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Abstract

We explore why certain descriptive feedback summarizing past choices prompts decision makers to change their behavior, while other feedback does not. For example, learning that only 5% of your last 20 hires were women might prompt immediate action. However, discovering that just 5% of your recent hires held advanced degrees might be less likely to provoke change. Why? We theorize and show that descriptive feedback highlighting low selection rates of women or under-represented minorities (URMs) triggers an impression management-driven motivation to respond without prejudice, resulting in increased selection of members of these groups. Conversely, descriptive feedback about low selection rates of members of other groups (e.g., those with specific job titles) doesn't evoke impression management concerns and has a smaller impact on future selections.

Study 1: What is the impact of descriptive feedback about past choices on future choices?

- Participants (N=1,000) were incentivized to choose six films to be featured in a Facebook advertisement promoting inspiring biographical films of broad interest.
- After selecting six films, participants were randomly assigned to **one of two conditions (no gender feedback or gender feedback)**, where we varied the list of descriptive feedback provided about their six initial film selections:

No gender feedback:

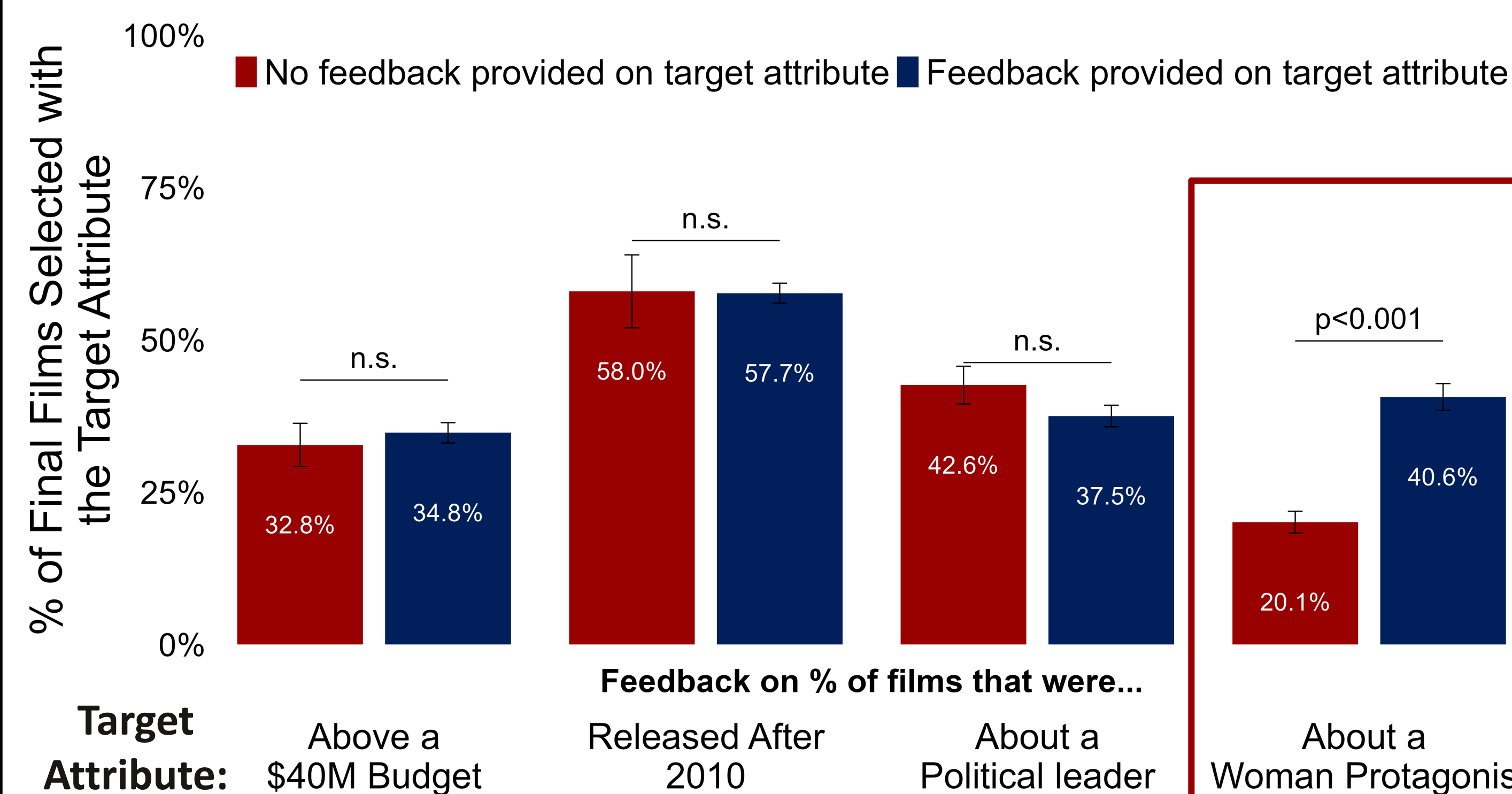
- % released after 2010
- % with a big budget (>\$40m)
- % featuring a political leader

