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Political Reality: Attack Ads are Here to Stay

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Abstract - The primary research questions of this study center on two largely overlooked areas in negative political advertising: (1) Would the sponsor of the attack ad message be better off with a positive message? (2) When one is targeted by an attack ad, how should the attacked candidate respond? M-Turk subjects (n = 1,380) were used to conduct a multi-stage experimental design to capture the dynamic aspects of how subjects react to the use of attack ads in a hypothetical political campaign. In general, subjects did not respond favorably to attack ads, as these negative political messages caused damage to the image of both the attacker and the attacked. However, it was found that attack ads did cause greater harm to the evaluations of the attacked candidate than to the attacker. Positive ads offered in response to an attack ad helped the attacked candidate recover, whereas negative counter ads, when executed in response to an attack ad, inflicted greater damage to the attacked than the attacker. Suggestions for future research are offered in this highly relevant area of political campaigning.

Keywords - Attack Advertising, Political Marketing, Political Campaigns

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners – This study identifies a unique aspect of advertising that is frequently found in political campaigns, the process of mudslinging as candidates make attack ads against each other. Practitioners and researchers alike will find interest in the design of this study and its perplexing results, while marketing educators can identify interesting fodder for unique classroom discussions.

Introduction

Recent presidential elections, as well as a realm of other national and regional campaigns, have been marked by the extensive use of negative advertising designed to attack the record of the opposing candidate. Such methods have been employed by both incumbents and challengers. Unlike product marketing, where market leaders generally eschew even mentioning competitors in market communications, thereby dismissing/minimizing their competitors' presence in the marketplace, politicians regularly employ attack ads toward their opponents even with the advantage of frontrunnership or incumbency. Hence, views on attacking a competitor from a traditional marketing perspective have little relevance in political campaigns. Whether attack ads lead to the outcome sought by campaigns is largely a matter of conjecture and/or circumstances; nevertheless, negative political advertisements have become increasingly evident in U.S. politics and are seemingly an integral part of the current political landscape.

Given the extensiveness of this practice in contemporary elections, it is appropriate to give a purposeful examination of negative political advertising to appraise the effects of this messaging format on voter evaluations of both the attacking and attacked candidates. The current study extends the literature by proposing fresh and relevant research questions beyond what has been typically employed to study this phenomenon. A review of the literature in political advertising and attack advertising found gaps that are addressed here. The current study offers new research questions to fill these gaps. A two-study approach was guided by two general issues: (1) Would the sponsor of the attack ad message be better off with a positive message? (2) When one is targeted by an attack ad, how should the attacked candidate respond? This approach allows for the offering of prescriptive, relevant conclusions and implications drawn from the results.

This study makes a contribution to the literature by employing an experimental scenario-based approach to securing voter evaluations. Previous research in this area is typified by relatively small student samples, resulting in findings that are descriptive in nature and narrowly generalizable (e.g., Garramone 1985; Rody and Garramone 1988; Pinkleton 1997; Pinkleton et al., 2002; Chou and Lien 2011; Shen et al., 2011). Other more recent studies have relied on 'big data' (archival) and econometric models (see Fulgoni et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2015; Hopp and Vargo 2017; Malloy and Pearson-Merkowitz 2016) to ascertain the implications of attack advertisements. Neither form of research is a direct approach in understanding voters' responses to attack ads in a campaign setting. The current study advances the literature by undertaking such a direct approach to understanding this phenomenon among voters by employing an experimental design within an online survey to ascertain the key strategic implications of attack advertisements.

Field experiments and scenario method are the two primary data collection approaches in political advertising research. While the key advantage of field experiments (e.g., Torres et al., 2012; Rao, 2017; Krishna and Sokolova, 2017) lies in the realism of the setting, the findings are typically case specific to political campaigns and candidates. As generalization of field experiments necessitates multiple studies across various relevant domains, something that is not present in the literature, there is a gap that the current study can help fill. Rather than take the field experiment approach, the current study adds depth of understanding to the political advertising literature regarding the implications of attack strategies by employing the generalized scenario approach, coupled with an experimental design, to examine the key research issues related to negative attack advertising. This approach provides generalizable findings for political campaigns.

Literature Review

Political Advertising

While a vast amount of literature on political advertising exists in the fields of political science, communications, and marketing/advertising, few of these studies have directly addressed the effects of attack advertising in campaigns. For example, review papers have been published in political science (e.g., Van Steenburg, 2015; Meirick et al., 2018; Dommett and Power, 2019), in political advertising (Lau et al., 1999; Fowler et al., 2020; Franz 2020), and negative advertising (Lau et al., 2007) regarding negative political campaigning. Communications is another field where publications on negative political advertising can be found (e.g., Allen and Burrell 2002; Benoit 2001; Benoit et al., 2007; Fernandes 2013; Johnson and Kaid 2002; Schemer 2012; Yoon et al., 2005). While it is appropriate to acknowledge the presence of such research, the issues addressed in the political science and communications fields are not directly relevant to the direction taken in the current study and consequently, will not be reviewed.

An in-depth review of the marketing/advertising literature in political advertising is offered. Recent research has examined the psychology of voting behavior (Rao 2017; Krishna and Sokolova 2017) and spill-over effects of political advertising to subsequent advertising (Fossen et al., 2020). Research in political advertising has examined its effects on voters for specific candidates and/or political campaigns, typically using field experiments. Specifically, Phillips et al. (2008) studied the effects of confirmation and valence on voters in the 2004 U.S. Presidential election. Kaid et al. (2007) concentrated on young voters' attitudes towards Bush and Kerry in 2004. Jasperson and Fan (2002) showed the backlash effect in the case of the 1996 U.S. senate race in Minnesota. Kim, Rao, and Lee (2009) examined the effects of temporal distance (when a message is presented) and abstractness of political message ("why" versus "how") on the perception of fluency among voters. Conclusions drawn from this body of research suggest that "why" messages are more persuasive than the concrete "how" messages when the voting decisions are distant. While these studies provide the benefits of realism, generalization across the domains of campaign, candidates, timing of voting, and so forth necessitate multiple replications in order to draw robust conclusions.

