

Role Models Can Decrease Women's Political Ambition*

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Abstract

One of the main reasons for the continued underrepresentation of women in politics is the persistent gender gap in political ambition. Exposure to role models is widely believed to increase women's political ambition. We show that this view is incomplete because it fails to account for mechanisms highlighted in related fields such as economics and psychology. When role models are viewed up close and share their experiences candidly, they can increase as well as decrease political ambition, by reinforcing perceptions of the challenges women encounter in a political career. We conducted a field experiment in which students were invited to participate in workshops led by female politicians. The treatment increased interest in the ongoing national election campaign, but did not have a positive effect on political ambition, and possibly decreased it. This study demonstrates the need for a new line of research into gender role models in politics.

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1 Introduction

We argue that role models can have a negative effect on women's political ambition and report evidence from a field experiment consistent with this argument, demonstrating the need for more research on this previously unrecognized aspect of political role models.

One of the main reasons why women remain underrepresented in politics is that women are less willing to run for office than men (Lawless and Fox, 2010). There are many reasons for the gender gap in political ambition, including perceptions of ability and qualifications (Fox and Lawless, 2004), attitudes towards competition (Kanthak and Woon, 2015), socialization (Fox and Lawless, 2014), work-life balance considerations (Silbermann, 2015), and political recruitment (Karpowitz, Monson and Preece, 2017).

In this paper, we focus on role models. It is widely believed that exposure to role models—female politicians with which potential aspirants can identify—has a positive effect on political ambition (Wolbrecht and Campbell, 2007; Lawless, 2004; Lawless and Fox, 2010; Fridkin and Kenney, 2014). Some studies found null or conditional effects (Broockman, 2014; Gilardi, 2015; Wolbrecht and Campbell, 2017), but none has considered the possibility that role models *decrease* ambition. However, research in other fields such as psychology and economics points to reasons why that might be the case, especially when role models are seen up close and not just as distant symbols. First, women might perceive successful female politicians as exceptional individuals whose accomplishments are unattainable for normal people, which has a demoralizing effect. Second, close contact with gender role models might provide more realistic, if less motivational, insights in the challenges awaiting women pursuing a political career.

Our analysis relies on a field experiment based on a non-random sample of 1,002 students attending a prominent Swiss university, a natural pool for the future Swiss political elite, whom we recruited to participate in an online panel. Within the female subsample in the online panel, we randomly assigned invitations to a large event—organized together with the *Frauenzentrale Zürich*, a non-partisan Swiss NGO—in which students listened to a motivational female speaker, participated in workshops led by young, prominent female politicians, and mingled with them over drinks. A few weeks after the event, the *Frauenzentrale Zürich* gave us the names of the women who applied to a mentoring program for young women interested in a political career, which it organizes each year independently from this project. All women in the online panel received an invitation to apply to the program, independently of treatment assignment. Application to this program constitutes the main, behavioral outcome for

our field experiment. We consider also an attitudinal outcome, the motivation to run for office, as measured in our online panel. In addition, we look at information-seeking behavior during the ongoing national election as a third outcome.

We find that exposure to role models makes women more likely to seek out political information. However, role models do not have a positive effect on the motivation to run for office. Although the effect of the event is imprecisely estimated, if anything, it is negative. Contact with role models hence provided information, but did not motivate young women to pursue public office. Rather, it might have even discouraged them, likely by exposing the challenges of a political career. This finding holds for both behavioral and attitudinal outcomes.

We do not claim to have provided conclusive evidence that role models can decrease women's political ambition. Instead, our findings demonstrate the need for more research on this hitherto unrecognized aspect of interventions aiming to improve women's political representation.