Gender feedback:

- % featuring a woman protagonist [Plus, two of the following:]
- % released after 2010
- % with a big budget (>\$40m)
- % featuring a political leader

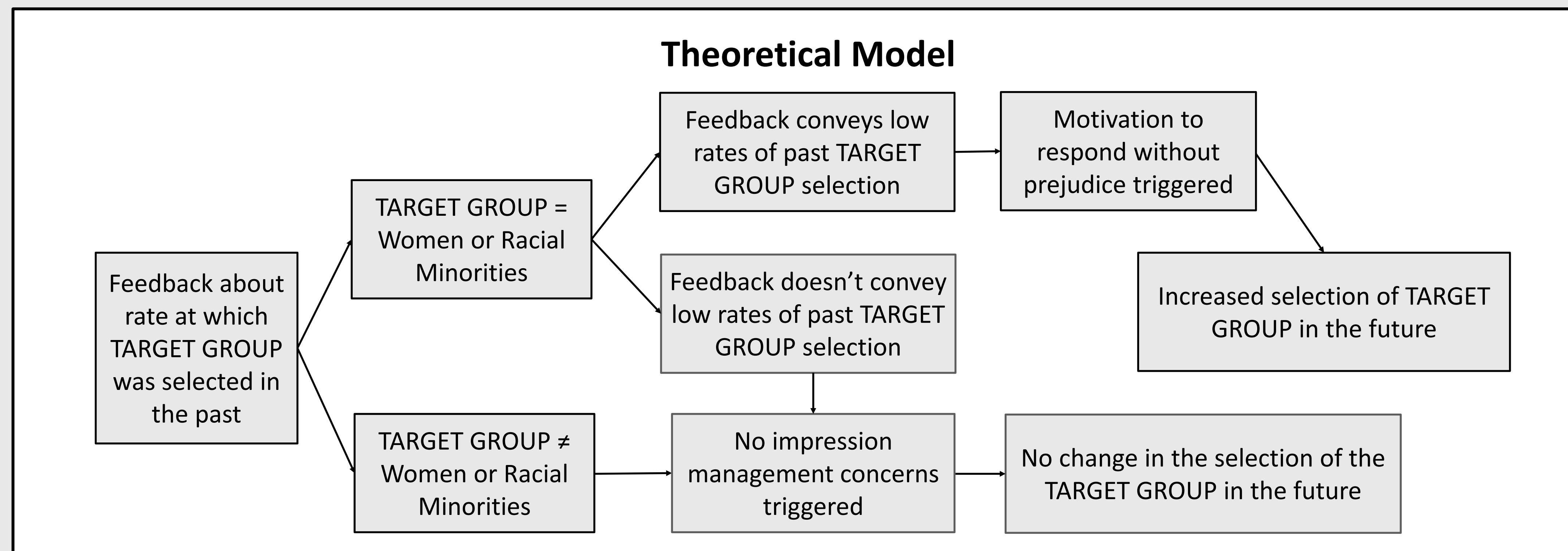
- Next, participants learned they could choose one more film.
- Results** (also depicted graphically):

- Providing feedback on what % of the first six films featured a female protagonist increased the subsequent selection of films with female protagonists.
- Providing feedback on the % of the first six films with other attributes had no significant effect the likelihood P's picked a final film with those attributes.