In most situations, voters' decisions are affected largely by concrete messages when they are temporally close to election day. One factor that strongly impacts voting decisions is the voter's evaluation of a candidate's personality relative to that of the party. This conclusion is supported by Hoegg and Lewis (2011) who found that political parties have brand images built around personality traits. Democrats tend to emphasize intelligence, while Republicans project competence. "When personality traits inferred from a candidate's appearance match personality traits associated with the candidate's party, it can promote success in electoral outcomes and can mitigate the impact of a negative advertisement directed at the candidate" (Hoegg and Lewis, 2011: 904). Thus, ads posed by competitors have less impact when offered in close proximity to election day.

Negative and Comparative Political Advertising

Negative political advertising can be defined as a direct assault using the presentation of broken promises and public misstatements attributable to a targeted candidate. Depending on the degree of the assault, this is often referred to as "mudslinging" or "attack advertising." Voters in general dislike such negative political advertising and consider these advertising messages to be distasteful and potentially deceptive (Banda and Windett, 2016; Pinkleton, 1997). The potential exists for negative attitudes to be generated among the voting populations toward the sponsor as well as the target candidates using attack ads. An alternative to attack ads is negative comparative advertising, which is a tuned-down version and utilizes a discussion of both candidates with the sponsoring candidate positioned to be superior. It is designed to lower the evaluation of the target while not negatively affecting the sponsoring candidate. Using archival data from 47 senatorial elections in Georgia between 2010 and 2012, Wang, Lewis, and Schweidel (2018) reported that "a 1% increase in negative advertising by the candidate produces a significant 0.015% lift in the candidate's unconditional vote shares" (p. 1). Thus, negative ads can have a positive effect for a candidate.

In general, negative information carries greater valence than positive information. Behavioral science research has attempted to provide a detailed understanding of why consumers/voters react to negative information (Ahluwalia, 1996; Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Klein and Ahluwalia, 2005; Lovett and Shachar, 2011) and how responses may differ toward positive, comparative information (Lovett and Shachar, 2011). One conclusion is that negative advertising produces more critical responses than positive advertising, even for voters' preferred candidates. Findings suggest that effects are multidimensional, including reinforcement, backlash, defensive reactance, and position change (Phillips et al., 2008).

Pinkleton (1997) conducted a between-group experiment with 165 undergraduate students using the scenario approach. A profile of two political candidates was presented, followed by negative ad messages. Three different levels (high, medium and low) of negative ad messages were presented. Responses to the candidates before and after exposures to the ads were gathered in terms of candidate and advertising evaluations. Aggregate candidate evaluations were taken along nine dimensions – intelligent, sincere, believable, honest, persuasive, concerned, qualified, good, and ethical, rated on a 7-point bipolar scale. Similarly, advertising evaluations were taken on the dimensions of credibility and relevance. The study's findings suggest a strong negative impact on target candidate evaluation, yet a minimal effect on the sponsoring candidate's evaluations.

In a follow-up study, Pinkleton, Um and Austin (2002) employed a similar research approach to study the effects of positive and negative political advertising messages. A between-subjects experiment was administered to undergraduates. The effects of negative advertising were further confirmed, yet it was found that negative political advertising does not automatically increase cynicism or apathy among voters.

The current study focuses on the effects of negative political advertising not only on the target candidate, but also on the sponsor candidate. The presentation of multiple messaging stimuli in the study allows for the opportunity to study how one would map out a similar or different strategy as a way of responding to negative political advertising. The current study employs individuals across a range of legal voting ages in order to provide more external validity about voters' responses to attack advertisements than found in previous research. Two general issues directed this study: (1) Would the sponsor of the attack ad message be better off with a positive message? (2) When one is targeted by an attack ad, how should the attacked candidate respond?

Method

Two studies were conducted and reported in this paper. Both studies utilized surveys, were approved by the institutional review board (IRB) at the primary author's institution, and were administered using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (M-Turk) worker panel. Nine hundred individuals participated in study 1 and 600 in study 2. Criteria were set up in M-Turk to ensure that participants were of legal voting age and that they could participate only once in the study. A comparison of the demographic characteristics of the two study samples with national norms suggested that the sample obtained was representative of the U.S. voting population. After editing for missing and errant responses, 1,380 participants remained in the final sample for data analysis (829 in study 1; 551 in study 2).

A two-study approach was employed to examine a range of outcomes and effects of political attack ads. In both studies, a state senatorial race with two candidates – Alex and Chris – was established as the context for ascertaining the effects of attack advertising. The principal campaign topic at issue between the candidates was the state's minimum wage.