2 Do role models increase or decrease women's political ambition?

It is widely believed that role models help bring more women into electoral politics. Successful female politicians make other women more likely to consider running for office by altering their perceptions of their suitability for a political career (Lawless and Fox, 2010, 174). Fox and Lawless (2004, 272) conclude that "the gender gap narrows considerably and becomes statistically insignificant as women perceive themselves as increasingly qualified to run for office." Women know more about, and are more active in, politics when they are represented by women (Wolbrecht and Campbell, 2007). Both Wolbrecht and Campbell (2007) and Fridkin and Kenney (2014) found that women know more about, and are more active in, politics when they are represented by women; Wolbrecht and Campbell (2017) found this effect particularly relevant for younger women exposed to new female candidates. Female politicians' visibility in general matters (Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006). Mariani, Marshall and Mathews-Schultz (2015) found a positive effect of very prominent female politicians on young women's ambition, whereas Hoyt and Simon (2011) emphasize the importance of role models being "non-elite," i.e. easier to identify with (Hoyt and Simon, 2011). Ladam, Harden and Windett (2016) found that electing a female governor has a significant effect on the number of female candidates for the state legislature.

A handful studies found no effects, or conditional effects, for role models. Gilardi (2015) showed that role models helped to increase the number of female candidates, but only during the early stages of

women's suffrage. Broockman (2014) finds precisely estimated null effects for recent elections in the US. Wolbrecht and Campbell (2017) emphasizes the importance of the novelty of female role models. Importantly, none of these studies argues that role models might have *negative* effects on political ambition.

Although the political science literature has essentially disregarded the possibility that role models might decrease women's political ambition, such demotivating effects have been identified in other fields such as psychology and economics. As Asgari, Dasgupta and Stout (2012, 371) write, "seeing successful women leaders sometimes produces a contrast effect, making women see themselves as far less leaderlike compared to successful female leaders." This happens especially when subjects cannot identify with the role models, for instance because their successes are seen as unmatchable (Betz and Sekaquaptewa, 2012). Role models have encouraging effects if two conditions are fulfilled: they must be perceived as relevant, and their achievements must be perceived attainable (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997). If role models are relevant but their successes seem unattainable, they "can demoralize and deflate less outstanding others" (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997, 91). Another reason why role models can be discouraging is that their experience might confirm negative preconceptions or otherwise reveal challenges, for instance in combining career with family life (Bamberger, 2014). Similarly, Lerner and Malmendier (2013) found MBA students (randomly) exposed to peers with entrepreneurial experience to be *less* likely to become entrepreneurs themselves. Here, role models function as a sorting mechanism, discouraging entrepreneurship in people who are not likely to be successful.

Therefore, looking beyond the political science literature, we find several reasons why role models, under some circumstances, might decrease political ambition rather than increase it. An important factor is the distance at which role models are observed. If role models remain relatively abstract—a symbol with which it is easy to identify superficially—their apparently effortless success might be highly motivational. But if subjects have a chance to be exposed more directly to role models' experience, and therefore see their struggles as well as their outstanding achievements more clearly, they might conclude, possibly not unreasonably, that they may not be up to the task.

3 Research design

3.1 Context

Our field experiment was conducted on students at a leading Swiss university, because the university provides a natural environment for the recruitment of future political leaders. In fact many of the politicians who volunteered as role models for this experiment were former students of the university. Despite its specificities—most importantly, the late introduction of women’s suffrage at the national level in 1971, as well as the militia system in which only few politicians are professional—Switzerland is not an outlier in cross-national comparisons of women’s political representation. On the contrary, it might be regarded as a “typical case,” that is, “a case that exemplifies a stable, cross-case relationship” (Seawright and Gerring, 2008, 299), or, in other words, “a low-residual case (on-lier)” (Seawright and Gerring, 2008, 297). As shown in Figure A1, Switzerland is precisely such an on-lier in three studies of women’s representation in national parliaments.