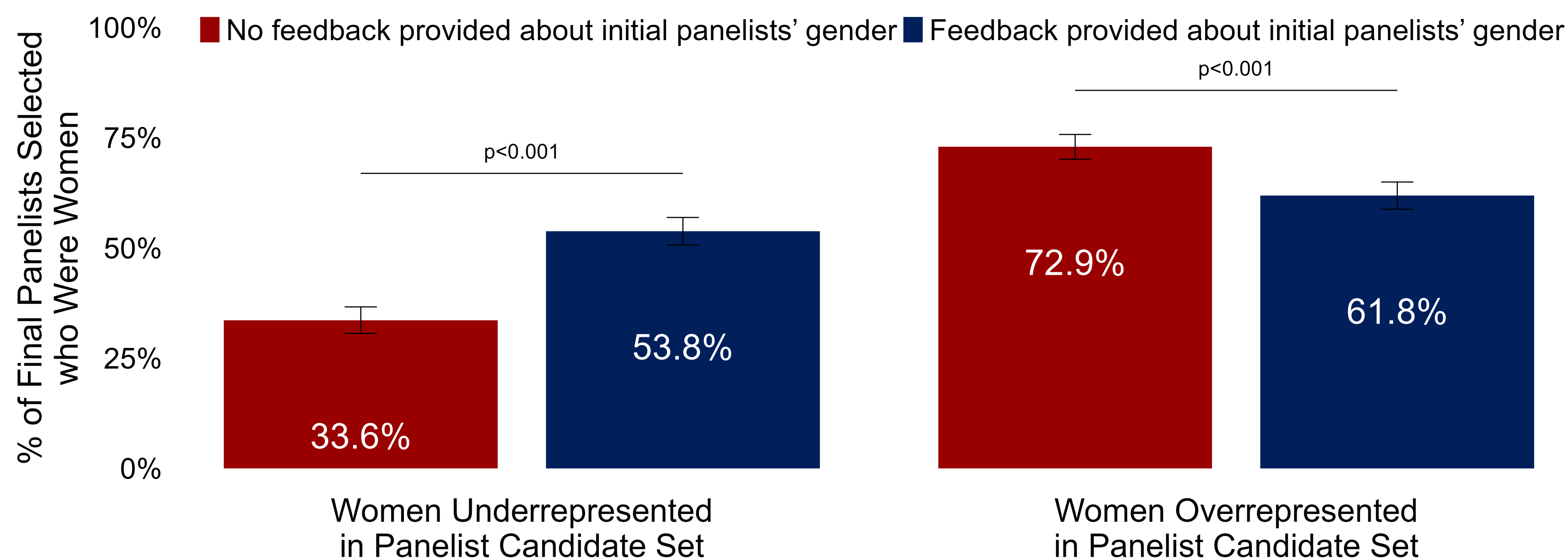
Study 2: Does the motivation to respond without prejudice mediate descriptive feedback?

Yes! This effect was mediated by participants' motivation to respond without prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998). We also extend our work to a new choice context and show that when people receive feedback about how many URMs they selected for past opportunities, it boosts URM selection for future opportunities.