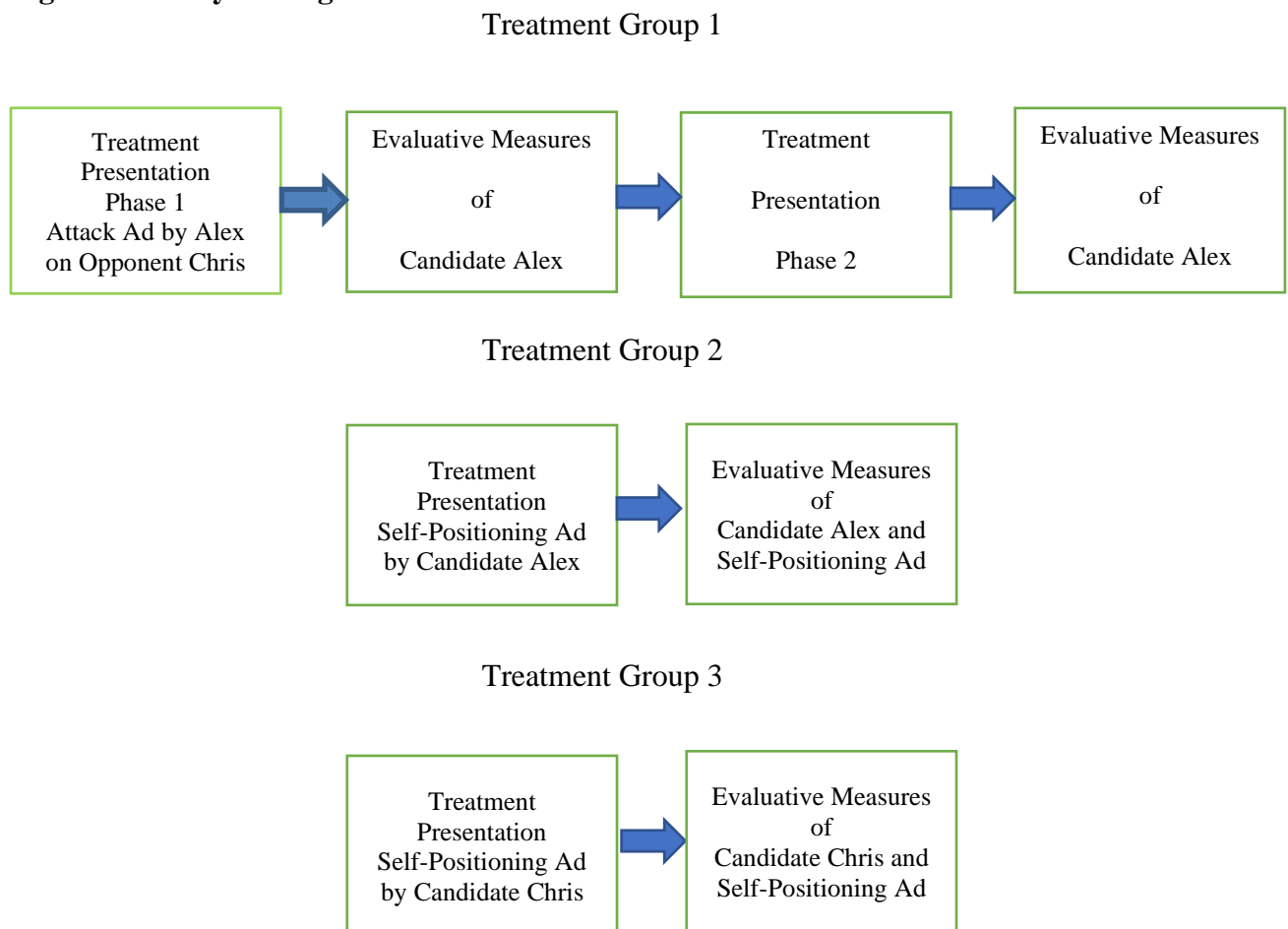
The stimulus scenarios used in the two studies were reviewed by marketing and advertising professors for realism and appropriateness. After editing the scenarios, pre-testing was completed with an undergraduate student sample (see the Appendix for scenarios 1-3). The key dependent measures were based on previous political advertising research (Kaid and Boydston, 1987; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991; Pinkleton, 1997; Pinkleton et al., 2002). Aggregate candidate and ad message evaluations were obtained from three items, each using a 7-point bipolar adjective response scale. Overall ratings of both the candidate and the ad were based on scale items with endpoints: very unfavorable/very favorable; very bad/very good; and very negative/very positive. Specific candidate and ad ratings were measured by the scales: very uncredible/very credible, very unbelievable/very believable, and very

unlikely/very likeable. Preambles were used to introduce respondents to each section of the evaluative scales.

Study 1

In study 1, candidate Alex is the antagonist, utilizing an attack ad on candidate Chris in order to discredit his position on the state minimum wage. The 900 subjects in study 1 were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups with 300 in each group. In all three groups the subjects were asked to read radio copy of an ad offered by the candidate and to provide feedback on the candidate and the message. The design and measures are graphically presented in Figure 1. Specifically, participants in treatment group 1 read the ad copy offered by candidate Alex that attacked the position and background of candidate Chris (see Scenario 1 in the Appendix). After reading the ad, subjects in treatment group 1 were asked to evaluate both candidates and the ad message. Subjects in this treatment group then read a self-positioning message by candidate Chris (see Scenario 3 in the Appendix), followed by a set of measures evaluating both of the candidates and the positioning message.

Figure 1: Study 1 Design



Those randomly assigned to treatment groups 2 and 3 experienced only one candidate's message. Specifically, those in treatment group 2 read the self-positioning ad copy of candidate Alex, wherein he offered his own perspective on the minimum wage issue (see Scenario 2 in the Appendix). The candidate did not mention his opponent, focusing solely on his position on the issue and its importance for voters. Subjects in treatment group 3 read the self-positioning message of candidate Chris (see Scenario 3 in the Appendix). This

candidate's message also did not mention his opponent, focusing instead on offering his own position on the issue. Subjects in both treatment groups 2 and 3 rated the message and candidate after reading his messaging. No additional actions were required from those in treatment groups 2 and 3.

Study 1 had three specific research objectives. The first objective was to ascertain whether a candidate engaging in badmouthing an opponent enhances his own position in a political race. In treatment group one, candidate Alex offers an attack advertising message that negatively depicts his opponent's background and position on the issue of the minimum wage. In order to assess the effects of this message on the attacking candidate, a comparison was made between the candidates' ratings obtained in the first phase in treatment group one (those for candidate Alex) and those obtained in treatment group 2 for the same candidate.

The second objective is to ascertain whether an attack ad actually affects voters' evaluations of the attacking candidate's opponent. An attack ad is obviously designed to negatively impact an opponent's standing with the voting populace. The direction and magnitude of the effect of the attack ad was examined in study one. This was achieved by comparing the ratings obtained from the measures of the attacked candidate in treatment group 1 (measured after the subjects read the attack ad on this candidate) with those obtained in treatment group 3 (which assessed the self-positioning message of the candidate).