With the help of the Career Services and the student union we registered a sample of 1,002 students, 620 female and 382 male, in an online panel, which was ostensibly unlinked to the field experiment. The gender distribution reflects that of the student population. We prominently advertised the panel on campus via emails, flyers and on social media, emphasizing the chance to win one of five weekend trips worth 1,400 Swiss Francs each. We also advertised 18 remunerated assistant positions among political science undergraduate students. Out of 33 applicants for the positions, 16 women had also registered in the online panel study. We hence stratified our sample on whether respondents had applied for an assistant position.

Right after enrollment in the online survey, participants answered the baseline wave, which included questions on gender attitudes and political careers embedded in a longer survey on career and study issues. The survey also measured demographic, as well as social and political background attributes.

3.2 Field experiment

To identify the effect of exposure to female role models on political ambition, we randomly assigned invitations to the mentoring event, ‘Women and Career Beyond the Glass Ceiling’, among all women who responded to the first wave of the online survey. We used blocked random assignment to allocate subjects to the treatment group, or to the control group. Random assignment was blocked on registration period, and on whether the student had applied for one of the assistant roles at the event. Assistants

assisted us with organizational issues at the day of the event, making sure that politicians knew where to go and what to do, and documented what happened during the workshops. Positions were remunerated. The treatment groups received an e-mail invitation to attend the event, asking subjects to pre-register online (see Figure A2). It was made clear that admission was invitation-only. The control group did not receive any invitation. The invitation was followed by two personalised reminders. After the registration deadline passed, participants received an email confirming their attendance at the event.

We organized the mentoring event in collaboration with several institutional partners including the *Frauenzentrale Zürich*, a Swiss non-partisan NGO that promotes gender equality, the Career Services of the University, and the University's Gender Equality Commission. The event was held two weeks before the elections to the Swiss National Assembly. Well-known politicians of all major Swiss political parties volunteered to conduct career workshops with female university students. Moreover, we recruited a prominent Swiss business woman to give a motivational speech. The event was followed by an evening reception that provided further opportunities for students and politicians to mingle.

Two weeks after the event, all Wave 1 respondents, regardless of gender, received an invitation to participate in the second wave of the online panel that measured the outcomes of the field experiment. The outcomes are meant to capture an interest in a political career. They include whether subjects attended the event, and the self-reported likelihood of running for political office in the future. Moreover, the *Frauenzentrale* circulated an application to enroll in a more advanced political mentoring program among all female survey participants. In the post-treatment wave we also asked students how closely they followed the election campaign, how often they read about the campaign online, and we assessed students' political knowledge by asking them to identify the candidates who were directly elected to the Swiss Senate a few days earlier.¹ The set-up of the study is displayed in Figure A3.

¹We use randomization inference to test whether we can reject the sharp null hypotheses that the pre-treatment covariates (age, marital status, citizenship, years of study, father's employment, mother's employment, father's education, mother's education, field of study, career goals, child wish, social skills, presentation skills, networking skills, gender attitudes, political interest, economic interest, and political knowledge) collected in survey wave 1, do not jointly predict assignment to treatment or control over and above what we would expect from random sampling variability alone. The p-value of 0.68 indicates that we cannot reject the sharp null hypothesis that all pre-treatment covariates taken together do not predict the assignment of any unit to treatment or control. We also used randomization inference to test whether we can reject the sharp null hypotheses that treatment assignment does not predict survey attrition in wave 2 over and above what one would expect from sampling variation alone. We cannot find any evidence that survey attrition is a function of treatment assignment.

4 Results

Despite the attractive program and the proximity to national elections, only around 8% of students in the treatment group ($n = 30$ out of 363), attended the event. This is despite the event being prominently advertised to subjects in the treatment group, including multiple email reminders. The first important result of the field experiment is hence that subjects were not very keen to meet prominent politicians. Only a small minority of students signed up to participate in the workshops and to meet the politicians.

