

Credibility and Television Advertising: Negative and Positive Political Ads

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Using negative and positive television ads for presidential candidates, the cognitive and affective components of ad attitude were examined. The Cognitive subcomponent of Ad Attitude, representing a positive Credible/Informational/Believable dimension of attitude toward the ad is shown to be present in negative-toned political ads but not in positive-toned ads. The Affective subcomponent of Ad Attitude, representing a positive feeling-based dimension is shown to be strongly present for positive-toned political ads but not for negative-toned television ads. The differences between the two ad treatments were found to be statistically significant for both attitude subcomponents.

INTRODUCTION

During the 2012 U.S. presidential election, the two presidential campaigns spent \$2.9 billion, with television getting 80-85% of that (Friedman, 2013). This total exceeds the old record set in 2010 (with only congressional offices running) at \$2.5 billion (McClellan, 2011) which broke the 2008 record at \$1.6 billion (Friedman, 2012). Including the advertising by outside political action groups and trade associations, the 2012 total goes to nearly \$10 billion (Pistulka, 2012; Delo, 2012). So we can clearly see two trends here – the increase in money spent and the increased use of television (Kaid & Dimitrova, 2005; Airne, 2005).

Overall, the volume of advertising money, and for television in particular, is a testament to business' perceived value of traditional media in reaching their desired audiences. In the U.S., ad spending for 2012 was \$166 billion, with television getting the largest share at 39% (Ovide & Bensinger, 2012). Politicians and their media consultants – often from the ranks of product and services advertising – have adopted mass media buys as more efficient vehicles for communicating a limited-content, image-positioning message.

The number of ads has increased as fast as the dollars. For example, in Orlando, Florida, an important state in all recent presidential elections, the number of political ads during the same August week went from zero in 2004, to 153 in 2008, to 1,863 in 2012 (Wilner, 2012). Political races have ballooned into giant media buys as they often buy up all available media time in the few weeks before an election (Vanacore, 2010), especially in battleground states during a close election (Friedman, 2011).

For those who claim that it seems that the political ads never stop, they may be close to the truth. A feature of political advertising is that the political ad “season” is becoming longer with each election (TNS, 2005). Candidates feel they must begin their advertising sooner, which puts pressure on their competitors to do the same. This may have been an advantage for President Obama, the only Democratic candidate in 2012. The Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, outspent the Democratic campaign – 55% of the \$2.9 billion total – but waited until he was the party's nominee before purchasing most of his ads.

However, the incumbent President was able to buy earlier, cheaper spots. So while President Obama's spending was a smaller percentage of the total, he was actually able to buy 10% more ads than Romney (Friedman, 2013).

This level of spending points to the need to find effective and efficient means of communicating positive messages and creating positive attitudes toward our candidate. However, political advertising increasingly relies on negative messages to construct negative information and negative feelings toward the political opponent(s).

Negative advertising is not isolated to the U.S. but is spreading worldwide, often because foreign candidates hire the same campaign operatives that work in the U.S. For example, Mark Penn, a strategist for Hillary Clinton in 2008, helped run incumbent Ukrainian President Victor Yushchenko's 2010 campaign and Paul Manafort, who worked on John McCain's run in 2008, worked for one of the challengers, the winner Victor Yanukovich (Vogel & Smith, 2009). Other countries "helped" by American political consultants include Argentina, Bulgaria, Romania, Israel, and Britain (Vogel & Smith, 2009).

These and many other countries are finding negative political advertising more prevalent even if a consensus has not developed about its usefulness. In Taiwan, a study has shown that both positive and negative political ads polarized party members toward their own candidate and away from the opponent, respectively (Chang, 2003). In the United Kingdom, it's believed that negative political advertising is more likely to drive voters toward the opposition and to think badly of the party slinging the mud (Murphy, 1996; "Negative," 2001).