The third objective was examined by appraising the effects of the attacked candidate's positioning response after he had been attacked by his opponent. A candidate may attempt to take the "high road" response to an attack ad by simply offering a his/her position on the issue without responding to the topics offered in the attack ad. This objective was assessed by comparing the outcomes obtained for the attacked candidate after the initial ad in treatment group one with those outcomes obtained after the same subjects read his rebuttal advertisement. This determines whether the response ad was able to mitigate against any adverse effects brought by the attack ad on this candidate. Such evidence is important in determining the appropriate response to an attack ad in a real campaign situation.

Study 1 Results

After editing out any errant responses, a total of 829 subjects, about 276 in each group, remained for further analysis. Table 1 contains the results related to the first research objective of whether attack ads positively or negatively affect the evaluations of the attacking candidate. This objective was assessed by comparing the evaluations of the attacking candidate (Alex) after the attack ad was read (treatment group 1) with those obtained for that same candidate among those who only read his self-promotional ad (treatment group 2). Comparison of the measures associated with these two treatments reflects which tactic results in better enhancing a candidate's image.

Table 1: Study 1 Comparison of Attack Ad Candidate's Ratings

Rating Dimensions	Treatment Group 1 Candidate Rating After Attack Advertisement	Treatment Group 2 Candidate Rating After Self- Positioning Advertisement	Difference
Overall Rating Dimensions of Attack Ad Candidate (Alex)			
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	5.00	5.38	0.379***
Very Bad/Very Good	5.03	5.35	0.324*
Very Negative/Very Positive	5.02	5.45	0.428***
Specific Rating Dimensions of Attack Ad Candidate (Alex)			
Very Uncredible/Very Credible	4.80	4.92	0.121
Very Unbelievable/Very Believable	4.94	4.94	-0.003
Very Unlikeable/Very Likeable	4.78	5.40	0.618***
Overall Ratings of Attack Ad			
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	4.33	5.25	0.914***
Very Bad/Very Good	4.38	5.27	0.896***
Very Negative/Very Positive	4.20	5.37	1.161***
Specific Ratings of Attack Ad			
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	4.53	4.89	0.361***
Very Bad/Very Good	4.67	5.02	0.350*
Very Negative/Very Positive	4.31	5.36	1.031**

*Significant at .05 level; **Significant at .01 level; ***Significant at .001 level

The overall evaluations of Alex after employing the self-positioning strategy are all significantly higher than after utilization of the attack ad. The differences between means on the overall measures of the candidate range from 0.324 to 0.428. For the three specific ratings, only one measure attained significance (“Likeable”). A mean of 5.40 was obtained for the likeable dimension under the self-positioning in treatment group 1 as compared to 4.78 among those in the attack ad treatment group 1. Comparisons of the means between the two ad copies found that the overall evaluations and specific rating scores were higher for self-positioning than attacking. These findings, collectively, suggest that attack ads have a negative effect on the evaluations of both the attacker and the message s/he executes.

Research objective 2 addresses the amount of damage induced by attack ads on the sponsor versus that of the target recipient. Table 2 compares the effects of the self-positioning

message by Chris as captured in treatment group 3 versus the effects of Alex’s mudslinging on Chris in the first phase of treatment group 1. Statistically significant differences were found between the two sets of treatment group means, indicating the attack ad by Alex greatly lowered the ratings for Chris. The average scores for the overall evaluations for the attacked candidate Chris ranged from 0.890 to 0.919, with 0.794 to 0.926 for the specific ratings. Comparing the outcomes found in tables 1 and 2, evidence exists that while attack ads can result in damage to the attacker, even greater damage is done to the attacked candidate. Such a finding suggests that attack ads certainly may be useful in certain campaign situations.

Table 2: Study 1 Comparison of Attacked Candidate’s Ratings

Rating Dimensions	Treatment Group 1 Candidate Rating After Attack Advertisement	Treatment Group 3 Candidate Rating After Self- Positioning Advertisement	Difference
Overall Rating Dimensions of Attack Ad Candidate (Chris)			
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	2.96	3.85	0.890***
Very Bad/Very Good	3.00	3.90	0.904***
Very Negative/Very Positive	2.91	3.83	0.919***
Specific Rating Dimensions of Attack Ad Candidate (Chris)			
Very Uncredible/Very Credible	3.37	4.29	0.926***
Very Unbelievable/Very Believable	3.43	4.22	0.794***
Very Unlikeable/Very Likeable	3.05	4.05	0.995***

***Significant at .001 level

Research objective 3 examines the effects of Chris countering Alex’s attack ad with a self-positioning advertisement. Recall that in treatment group 1, Alex employs the attack ad against Chris in phase 1, and Chris counters with his self-positioning message in phase 2. As shown in Table 3, overall and specific ratings for the attacking candidate Alex went down drastically along all rating dimensions between phase 1 and phase 2. Average evaluation scores went from about 5.0 to the low 4.0 range. The average differences ranged from 0.588 to 0.681. All differences were statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. Similarly, average specific rating scores declined substantially from phase 1 to phase 2. On the other hand, the overall and specific rating scores for Chris experienced a substantial lift with his counter, self-positioning message (see Table 3). When Chris countered Alex’s attack message with a self-positioning message for himself, Alex’s ratings went substantially lower, while

Chris' ratings largely recovered nearly to the same levels as shown in treatment group 3 (as shown in Table 2).