Table 1 shows the effects of the invitation on whether students applied for the mentoring program offered by the *Frauenzentrale Zürich*, and whether they could see themselves running for a political office in a few years. The behavioral outcome is binary, application (1) or no application (0), and the attitudinal outcome is measured on a 0-4 scale. In the upper rows of Table 1 we report estimates of the Intent-to-Treat (ITT) effect, that is, the effect of sending the invitation to participate in the event on political ambition. The bottom rows display estimates of the Complier Average Causal Effect (CACE), that is, the effect of participation in the event, instrumented with the (randomized) invitation under the exclusion assumption that the invitation itself only affects the outcome through attendance at the event.

Although the treatment effects are imprecisely estimated, and not statistically significant, the direction of the treatment effect estimates for political ambition and for the mentoring program application is consistently negative. A lower proportion of students who was emailed the invitation applied to the mentoring program, and subjects in the treatment group expressed a lower degree of political ambition than the control group. Furthermore, the negative treatment effects for the subgroup of compliers, those subjects that would attend the event if invited, are substantively large. They amount to -2.1 points on the 5-point attitude scale measuring political ambition, and to 10 percentage-points in relation to subjects' application for the mentoring program. Our best guess is therefore that attendance at the event decreased subjects' applications to the political mentoring program by 10 percentage-points.

Even though the estimates are imprecise, they suggest, contrary to our expectations based on the political science literature, that the effect of the program was not positive. One reason for why the event may have failed to produce positive effects is that role models can provide students with information that they may find off putting, such as highlighting challenges of work-life balance, negative aspects of electoral competition, or political exposure. Qualitative evidence from the workshops supports the idea that role models confronted students with a "reality check" likely to be discouraging to many.

	Applied to mentoring program	Political ambition
	ITT	
Control	0.02	0.36
Effect of invitation	-0.01 [-0.03, 0.01]	-0.17 [-0.39, 0.04]
Covariate-adjusted	-0.01 [-0.03, 0.01]	-0.14 [-0.30, 0.19]
	CACE	
Attendance rate	0.08	0.08
Effect of attendance	-0.10 [-0.40, 0.20]	-2.12 [-5.10, 0.85]
Covariate-adjusted	-0.08 [-0.38, 0.22]	-1.60 [-3.69, 0.49]
Blocks	Yes	Yes
N	596	596

Table 1: *Applied to mentoring program (1 = yes, 0 = no), “could see myself running for office in a few years” (0–4 scale), 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Generalized Difference Estimator for ITT (Aronow and Middleton, 2013), 2SLS for CACE.*

	Following the news	Following the news online	Political knowledge
	ITT		
Control	2.86	1.30	0.73
Invitation	0.19 [-12.83, 0.51]	0.02 [-0.21, 0.25]	0.06 [-0.03, 0.15]
Covariate-adjusted	0.29* [-0.01, 0.58]	0.13 [-0.09, 0.34]	0.03 [-0.06, 0.12]
	CACE		
Attendance rate	0.08	0.08	0.08
Attendance	2.36 [-1.58, 6.31]	0.29 [-2.49, 3.07]	0.66 [-0.43, 1.75]
Covariate-adjusted	3.32* [-0.41, 7.04]	1.48 [-1.11, 4.07]	0.31 [-0.61, 1.22]
Blocks	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	446	446	437

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Table 2: *“How often have you followed the news about the election campaign”, 0–6 scale, “How frequently did you follow the campaign online?”, 0–4 scale) and political knowledge (“which politicians got directly elected in the first round of the Swiss Federal Senate election?”. 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Generalized Difference Estimator for ITT (Aronow and Middleton, 2013), 2SLS for CACE.*

The politicians gave a candid assessment of the challenges women can expect to be confronted with when running for office. For instance, one politician emphasized that when she first took office a few years ago, she was the only woman in the legislature who had small children and lived far from the capital. The same politician also presented herself as someone “with above-average energy resources.” It is not difficult to see how some young women, or indeed men, might be put off by such statements. The message is, “it’s possible to do what I do, but few women can.” Moreover, another politician put considerable emphasis on the challenges women face when combining a demanding professional career with a family life. This was a common thread in all workshops. One politician even discussed a book titled “The ‘Anything is Possible’ Lie: Why Career and Family Cannot be Reconciled.”