In the U.K., Fletcher (2001) thinks that because the New Labour and the Tory parties are relying heavily on negative advertising because the two parties have become indistinguishable from one another, having no unique policy objectives. He also feels that negative campaigning is due to having only two strong parties, and that negative advertising is rarer in countries with several parties and proportional representation. Perhaps, but it is clear that in Canada, the U.K., the U.S., and elsewhere, the use of negative political advertising is strong, and getting stronger (Cuneo, 2006). One study (Teinowitz, 2004) showed that for October of 2002 (the last full month before the November non-presidential election), 35% of candidate ads, 72% of political party ads, and 36% of independent committee ads were negative.

Both academics and practitioners have been increasingly studying negative political advertising. The use of negative advertising is increasing and their impact on the political process is worrisome to many. The social scientists who worry about the negativity of the political process on liberal democracies (e.g. Dermody & Scullion, 2003) usually adopt macro, or normative, arguments. Arguments such as generally driving voters away from the voting booth (evidenced by low turnouts), and generally driving negative attitudes towards politicians (shown by their low respectability in public polling). The practitioners, on the other hand, work in the micro world of getting their individual politicians elected and will use the tools that they think work.

As shown above, the importance and impact of political advertising is reflected by the campaigns' willingness to spend ever more on television advertising. The tenor of the advertising has increasingly become more negative, and polls consistently show that the public dislikes this type of advertising. The use of negative advertising is supposed to hurt the sponsor by driving up feelings of negativity toward the sponsor (Hill, 1989) or even driving the voter into the arms of the competitor (Hockstader & Nossiter, 2002; "Negative," 2001; Jaspersen & Fan, 2002). However, research has also shown that these negative ads are useful to convince existing voters to stay loyal (Fletcher, 2001), because they cognitively are more believable to voters (Robideaux, 1998), because they avoid source derogation (Meirick, 2002), and even because they benefit from the sleeper effect found in other disliked advertising (Lariscy & Tinkham, 1999). Negative ads are often called "informational ads" by their creators because they provide voters information not otherwise available. These creators are not alone in believing that negative ads are useful in disclosing the true nature of candidates, but it is usually the opponent – not the sponsor – that one's ads are telling the "truth" about (Feder, 2000).

Earlier studies have found that negative political advertising works at some level, but they usually look at print advertising only (e.g. Pinkleton, 1998; Robideaux, 2004; Merritt, 1984). As shown above,

the preponderance of advertising is moving toward television (Friedman, 2013). On what support then do political strategists continue to believe that negative ads are essential (Abbe et. al., 2000) and that research results found for print are still valid for television? This study will examine whether the attitudes toward these negative and positive political ads are as true for television ads as they were for print ads.

For this study, measurements for Ad Attitude that were developed in prior studies for positive and negative political print ads (e.g. Robideaux, 2004) will be used. These earlier tools will also provide an indication of the direction – positive versus negative – of the attitude of the subject toward the ad's sponsor. This study will examine political ads for the reaction to the rational/cognitive and the emotional/affect aspects of television ads for differences between two treatments. The two treatments examined are: political ads which are Sponsor-Positive in tone and content, and political ads which are Opponent-Negative in tone and content.

BACKGROUND

Ad Attitude and Political Ads

Evervelles (1998) stated that attitude has received more attention than any other construct in consumer research. Attitude is defined as “a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner in respect to a given object” (Runyon & Stewart, 1987, p. 460) or as “an individual's internal evaluation of an object such as a branded product” (Mitchell & Olson 1981, p. 318). Attitudes are composed of the dimensions of (1) affect or feeling, (2) cognition or beliefs, and (3) behavioral intent (Assael, 1998), and are expected to be stable over time.

Ad Attitude (A_{ad}) is defined as an attitude toward an advertisement which will hopefully “leave consumers with a positive feeling after processing the ad” (Shimp, 1981, p.10-11). Ads generate moods and other subjective experiences (the affect component of attitude) during the ad exposure (Madden, Allen & Twible, 1988; Aylesworth & MacKenzie, 1998).

In most studies, ad attitudes are only examined as an affective, emotional construct (Derbaix, 1995; Assael, 1998). It is important to note however that a positive emotional response to an ad is not, however, the same as a positive cognitive evaluation of the ad (Stout and Rust, 1993). This is because there are two relatively distinct dimensions of attitude toward the ad, one cognitive and the other emotional (Shimp, 1981; Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999).

