



# Evaluation in political discourse addressed to women: Appraisal analysis of *Cosmopolitan's* online coverage of the 2014 US midterm elections



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## ABSTRACT

Before the US midterm elections of November 2014, the well-known women's magazine *Cosmopolitan* decided to include politics in its contents. The editorial board stated that their aim was to encourage readers to vote and to be engaged with women's rights advocacy in the election process. To that end, *Cosmopolitan* created a new website, *CosmoVotes*, with content ranging from discussion of political issues to endorsement of specific candidates who were believed to advance women's issues. Topics include labour rights, abortion, contraception, health, minimum wage and social equity.

This paper evaluates the discourse of this new section of the *Cosmopolitan* website, together with readers' responses, concentrating on evaluative language. In particular, we are concerned with differences between the editorial position and readers' responses as viewed through the Appraisal framework (Martin and White, 2005), and the role that verbal processes play in the expression of evaluative meanings. The corpus used for the analysis consists of a selection of articles and readers' opinions from *CosmoVotes*. The methodology is based on annotation of Appraisal features and processes related to the interpersonal dimension of meaning. Those features reveal how attitudes are evaluated and capture ideological positionings in this discourse. Our results show that *CosmoVotes* has special characteristics, such as a predominance of high intensification in the readers' opinions, and strong negative judgements and expressions, while the magazine's pieces on political issues are more nuanced and eschew intensification.

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## 1. Introduction

This study analyzes, using corpus linguistics methods, the presence of evaluative polarities and semantic intensification related to gradable lexical items in the new political topic introduced by *Cosmopolitan* magazine during the US midterm elections in 2014, in an attempt to explore the presence of attitudes in political discourse, and in readers' reactions to articles on politics.

The main goal of our analysis is to reveal how positive and negative Appraisal is presented in *Cosmopolitan's* series of articles about the 2014 American midterm elections. We also compare the linguistic evaluation present in the body of the article with comments from the readers in each article. We try to answer three

main questions: How is the position of women in politics evaluated in *Cosmopolitan*? How do readers react to this editorial position? Are there linguistic differences between readers' opinions and editorial content? The results of this study allow us to explore the evaluative nature of political discourse, and how that evaluation is present in the new online genre of readers' comments.

## 2. *Cosmopolitan* and *CosmoVotes*

In 2014, the US edition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine included a new section on its website named *CosmoVotes*, also complemented with a Twitter presence, using hashtags such as #politics, #elections or #cosmovotes. The goal of this new section was to endorse specific candidates whom *Cosmopolitan* viewed as supportive of women's rights, and to encourage women, especially young women, to vote.

The different articles and interviews posted by *Cosmopolitan* highlight the importance of female participation in different

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social and private spheres across the United States. The articles in *CosmoVotes* defend the right of women to participate in the political process, and raise awareness toward that end. The most interesting aspect of this effort is that it is still quintessentially *Cosmopolitan*, that is, it retains the frivolous style that has been the mainstay of *Cosmopolitan*'s persona for decades, with articles such as “9 Gorgeous Ways to Look Patriotic on Election Day” (Cardellino, 2014) or “The official #CosmoVotes drinking game for the 2014 midterm election” (Ahn, 2014). In this section, we briefly describe the magazine itself, and its new foray into politics.

### 2.1. *Cosmopolitan* and the *Cosmo* universe

*Cosmopolitan*, or *Cosmo* to its followers, is known around the world as the prototypical women's magazine, focused on such inconsequential topics as clothes, make-up, celebrity gossip and sex. Published by the Hearst Group, *Cosmopolitan* is not just a magazine, but also a world unto itself, with editions in 35 languages, and a total of 61 print editions. This “Cosmoworld” has emerged from a variety of marketing products, a TV channel and some TV series, together with different social media channels. This means that the editorial board has multiple avenues to convey its ideological positioning about women, a form of globalized discourse on women studied by Machin and Thornborrow (2003). Although *Cosmopolitan* is often ridiculed for its emphasis on sex and appearance, it is also one of the first magazines to promote and to defend a progressive and positive image for women, especially after a re-launch in the late 1960s, under the editorship of Helen Gurley Brown, a prominent feminist (Landers, 2010). The US edition of *Cosmopolitan* has around 18 million readers, and the website *Cosmopolitan.com* has more than 20 million unique visitors a month.<sup>1</sup> The target audience consists of young women aged 18–34 years, not necessarily specialized in fashion or beauty products, but regular (or potential) consumers of such products.