These results raise the question whether the event failed to excite students. Table 2 displays the results of the invitation on interest in the ongoing election campaign, and on political knowledge. If subjects perceived the workshops as boring or irrelevant, the event should have had a negative effect on interest in following the ongoing election campaign. However, this does not appear to be the case. In fact, subjects in the treatment group report following the campaign more frequently via traditional media than subjects in the control group, and also record higher levels of online media consumption and political knowledge, albeit the latter effects are not statistically significant. Moreover, we asked the research assistants who documented the workshops to rate their quality. The average rating was 5 out of 6, indicating that the workshops were perceived as successful.

5 Conclusion

Contact with female role models does not necessarily increase political ambition; it can decrease it. The results of the randomized field experiment conducted in collaboration with a civil society organization show that young women who were invited to an event to meet prominent female politicians, were afterwards no more likely to be interested in a political career than women who were not invited to attend. First, only a small minority of invitees, attended the event. Second, those that attended the workshops and were directly exposed to role models appear to have been discouraged. The recorded negative treatment effects are substantially very large, but do not reach statistical significance due to the relatively small number of women who were willing to attend a meeting with female politicians in the first place.

A plausible explanation for why the event even failed to motivate those women who attended is that

in relating their experiences, female politicians confirmed the structural barriers that prevent women from pursuing a political career. Witnessing female politicians discuss their experiences with juggling a political career and a family life, and hearing first-hand reports of misogyny in politics, might have put young women off. This interpretation is supported by systematic qualitative evidence collected during the workshops and is consistent with insights and findings from psychology and economics, showing that role models can demoralize if their achievements seem unattainable (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997; Asgari, Dasgupta and Stout, 2012; Betz and Sekaquaptewa, 2012; Bamberger, 2014; Lerner and Malmendier, 2013). If even women who are objectively successful face high barriers, then what would it be like for those women who might not have the same degree of motivation and skills?

Given that women, on average, perform better in school and at university than men (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008), young women might be tempted to think that structural barriers to their professional success have been removed, and that gender discrimination is mostly confined to previous generations. Moreover, the gender gap in the labor market, for instance in terms of pay or career opportunities, tends to emerge only when women start a family (Juhn and McCue, 2017). Most female students hence might underestimate the degree of gender inequality still present in society. Our workshops might have served as an early encounter with the realities of a professional career.

An important specificity of the Swiss case is its militia system. Only few politicians are professionals; most pursue their political career on top of a day job. This compounds life-balance problems for women, and our qualitative evidence confirms that life-balance issues were one of the main themes discussed in the workshops. Nevertheless, we believe that the main finding may apply more broadly. Political careers are extremely demanding on politicians' private lives. Parliament often sits until late in the evening, and politicians who have seats in national parliaments often need to commute long distances. Commutes are longer in larger countries such as the United States or Germany, compared with Switzerland.

The contribution of this paper does not only lie in its surprising, suggestive, experimental findings, but especially in highlighting potential mechanisms, previously neglected in the political science literature, that might produce negative effects of political role models. By showing that other disciplines such as economics, business, and psychology recognize the potential drawbacks as well as benefits of direct exposure to gender role models, we highlight the potential for political role models to backfire. While the results of this study are far from conclusive, they merit a call for further investigation, and a larger number of field experiments that directly expose young women to role models. Direct exposure

to women who can serve as role models is crucial because it is an essential part of embarking on a political career. Finally, combining field experiments with panel data collected online offers researchers the possibility of identifying causal effects and tracking the duration of treatment effects over time. If researchers and civil society organisations can develop stronger treatments, which encourage a larger share of young women to meet female politicians, the design of this study can serve as a blue-print for further field experiments, which can deliver more precise answers to the question under which conditions gender role models encourage or discourage political ambitions.