It has been found that ad attitude toward political advertising was composed of two attitude components, the affect/emotional (Ad-A) and the cognitive/belief (Ad-C) dimensions, and that the evaluations of ads would differ depending on different types of political ads (Robideaux, 1998). There are questions whether the cognition or affect play the dominant role in ad attitude, but the acceptance is that both will be present (Morris et. al., 2002).

Most of the earlier studies investigating ad attitude used messages that were positively framed and designed to generate positive emotions (e.g. Homer and Yoon, 1992). As stated earlier, political ads are often not positively framed and may use only negative elements. Some studies have found that these negative-only ads are not effective (e.g., Hill, 1989; Pinkleton, Um, & Austin, 2002) because the sponsor will be tainted by the negative feelings elicited by the ad. Some researchers (e.g. Hill, 1989) have treated negative political ads as similar to consumer-oriented “comparative” ads because comparative ads claim superiority for the sponsor and impute inferiority on the competitor (Merritt, 1984). However, “the goal of negative advertising is to push consumers away from the competitor” (Merritt, 1984, p. 27), so negative political ads have no positive or comparative message elements, only negative elements.

Product advertising and political advertising both seek to be persuasive by presenting themselves as rational-oriented and believable (the cognitive construct). General marketers' positive and comparative ads ask consumers to logically, cognitively, conclude that the sponsor's product is better and their competitors' brands inferior. Negative political ads do not provide positive sponsor attributes; they only provide specific and/or general claims of the opponent's inferior attributes. This informational goal of negative ads is expected to be represented in the cognitive evaluative dimension of attitude.

Previous Research

Ad attitude (A_{ad}), as an antecedent or moderator variable toward behavior and other attitudes and feelings, has been increasingly researched since 1981. Hill (1989) investigated the use of comparative political advertising in the 1988 presidential race and attempted to evaluate ad attitude as a function of comparative or noncomparative political ads. Hill was attempting to find evidence for the perception that “negative ad campaigns are not effective” because “voters view negative ads critically” (Hill, 1989, pp. 14, 15) and “may reflect negatively on the ad sponsor, and may have little impact upon the opposing candidate . . . compared to sponsor-positive ads” (p. 20).

Merritt (1984) suggested that the comparative ads were not as effective because the negative information in the ads lacked credibility. She also concluded that a “negative strategy [may reinforce] predispositions but does not attract voters to the candidate” (p. 37). Stevens (2012) offered that it was perhaps the arresting power of the negative tone that makes the negative ads seem to provide more information than positive ads, and not that more information is actually present. These studies help explain why general advertisers hesitate to use comparative ads (Barry, 1993), but the politician-sponsor may be willing to lose some votes if the sponsor believes that he/she can cause a greater loss of votes for the competitor (Rickard, 1994). So the objective of a negative ad may not be to attract voters to the sponsor-candidate, but to drive them away from the opponent.

Most early measurements of A_{ad} only investigated the affect portion of attitude, so it was not clear whether the studies' results would have been different by examining the cognitive-belief (Ad-C) and affect-emotional (Ad-A) portions of ad attitude separately. In both high- and low-involvement decisions, the cognitive component of attitude precedes the affect component (Assael, 1998), and that affect is derived from cognitive, attribute beliefs (Tinkham & Weaver-Lariscy, 1994; Desai & Mahajan, 1998). Therefore, ignoring the cognitive element of attitude allows researchers to miss the first, and perhaps most important, element of the attitude toward the ad.

Many studies have looked at television ads and how they differ from print ads. Some have investigated television advertisements for attitudes and credibility, but not for ad attitude components toward political ads. Previous studies include looking for credibility of the medium (Moore & Rodgers, 2005), creativity with credibility (Dahlén 2005), ad avoidance (Speck and Elliott, 1997), low-involvement context (De Pelsmacker et. al., 2002), and objectivity versus subjective message claims (Darley & Smith, 1993).

HYPOTHESES

Studies using presidential campaigns' print ads have demonstrated that both the cognitive and affective components of ad attitude were present and statistically different to warrant separate examination (e.g. Robideaux, 1998, 2004). The earlier study found that positive-only and negative-only ad arguments were statistically different. This study will examine these ad attitude dimensions along the same positive versus negative ad content to see if these two ad attitude dimensions are still present for television advertising.