### 2.2. *Cosmo* in politics

*Cosmopolitan* decided, in advance of the United States 2014 midterm Congressional elections to become involved in politics. To this end, they created a new web section on their website named *CosmoVotes*. The editors declared an intention to influence politics (Editors, 2014), announcing endorsements for candidates that “stand up for the issues that matter to us the most”. In particular, the editors were interested in candidates' stands on abortion, equal pay for equal work, and minimum wage. Other issues of importance were: violence against women; responsible gun ownership; sexual assault, especially in colleges and the military; environment; and immigration. Editors are aware that the *Cosmopolitan* readership features low voting participation, and thus published articles encouraging their readers to vote. They target preconceptions about female participation in political life:

*If you only listened to the pundits, you'd think young female voters were a lost cause this election season. We don't turn out for the midterms. We're single-lady “Beyoncé voters” who “depend on government because they're not depending on their husbands.” We need politicians who will bring policy discussions “down to a woman's level” [...].*

[Editors, 2014]

In all, during the 2014 campaign, *CosmoVotes* endorsed fourteen candidates, all of them Democrats. They anticipated potential criticism, maybe from both the right and the left; from the right for their overall set of choices, and from the left for their perhaps less-than-progressive candidates:

*We're supporting candidates who we believe will make significant changes that improve the status quo for women and whose opponents are potentially disastrous. And we're looking at candidates in context and recognizing that an incumbent representative from a liberal district in the Northeast may have more leeway to be a vocal proponent of women's rights than a challenger in a traditionally conservative area.*

[Editors, 2014]

Articles were written by the editorial team when they were endorsements, and by a roster of other authors on general issues, including prominent names such as Gloria Steinem.

Their efforts did not seem to have a strong impact: Of the fourteen candidates for Senate, Congress and Governor that *Cosmopolitan* endorsed, only three were elected. *Cosmopolitan* was, however, not discouraged. After a few months without postings, they resumed publishing articles on the topic in April 2015, with the announcement of Hillary Clinton's run for president, and publication was steady in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election, which turned out to involve issues of feminism, misogyny and the treatment of women in media more prominently than previous elections. Interestingly, however, comments on articles are no longer allowed and, as of August 2016, all previous comments were removed from the website.

### 2.3. Reception of *CosmoVotes*

We are particularly interested in how readers react to *CosmoVotes* articles. Social media platforms have enabled the large-scale exchange of information, and the opinions of the general public have an increasingly important influence in our lives. Opinions expressed online can influence which restaurant we choose or which mobile phone we buy. Increasingly, online opinions also shape the political landscape, because they question, critique or in general evaluate events or facts presented by news journalists and political authorities.

For this reason, we believe that readers' comments posted in response to online articles constitute not only a new form of discourse, but also a valuable source of information on how readers view politics.

The immersion of *Cosmopolitan* into political opinion received a warm welcome by readers, most of them women, as we can glean from readers' comments of several articles from the *CosmoVotes* web section.

(1) Lyn Bartlett · Top Commenter · Santa Clara, California

LOVE IT that Cosmo is diving in to this very sensitive yet important issue. Keep up the good work!!

Reply · Like · 1 · November 7 at 1:59pm

(2) Brooke Doris · Top Commenter · Dallas, Texas

Thank you Cosmo for getting involved in issues that really matter to women! Bravo!

Reply · Like · 6 · Follow Post · October 7 at 4:00pm

Readers comment after the posts and present words of agreement, support and compliment for this new political focus. However, we also found negative opinions and arguments, about *Cosmopolitan* showing its colours too openly, as we can observe in the following comments about *CosmoVotes*:

<sup>1</sup> Circulation and readership information in this section was culled from *Cosmopolitan.com* and from Hearst.com.

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