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A1 Appendix

Women's political representation: Switzerland is a "typical" case

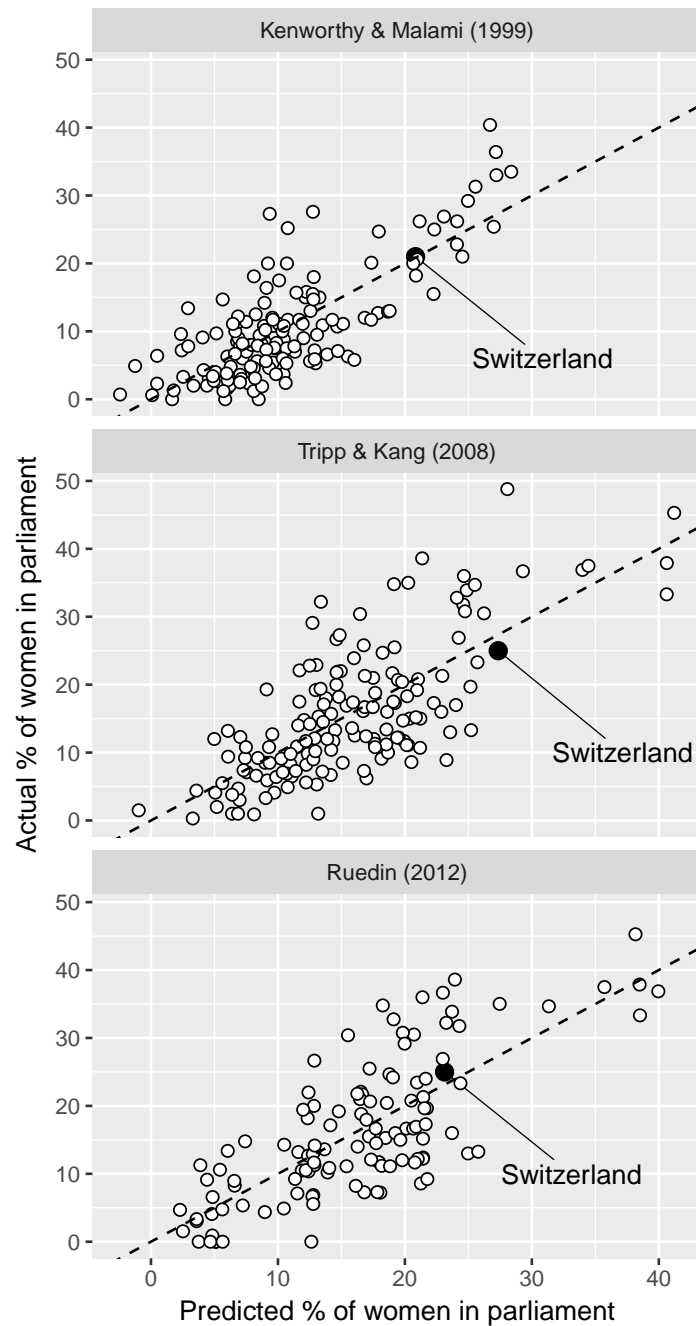


Figure A1: *Switzerland as a "typical" case.* The analyses replicate Kenworthy, Lane and Melissa Malami. 1999. "Gender Inequality in Political Representation: A Worldwide Comparative Analysis." *Social Forces* 78(1): 235-269; Tripp, Aili Mari and Alice Kang. 2008. "The Global Impact of Quotas: On the Fast Track to Increased Female Legislative Representation." *Comparative Political Studies* 41(3): 338-361; and Ruedin, Didier. 2012. "The Representation of Women in National Parliaments: A Cross-national Comparison." *European Sociological Review* 28(1): 96-109.