Table 3: Study 1 Comparison of Responses to Attack Ad and Self-Positioning Ad

Rating Dimensions	Treatment Group 1 Phase 1	Treatment Group 1 Phase 2	Difference
Overall Rating Dimensions of Attack Ad Candidate (Alex)			
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	5.00	4.41	0.588***
Very Bad/Very Good	5.03	4.38	0.648***
Very Negative/Very Positive	5.02	4.34	0.681***
Specific Rating Dimensions of Attack Ad Candidate (Alex)			
Very Uncredible/Very Credible	4.80	4.23	0.568***
Very Unbelievable/Very Believable	4.94	4.24	0.701***
Very Unlikeable/Very Likeable	4.78	4.16	0.615***
Overall Rating Dimensions of Attacked Candidate (Chris)			
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	2.96	3.85	-0.886***
Very Bad/Very Good	3.00	3.93	-0.912***
Very Negative/Very Positive	2.91	3.88	-0.962***
Specific Rating Dimensions of Attacked Candidate (Chris)			
Very Uncredible/Very Credible	3.37	4.08	-0.709***
Very Unbelievable/Very Believable	3.43	4.07	-0.636***
Very Unlikeable/Very Likeable	3.05	3.92	-0.867***
Overall Rating Ad Message			
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	4.33	4.09	0.243
Very Bad/Very Good	4.38	4.11	0.266
Very Negative/Very Positive	4.20	4.13	0.054
Specific Rating Ad Message			
Very Uncredible/Very Credible	4.53	4.26	0.263
Very Unbelievable/Very Believable	4.67	4.34	0.333
Very Unlikeable/Very Likeable	4.31	4.07	0.232

***Significant at .001 level

Table 4 provides a direct comparison of Chris' original position (in treatment group 3) with his recovery level in treatment group 1, phase 2. Little or no difference is captured in terms of the overall and item ratings for Chris. It is interesting to note that the overall ratings for Chris' ad message after Alex's attack ad are higher than the corresponding ratings obtained from treatment group 3. The ad message is perceived to be more favorable and more

positive after the candidate is attacked than when it stands alone (treatment group 3). Similarly, the ad is seen as more likeable after the attack ad than in the stand-alone treatment.

Table 4: Study 1 Comparison of Attacked Candidate’s Personal Ratings and Ratings for his Self-Positioning Ad (Treatment Group 1, Phase 2 vs. Treatment Group 3)

Rating Dimensions	Treatment Group 1 Phase 2 Self-Positioning Post-Attack, Recovery Ad		Treatment Group 3 Self-Positioning Ad	Difference
Overall Rating Dimensions of Attacked Candidate (Chris)				
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	3.85		3.85	0.001
Very Bad/Very Good	3.91		3.90	0.008
Very Negative/Very Positive	3.88		3.83	0.043
Specific Rating Dimensions of Attacked Candidate (Chris)				
Very Uncredible/Very Credible	4.08		4.29	-0.211
Very Unbelievable/Very Believable	4.07		4.22	-0.157
Very Unlikeable/Very Likeable	3.92		4.05	-0.114
Overall Rating Ad Message				
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	4.09		3.61	0.478**
Very Bad/Very Good	4.11		3.74	0.368*
Very Negative/Very Positive	4.15		3.73	0.424*
Specific Rating Ad Message				
Very Uncredible/Very Credible	4.26		4.14	0.120
Very Unbelievable/Very Believable	4.34		4.21	0.125
Very Unlikeable/Very Likeable	4.07		3.73	0.349*

*Significant at .05 level; **Significant at .01 level

After Alex’s attack ad has been experienced, the strategy of countering with a self-enhancing position helps the attacked candidate (Chris) recover, while the attacking candidate’s (Alex) position erodes. This finding raises additional research questions that warrant further examination (which are elaborated later in the paper).

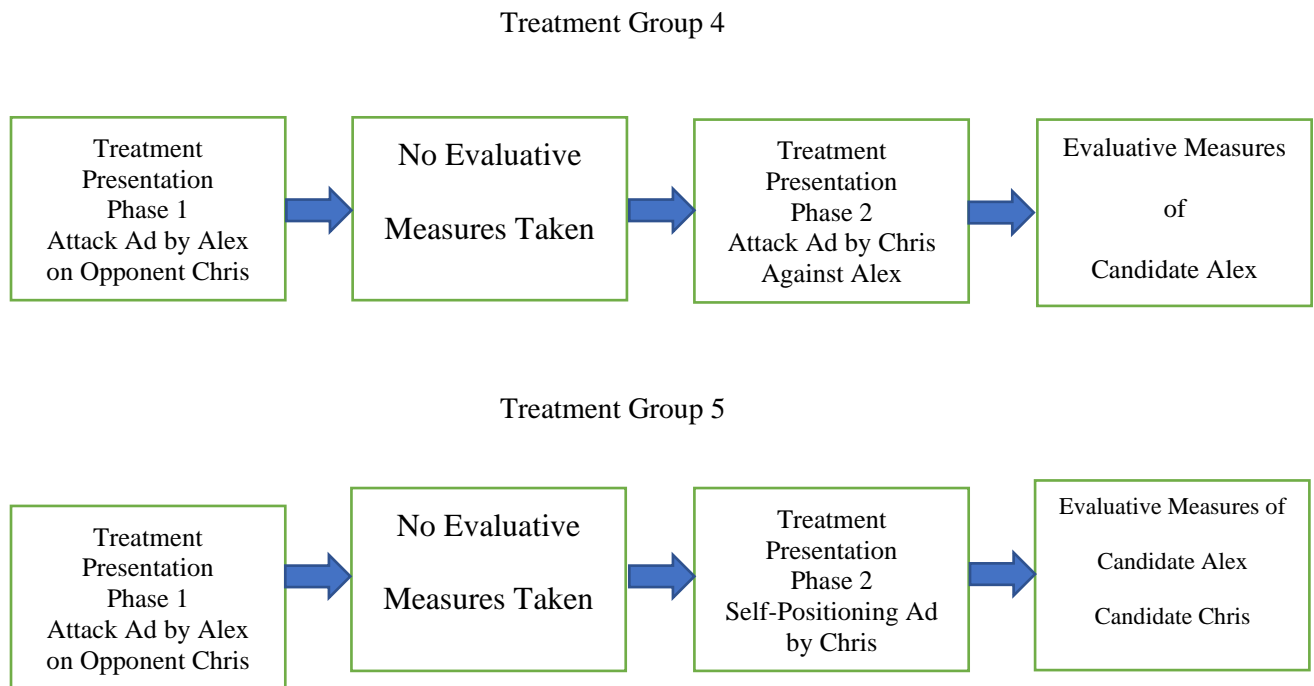
A critical question in a campaign where one candidate uses negative advertisements to attack her/his opponent is what approach the attacked candidate should take to countervail her/his opponent’s attack. Should s/he counter with a similar attack message or a self-positioning message? Study 2 was designed and conducted to address these research questions.