Hypothesis One will look to see if the ad attitude (A_{ad}) subcomponent of Affect is present and statistically different for the two types of political television advertising. Hypothesis Two will do the same for the Cognitive subcomponent of A_{ad} . The two types of political ads were designated as: Positive (for Sponsor-Positive only ads); and Negative (for Opponent-Negative only ads).

Hypothesis One: The Affect component (Ad-A) of Ad Attitude (A_{ad}) will be present and statistically different between the two ad treatments, Positive and Negative.

Hypothesis Two: The Cognitive component (Ad-C) of Ad Attitude (A_{ad}) will be present and statistically different between the two ad treatments, Positive and Negative.

METHODOLOGY

Instrument

Respondents were shown one of four representative television commercials that had been broadcast by the two presidential candidates. Afterward, a pencil and paper questionnaire was completed.

Respondents had an equal chance of receiving one of four ad treatments – A Positive or Negative television ad, for either the Republican or Democratic candidate. While ads from both Republican and Democratic candidates were presented, they were not examined separately, but combined for subsequent hypothesis analysis.

Positive ads were composed of sponsor-positive statements only and Negative ads were composed of opponent-negative statements only. The ads shown were selected from those broadcast by the two campaigns. An ad that was clearly sponsor-positive and one that was opponent-negative in tone were selected for each candidate. The ads were also selected to be analogous in style and content so that the two Positive ads would be comparable and the two Negative ads would be comparable.

Subjects

A convenience sample of 278 business and non-business undergraduate students at a Midwestern state university participated. This population is the type used most often in ad attitude studies (Moore & Rodgers, 2005; Brown & Stayman, 1992; Pinkleton, Um, & Austin, 2002). Within this convenience sample, the students were assigned randomly to one of the four message treatments: Sponsor-Positive or Opponent-Negative television ad, and either Democratic or Republican sponsored.

A_{ad} Measurement

Ad attitude (A_{ad}) has been measured many times, but as mentioned earlier, treated as a single feeling (or affect) based measure. Ad attitude has three subcomponents: Cognitive (Ad-C), Affective (Ad-A), and Behavioral Intent (Assael, 1998). Behavioral Intent is not examined in this study. The Cognitive and Affective subcomponent measures were developed following the scaling built on the previous ad attitude studies discussed below. Cronbach's Alpha was used to provide evidence of reliability and then factor analysis was used to discover and develop the multiple scaling items discussed below.

Affective Measurement

The survey instrument investigated subjects' attitudes toward the ads using a series of 5-point bipolar scale items developed by Mitchell and Olson (1981); Lutz, et. al., (1983); Hill and Mazis (1985); and Hill (1989). The items were labeled "good – bad," "like – dislike," "irritating – nonirritating," "favorable – unfavorable," "pleasant – unpleasant," "nice – awful," "sensitive – insensitive," and "tasteful – tasteless." While these items represented the A_{ad} scale as a global construct in Hill (1989) and Mitchell and Olson (1981), they were used to only represent the affective component of attitude (e.g., Robideaux 1998, 2002) used for hypothesis testing.

Cognitive Measurement

The cognitive construct, representing thinking and beliefs toward the ad, is also a subcomponent of the overall ad attitude. Three scales, "interesting – uninteresting," (Hill, 1989) "believable – unbelievable" and "informative – not informative" (Tinkham & Weaver-Lariscy, 1994) were used to measure the content-relevant cognitive dimension.

The response scales alternated the position of the positive and negative polar adjective to reduce measurement error. The items were then recoded so that the middle position of the 5-point scale was neutral, or zero. This allowed one to read the scale as +1 or +2 as positive and very positive, and -1 or -2 as negative and very negative.

Composite Scales

Guided by the previous factor analysis grouping of the bi-polar scales, construct means of summated scores were developed (e.g., Mitchell & Olson 1981) for the Affective and Cognitive constructs of A_{ad} . As described above, because the 5-point item scales used the midpoint as zero, the construct means could be positive or negative, reflecting the overall, or mean, directional responses of the construct. These construct means were used for the subsequent testing of hypotheses.