An:

Liebe

**Wie kann ich meinen beruflichen Einstieg vorbereiten? Muss ich meine Karriere planen? Mit welchen Hürden ist zu rechnen?
Wie bringe ich in Zukunft Familie und Beruf unter einen Hut?**

Antworten auf diese Fragen finden Sie am 8. Oktober auf der Veranstaltung „Frauen und Karriere jenseits der Glasdecke“ an der Universität Zürich. Die Veranstaltung mit bekannten Personen aus Wirtschaft und Politik ist für Sie kostenlos.

Anmeldung oder Abmeldung bis spätestens 30. September: [Hier geht's zur Registrierung](#)

19 Politikerinnen und Politiker (aus dem National- und Kantonsrat) berichten in Workshops über ihren beruflichen und politischen Werdegang und beraten Sie mit konkreten Tipps zum Thema Karriereplanung. Das Input-Referat hält Heliane Canepa. Die erfolgreiche Managerin war zwei Mal Unternehmerin des Jahres und in der Geschäftsleitung von grossen Unternehmen. Heute ist Heliane Canepa CEO beim FC Zürich und berät kostenlos Frauen bei Firmengründungen. Zudem hat auch sie verschiedene Verwaltungsratsmandate.

Organisiert wird der Anlass vom Institut für Politikwissenschaft, der Frauenzentrale Zürich, den Career Services UZH und der Gleichstellungskommission UZH.

Weitere Details finden Sie in der [Einladung](#).

Es ist nur eine begrenzte Anzahl von Plätzen vorhanden. Die Einladung ist deshalb nicht übertragbar.

Wir freuen uns auf Sie!



Wie plane ich meine Karriere?

Welches sind die grössten Herausforderungen? Wie kann ich meinen beruflichen Einstieg erleichtern? Wie bringe ich Familie und Beruf unter einen Hut? Politikerinnen und Politiker berichten in Workshops über ihren beruflichen und politischen Werdegang und beraten Studentinnen bei der Karriereplanung mit konkreten Tipps.

Datum: **Donnerstag, 8. Oktober 2015, 18.00 Uhr**
Ort: **Universität Zürich, Aula**

18.00 Uhr **Begrüssung, Ziele der Veranstaltung**
Inputreferat: Heliane Canepa, Unternehmerin,
Delegierte des Verwaltungsrates FC Zürich

19.00 Uhr **Workshops**

20.00 Uhr **Apéro im Lichthof**

Organisiert wird der Anlass vom Institut für Politikwissenschaft, der Frauenzentrale Zürich, den Career Services UZH und der Gleichstellungskommission UZH.

LEITUNG WORKSHOPS

- Angelo Barrile (SP), Kantonsrat
- Barbara Steinemann (SVP), Kantonsrätin
- Beat Walti (FDP), Nationalrat
- Beatrix Frey-Eigenmann (FDP), Kantonsrätin
- Corinne Thomet-Bürki (CVP), Kantonsrätin
- Esther Guyer (Grüne), Kantonsrätin
- Esther Straub (SP), Kantonsrätin
- Jacqueline Badran (SP), Nationalrätin
- Judith Stofer (AL), Kantonsrätin
- Kathy Riklin (CVP), Nationalrätin
- Maria Rohweder-Lischer (Grüne), Kantonsrätin
- Markus Bischoff (AL), Kantonsrat
- Michael Zeugin (gjp), Kantonsrat
- Nik Gugger (EVP), Kantonsrat
- Regine Sauter (FDP), Kantonsrätin
- Regula Rytz (Grüne), Nationalrätin
- Rosmarie Quadranti (BDP), Nationalrätin
- Thomas Hardegger (SP), Nationalrat
- Tiana Moser (gjp), Nationalrätin