Study 2

Figure 2 shows the experimental design for study 2. As shown in Figure 2, both treatment groups were given the attack ad scenario in phase 1. The difference between the two treatment groups in study 2 is that treatment group 4 receives the attacked candidate’s

counterattack ad, whereas those in treatment group 5 receive the attacked candidate’s self-positioning ad. No measures are obtained after the first ad treatment exposures. This helps to eliminate the potential for carryover effects from the measurement process.

Figure 2: Study 2 Design



The three scenarios employed in study 2 are contained in the Appendix. The initial attacking candidate’s (Alex) attack ad (see Scenario 1 in the Appendix) and his opponent’s self-positioning scenario (see Scenario 3 in the Appendix) are the same as used in study 1. The counterattack ad used in treatment group 4 was prepared and pretested following the same procedure previously described in study 1 (see Scenario 4 in the Appendix). The initial attack ad was presented to both treatment groups in phase 1 and immediately followed by either the attacked candidate’s counterattack (treatment group 4) or self-positioning ad (treatment group 5). After the second ad presentation, measures were obtained for each candidate, as well as evaluations of the second advertisement. These measures were obtained from both sets of treatment group subjects.

The 600 participants recruited for study 2 were randomly assigned to the two treatment groups, yielding 300 in each of the two groups. After editing for missing observations, a final sample of 551, about 275 in each group, remained for data analysis.

Study 2 Results

The results presented in Table 5 show no statistically significant difference in the overall evaluations for the attacked candidate (Chris) due to either the self-promoting or counterattacking strategy. However, the average scores for credibility and believability among the specific measures were significantly higher among respondents receiving the self-positioning message. Ad message ratings are directionally higher for the self-positioning ad than the counterattack ad.

Table 5: Study 2 Comparison of the Effects of Counter Strategies by Attacked Candidate (Chris) on Candidate's Ratings

Rating Dimensions	Treatment Group 4 (Attack ad on Candidate)	Treatment Group 5 (Self-Positioning Ad)	Difference
Overall Rating Dimensions of Attacked Candidate (Chris)			
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	3.60	3.60	-0.004
Very Bad/Very Good	3.58	3.67	-0.007
Very Negative/Very Positive	3.52	3.59	-0.071
Specific Rating Dimensions of Attacked Candidate (Chris)			
Very Uncredible/Very Credible	3.72	4.18	-0.461**
Very Unbelievable/Very Believable	3.71	4.03	-0.317*
Very Unlikeable/Very Likeable	3.62	3.75	-0.136
Overall Rating Ad Message			
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	3.60	3.73	-0.130
Very Bad/Very Good	3.65	3.78	-0.131
Very Negative/Very Positive	3.44	3.73	-0.292
Specific Rating Ad Message			
Very Uncredible/Very Credible	3.75	4.19	-0.441**
Very Unbelievable/Very Believable	3.75	4.12	-0.371*
Very Unlikeable/Very Likeable	3.51	3.74	-0.231

*Significant at .05 level; **Significant at .01 level

The attacking candidate's (Alex's) overall evaluation measures and item ratings are all substantially lower when his opponent responds with a similar attack message as compared to when the attacked candidate employs a self-positioning ad (see Table 6). The attacked candidate's self-positioning ad message resulted in higher scores for the attacking candidate than when subjects received the counterattack ad. This result provides substantiation for the negative effects of attack ads and the positive effects associated with self-positioning ads.

Table 6: Study 2 Comparison of Effects of Counter Ad Strategy on Attacking Candidate

Rating Dimensions	Treatment Group 4		Difference
	Counteractive Attack Ad	Treatment Group 5 Self-Positioning Ad	
Overall Rating Dimensions of Attack Ad Candidate (Alex)			
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	4.04	4.77	-0.728***
Very Bad/Very Good	4.05	4.74	-0.692***
Very Negative/Very Positive	3.92	4.71	-0.782***
Specific Rating Dimensions of Attacked Candidate (Alex)			
Very Uncredible/Very Credible	3.88	4.57	-0.681***
Very Unbelievable/Very Believable	4.08	4.59	-0.519***
Very Unlikeable/Very Likeable	3.89	4.73	-0.837***
Overall Rating Attack Ad Message			
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	3.92	4.64	-0.714***
Very Bad/Very Good	3.91	4.56	-0.651***
Very Negative/Very Positive	3.68	4.46	-0.780***
Specific Rating Attack Ad Message			
Very Uncredible/Very Credible	3.97	4.49	-0.520***
Very Unbelievable/Very Believable	4.08	4.54	-0.467***
Very Unlikeable/Very Likeable	3.77	4.50	-0.735***

***Significant at .001 level

Toward the end of each survey form in both treatment groups of study 2, participants were asked to respond to the question: “After first reading Alex’s ad and then reading Chris’ ad, do you think that Chris responded appropriately to Alex’s ad?” It was found that forty-six percent of the participants indicated “yes” in treatment group 4, compared to an overwhelming 82.9% in treatment group 5 when the self-positioning ad was used. Again, these findings provide further substantiation for the negative perception voters have towards attack ads and the positive image of self-positioning ad messages.