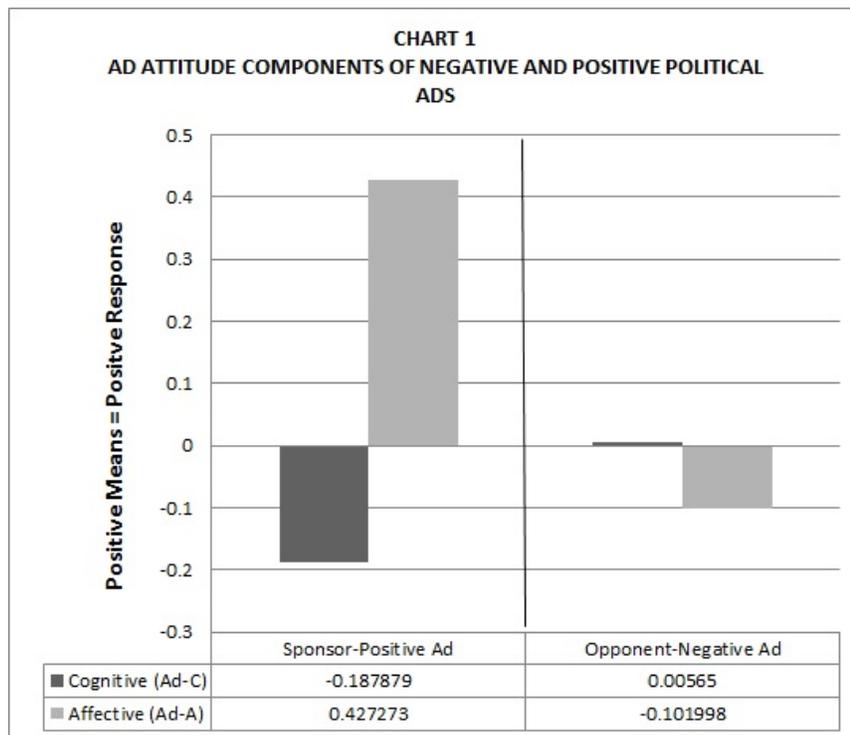
Limitations of Study

As with all studies, there are limitations that should be noted. First, a convenience sample of students from a single geographic location was used. This limits generalizability to perhaps younger voters, but this group is very important. Earlier studies have indicated that younger voters' trust of information and media sources is perhaps due to younger voters' cynicism toward politicians (Merritt, 1984), the inherent trust of candidates and media (Sherman, et. al., 2012), or just the general cynicism of younger voters (Yoon, 1995). In any case, the study was looking for ad attitude effects and media differences in those effects and does not propose that the findings exist at similar levels with all voters.

Another limitation is the variation between political systems and any regulatory bodies governing the political or advertising process. Until negative political advertising increases to the levels found in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K., the ad attitude responses may not rise to the levels found in this study. And even here, differences in reactions to negative ads may exist between the U.S. and other countries (Murphy, 1996).

RESULTS

Hypothesis One was seeking to examine whether the Affect (Ad-A), or feeling-based, subcomponent of A_{ad} was statistically different between the Sponsor-Positive television ad and the Opponent-Negative television ad. As one can see from Chart One, the Affective (Ad-A) dimension between the two ad treatments are very different.



The Affective means are very positive for Sponsor-Positive ads and negative for Opponent-Negative ads. Hypothesis testing using ANOVA analysis revealed a t-score of 8.82, a statistically significant level that easily exceeds the 0.05 alpha level.

Hypothesis Two was seeking to examine whether the Cognitive (Ad-C), or informational/believable, subcomponent of A_{ad} was statistically different between the Sponsor-Positive television ad and the Opponent-Negative television ad. As one can see from Chart One, the Cognitive dimension between the two ad treatments are also very different.

The Cognitive means are very negative for Sponsor-Positive ads and just barely positive for Opponent-Negative ads. Hypothesis testing using ANOVA resulted in a t-score of -3.23, a statistically significant level beyond the 0.05 alpha level.