Figure A2: Invitation and flyer e-mailed to the treatment group

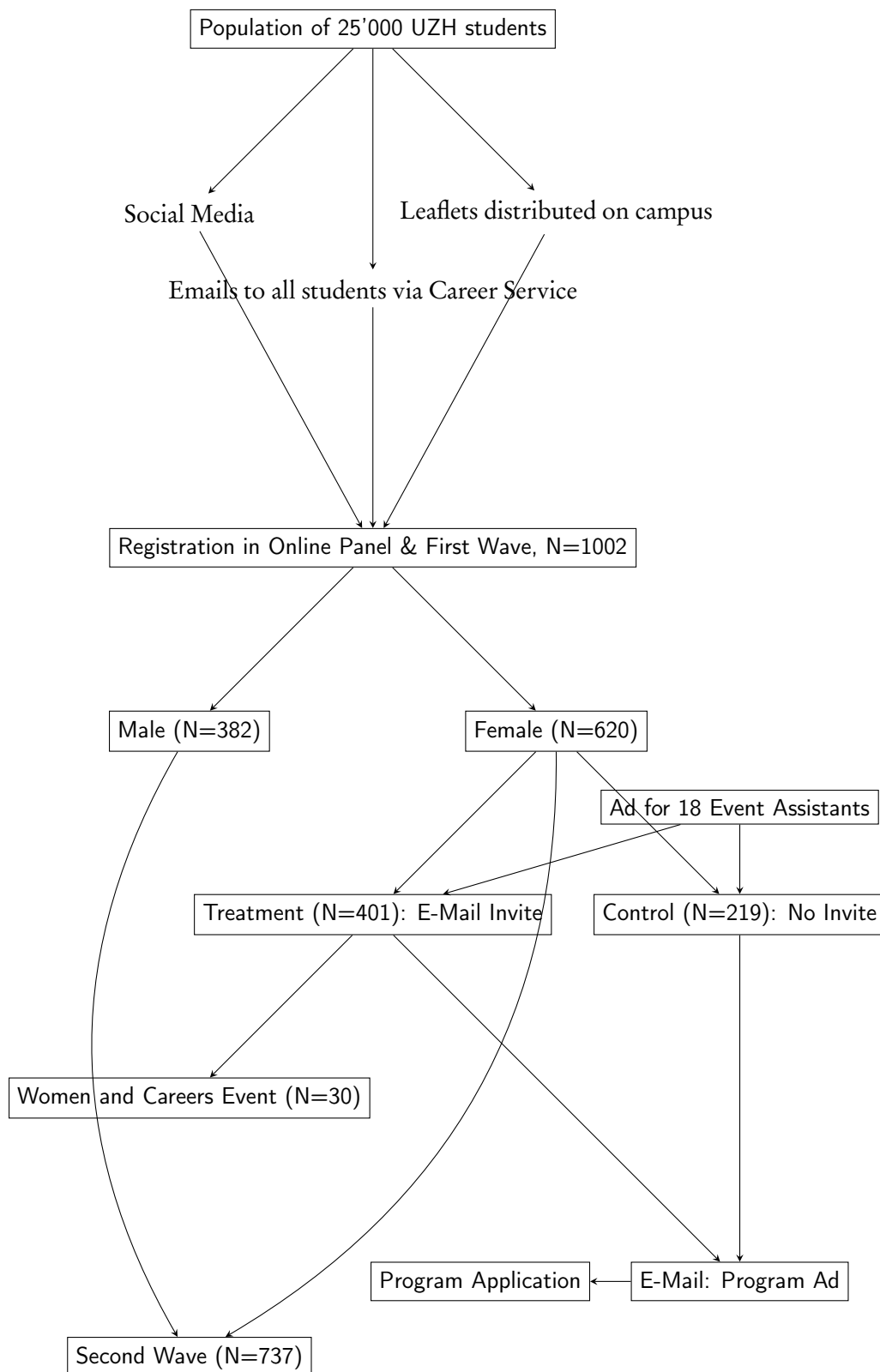


Figure A3: Study set-up