For an attacked candidate, it is important to ascertain which course of action leads to a greater improvement in his/her position among voters. In Table 7, direct comparisons are made between the two candidates in treatment groups 4 and 5. For treatment group 4, where the attacked candidate responds to his nemesis by attacking with a similar attack ad message of his own, the initial attacking candidate’s (Alex’s) overall and item ratings declined drastically, while Chris’ position moved modestly lower (see Table 7). The initial attacking candidate still holds a stronger position, even though the differences are not all statistically significant. For example, candidate item ratings for “favorability” and “likeability” are perceived to be statistically similar. In other words, the overall distance between the two candidates, Alex and Chris, decreased substantially.

Table 7: Study 2 Comparison of Attacking Candidate and Attacked Candidates Results from Treatment Groups 4 and 5

Rating Dimensions	Attacking Candidate (Alex)	Attacked Candidate (Chris)	Difference
Treatment Group Four			
Overall Rating Dimensions			
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	4.04	3.60	0.444**
Very Bad/Very Good	4.05	3.58	0.468**
Very Negative/Very Positive	3.92	3.52	0.404*
Specific Rating Dimensions			
Very Uncredible/Very Credible	3.88	3.72	0.168
Very Unbelievable/Very Believable	4.08	3.71	0.366**
Very Unlikeable/Very Likeable	3.89	3.62	0.271
Treatment Group Five			
Overall Rating Dimensions			
Very Unfavorable/Very Favorable	4.77	3.60	1.164***
Very Bad/Very Good	4.74	3.67	1.072***
Very Negative/Very Positive	4.71	3.59	1.113***
Specific Rating Dimensions			
Very Uncredible/Very Credible	4.57	4.18	0.389*
Very Unbelievable/Very Believable	4.59	4.03	0.563**
Very Unlikeable/Very Likeable	4.73	3.75	0.974***

*Significant at .05 level; **Significant at .01 level; ***Significant at .001 level

Table 7 also presents the comparison of the two candidates' positions when subjects received the attacked candidate's self-positioning ad response. Substantial differences were observed along all dimensions for the two ads. The attacked candidate's position improved slightly with his self-enhancement ad message, while Alex's position remained largely unaffected.

In the evidence found in this study, given the highly favorable position initially enjoyed by the attacking candidate (Alex) over his opponent, the opponent (Chris) is better off adopting the attack ad counter-response to Alex's attack ad. The evidence shows that this helps to more effectively reduce the distance between the two candidates. However, the subordinate candidate does not improve his position among voters. Rather, the manipulation showed that the movement in ratings occurred with the attacking candidate moving down towards his opponent.

In conclusion, attack ads generate a negative self-image, yet have a greater negative impact on the opponent than on the self (as one would expect to observe). Self-positioning ad messages enhance the self-image, while helping to dilute the negative impact of attack ads. The self-positioning ad messages have little or no impact on the opponent.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study extends the research in political advertising (in particular, Pinkleton, 1997 and Pinkleton et al., 2002) by putting the spotlight on what the targeted candidate should do in response to an attack ad. Rather than using a student sample, we have gathered useful data

from 1,380 participants who closely resemble the characteristics of the U.S. voting population. With the two-stage experimental design, we were able to capture the potential reactions on the part of the target opponent to the sponsor.

The findings from study 1 clearly confirm the overall negative feelings of the voters towards attack ad messages, as well as the associated attacking and attacked candidate. The self-enhancing, positive advertising was looked upon as being informative and reflected how each candidate should run his/her campaign. As evidenced in the current results, the magnitude of the impact associated with the positive, self-enhancing advertising messages was far weaker than that from attack advertising. As a result, candidates may rely on these negative ad messages to cause greater damage to their opponents, even though they themselves do not benefit from these negative advertising messages. Perhaps it can be safely concluded that the negative/positive effects being captured in this study are only associated with a single ad exposure immediately after the ad presentation, potentially a short-lived result. In real campaigns, ads would be aired multiple times. The effects of attack ads may be quite different as wear-out effects and other factors contribute to later voter perceptions.

The multi-stage format of the experimental design provided the potential for capturing the dynamic nature of each candidate's responses. The impact of the negative ad message remains the same even when the previously targeted candidate employs a similar (negative) ad message as a reactionary tactic. The recipient incurs greater damage than the sponsor. Results from study 2 suggest that the negative advertising message is not justified when it is deployed in response to a similar negative message. At issue is whether a positive message should be used to counter the effects of negative ad messages. The attacked candidate in study 2 did recover somewhat from the negative message launched by his opponent. Positive political advertisements are more likely to be integrated into a candidate's platform, and these effects are likely to be more enduring in nature. The audience may easily get tired of the negative advertisements. Thus, any positive effects of continual usage of these negative ads may quickly wear out.

The aforementioned comments point to the need to consider effective timing of the deployment of attack advertisements. In a close election campaign, a candidate lagging behind in the polls may consider launching a series of last minute, nasty attack ads as a way of effectuating immediate damage on the frontrunner in order to improve his/her chance of overtaking the opposing candidate. This last-minute tactic lessens the possibility of retaliation and recovery by the recipient of the attack advertising approach, giving the attacker an edge in the polls.

Limitations and Future Research

Given the constraints of the experimental setting, we were not able to determine the duration of the effects associated with negative or positive messages, which would need to be considered in an actual campaign. Furthermore, even though the positive and negative ad messages were pretested to be typical of actual negative political ads, the magnitude of these advertising messages is specific to the scenarios used in the experiments. That is, this study cannot provide complete clarity to the question of whether the effects of negative ad messaging are longer lasting than positive ads or vice versa. Since evaluations were taken immediately after the advertising messages were presented, it is difficult, if not impossible, to model the full dynamic nature of a political campaign where multiple advertisements of different types can be used sequentially or in combination. This limitation should be considered in future academic research.