Examining the direction of the means of Ad-C is illuminating. For Sponsor-Positive television commercials, the Cognitive, or believability, of the ad is in the negative territory. This indicates that the subjects viewed a candidate's television ad, which said only positive things about himself, to be on the negative side of the scale. We also see this to a lesser degree on Affect dimension when viewing an Opponent-Negative ad. Again, a positive composite score mean indicates a positive reaction by subjects and a negative mean indicates a negative reaction by subjects.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Hypothesis One did find that the Affect subcomponent of Ad Attitude was statistically different between the Sponsor-Positive ads and the Opponent-Negative ads. The direction and strength of the Affect score means are also useful. These results provide some support for previous studies (e.g. Merritt, 1984; Hill, 1989) that concluded that subjects did not "like" negative political ads. Indeed, the difference between the Positive and Negative ad treatments were statistically different. As shown in Chart One, subjects evaluated Sponsor-Positive ads in a positive manner on the Affect (Ad-A) attitude subcomponent and in the opposite direction for the Opponent-Negative ads. So the subjects do have positive feelings about the ad when the sponsor says good things about himself, and negative feelings about ads in which the sponsor says bad things about his opponent.

What we can conclude from Hypothesis Two (Chart One) is that the Cognitive (Ad-C), or credible/believable/informational, ad attitude construct for Sponsor-Positive ads is strongly negative for television ads. For Opponent-Negative ads, the Cognitive construct is statistically different from the Positive ads and is marginally on the positive side of the scale.

These results indicate that subjects find television ads to be not believable when the politician's ad says nothing but positive things about him/herself. This is true even though the subjects do have positive feelings (Ad-A) about the ad. This offers the suggestion to political strategists that for Sponsor-Positive TV ads, don't bother to present facts and information since they are not likely to be interpreted as credible. Stick to image-based ads designed to promote positive feelings toward your candidate.

One can also find here some tentative support from Hypothesis Two for studies that concluded that even though subjects did not "like" the negative ads, they found them to be credible and believable (e.g. Robideaux, 1998). This supports political strategists who continue to believe that regardless of liking or disliking negative political ads, these ads continue to provide information and to influence voters.

Certainly further investigation is warranted. These results showing that on the Cognitive level, television ads were viewed as on the negative side of the credible/believable scale could have important implications for political strategists' ad campaign decisions. These results indicate that when creating ads that will portray one's political opponent in a negative light, subjects will interpret these television ads as more believable than ads showing the sponsor in a positive light.

In summary, the general cynicism toward politicians by voters may become a self-fulfilling conundrum – increasing levels of negative advertising leading to increased cynicism (Merritt, 1984) and doubts about the ability of the political process or government to solve problems (Zeller, 1991). Even if true, this cynicism has not yet come to a saturation point, to where one finds nothing believable in negative ads. But we may be getting very close to this point.

From this study, practitioners of political advertising may find some useful guidance. There is certainly no surprise from these results that indicate that subjects “like” Sponsor-Positive ads and “dislike” Opponent-Negative ads (Hypothesis One). What is the more surprising, and perhaps useful, is the level of disbelief/noncredible/noninformational evaluation (Ad-C’s negative mean) subjects assigned to Sponsor-Positive ads.

In the past, practitioners could count on the Opponent-Negative ads to still have a cognitive/believability component (Ad-C) that would possibly sway undecided voters as well as strengthen the commitment of their own party's voters. This study has shown that the believability (Ad-C having a positive mean) may be minimal or nearing zero, at least for television ads. Unlike previous studies with print ads (e.g. Robideaux, 1998, 2004) that found negative advertising to be highly credible, this study found that for negative television ads, the credibility score is barely positive.

Perhaps that political cynicism discussed earlier among younger voters is finally affecting even negative political ads. However, the statistical difference for Ad-C is still there. Negative political ads are evaluated as much more credible than Positive political ads. So negative political advertising will still have its adherents, albeit for differing tactical purposes. Information, believability, and credibility are still greater in Opponent-Negative television ads and are actually working against the sponsor of Sponsor-Positive television ads.

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