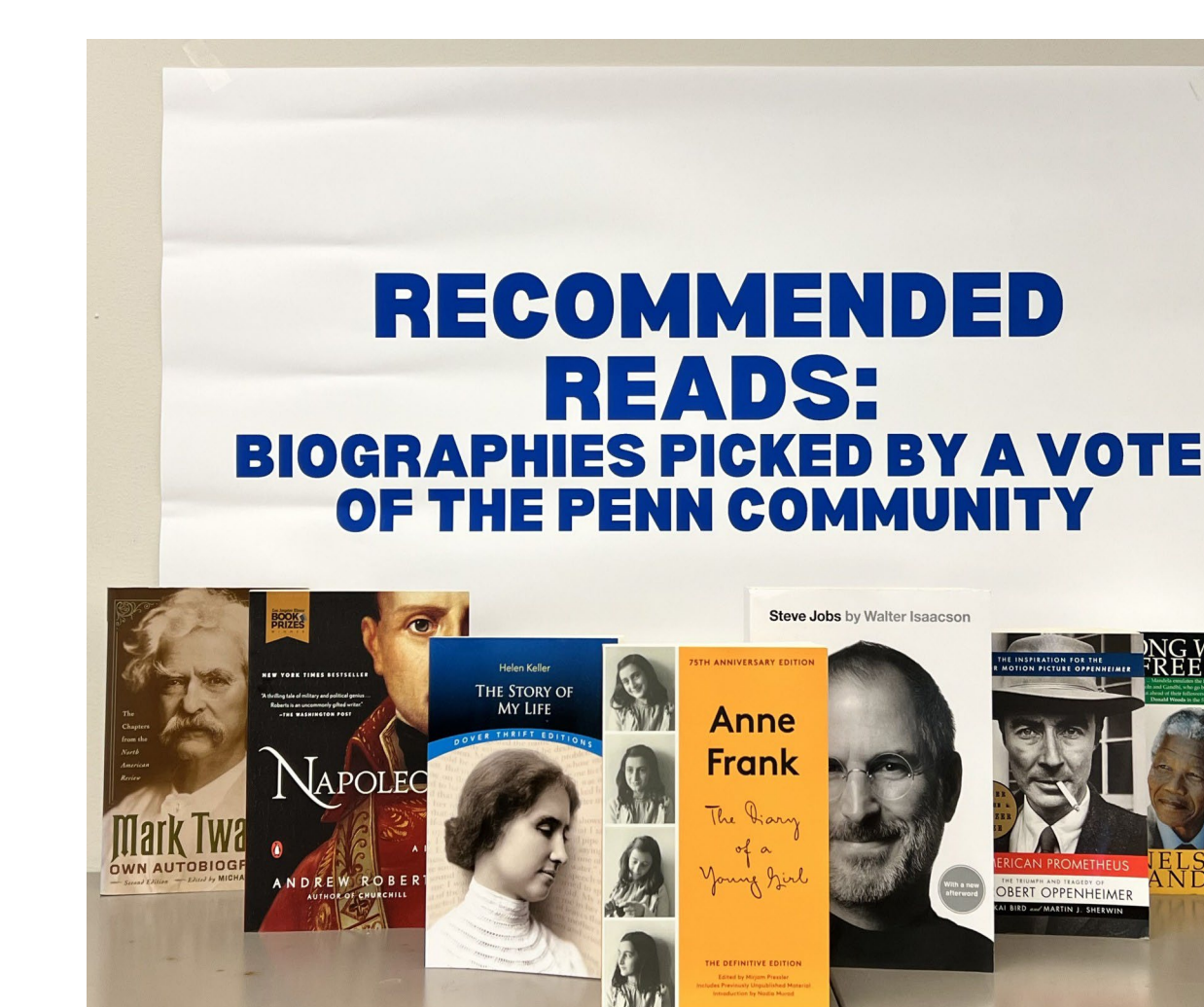
Study 3: Does the candidate pool's composition moderate descriptive feedback's impact?

Participants (N=1,000) selected six business leaders to include on a prestigious conference panel, received feedback on their selections, and then picked a final panelist. This study had a 2x2 design: feedback about panelists' gender alongside other feedback vs. only feedback about panelist attributes besides gender; women underrepresented in panelist candidate pool vs. women overrepresented.



Study 4: Does this extend to the field?

- Participants (N=302) were recruited for this incentive-compatible field experiment on a central thoroughfare at a university (left) and solicited to vote for a set of biographies to recommend in a prominent public display on campus (right).



- Again, we randomly assigned participants to receive feedback about their initial six selections and randomly assigned them to different experimental conditions:

No gender feedback:

- % over 500 pages
- % written in the past 25 years
- % featuring an entertainer

Gender feedback:

- % featuring a female protagonist [Plus, two of the following:]
- % over 500 pages
- % written in the past 25 years
- % featuring an entertainer