Suggestions for future research include relating candidate and ad evaluations to actual voting decisions, assessing the level of negativity used in a political ad, as well as candidate gender and credibility. Voter decision making is a multi-faceted, complex process. A

qualitative, exploratory approach to probe the reasons why one candidate is preferred over another by the voting population may provide valuable insights that may not be so easily obtained in a large-scale quantitative study. Behavioral research (Ahluwalia, 1996; Ahluwalia et al., 2000) indicates that extreme negativity tends to be ignored as unbelievable even though it comes from a rather credible source. The interplay between an advertising message and the reputation of a political candidate is a fruitful area for future research. For instance, negative advertising messages from a highly credible candidate may or may not be perceived as being in “bad taste.” By the same token, the perception of negative ads launched toward a candidate with low credibility as either informative or destructive is a topic of future research as well.

The results from study 1 suggest that the opponent (attacked) candidate, Chris, is *a priori* a weaker candidate compared to the attacking, incumbent candidate Alex (as evidenced by the findings in Tables 1 and 2). A reasonable question these results pose is how much of the perceptual distance between the two candidates can be narrowed by the attack or self-positioning ad message. The answer seems to depend on the magnitude of the initial distance and the strength of the two ad messages. This outcome should be explored in other scenarios where the incumbent is in a weaker position to the challenger, as well as where both candidates have equivalence in their positions in the race prior to the use of attack advertising.

An unbalanced experimental design was used in the current study. The attack ads were only implanted in the first stage of the experiment with one treatment group. This design did not allow for treatment of positive ads by the sponsors in the first phase and negative ads by the recipients in the second phase. A balanced design would provide the opportunity to investigate the effects of launching a negative ad when the other candidate has already established a positive position. This is another fruitful avenue for future research.

In conclusion, the current study provides meaningful evidence of the effects of attack advertising on both the attacking and targeted candidates. Evidence for how a candidate could respond to being attacked are also present in the study’s findings. As such, the study provides useful information that could shape the nature of political advertising in the future. Additional research is, of course, needed to fully understand this phenomenon. Yet, the current study makes a meaningful contribution to the extant literature in the area of advertising messaging in political campaigns.

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APPENDIX: Campaign Ad Scenarios used in the study.

Scenario 1: (Used in Study 1 Treatment Group 1, Phase 1; and Study 2 Treatment Groups 4 and 5 in Phase 1)

Alex → Chris: Alex's attack ad against Chris

Hello, this is Alex Randolph here, bringing an important issue to the table. While our economy has suffered in recent years, we are now moving forward again. This is largely due to the minimum wage laws—a guaranteed income that working individuals receive to live on and support their family. My opponent Chris Blanton is trying to do away with minimum wage. He claims that enforcing a minimum wage costs our economy thousands of jobs. He claims that businesses will be more efficient and have lower prices if they don't have a minimum wage enforced upon them. To him, the minimum wage law is just another example of government condescendingly controlling our actions and destroying personal choice. He claims businesses should have the option of saying "no" to a minimum wage. Yet, this is the same man who is supportive of increased taxation. Being in the elite 1%, he doesn't understand what this means to you and me. Is this who you want representing you and your family in the State Senate? Don't you want to be able to survive and pay your bills? Don't you want to force businesses to share their wealth with their employees rather than hoard their wealth? This is America—we need to band together to remember what we stand for. Don't let Chris Blanton take your hard-earned money. I'm Alex Randolph, candidate for State Senate, and I approved this message.

Scenario 2: (Used in Study 1 Treatment Group 2)

Alex → Alex: Alex's self-positioning

Hello, this is Alex Randolph, candidate for State Senate. I ask that you vote for me in the coming election. If you talk about the basic promise of life and quality of life, whether we look at products such as a hamburger or a box of laundry detergent, most of these products are purchased by individuals working for minimum wage. Many of the people who are on a minimum wage do not have advocates, yet a responsibility of the government should be to advocate for the poor. We should not be a country that profits on starving our lowest sector, and I am supportive of increasing the minimum wage to raise our quality of life. Please show your support for my efforts in the upcoming election. This is Alex Randolph, and I approved this message.

Scenario 3: (Used in Study 1 Treatment Group 1 in phase 2; Study 1 Treatment Group 3; and Study 2 Treatment Group 5 in Phase 2)

Chris → Chris: Chris' self-positioning

Hello, this is Chris Blanton, your candidate for State Senate. I have had 20 years of experience as a small business owner, and I can see how minimum wage can drive small businesses out of business. While I am not advocating doing away with minimum wage--I would never do that to my employees--I am challenging the current minimum wage law *as it exists today* and am willing to fight for a more fair and flexible compensation plan. When we force American companies to pay a certain wage, we increase the likelihood that those companies will outsource jobs to foreign workers where labor is much cheaper. Again, I am not trying to make companies more wealthy and the people poorer; I aim to find ways that will increase the level of employment in our state and to offer wages based off of the cost-of living in their

respective areas. I am also supportive of efforts to limit healthcare costs without limiting healthcare. I am planning for the long-term employment of our people in a way that will keep jobs in our state. I'm Chris Blanton, candidate for State Senate, and I approved this message.

Scenario 4: (Used in Study 2 Treatment Group 4 in Phase 2)

Chris → Alex: Chris' attack ad against Alex

Hello, this is Chris Blanton, candidate for State Senate. My opponent, Alex Randolph, recently made false accusations in an ad suggesting that I want to do away with minimum wage. That is simply not true. Did you notice that his ad neglected to tell you anything about his own stance on the issue? Chris Blanton is not a man to be trusted. Last fall, he led efforts to increase the cost of doing business in our state. He supported movements that would detract new investments for economic development in our state. As our state's economy flounders, the working population will suffer greatly. Jobs will be lost, and new business will not be entering our area. Then, what do we do? How do we support our families? Alex Randolph, who you may know comes from generations of wealth, does not understand or care about these issues. He has never owned a business or had employees counting on him for their paycheck that puts food on the table. He has never seen firsthand the impact that introducing jobs to the state can bring to families, and he is actively allowing our state to miss out on great opportunities. Don't vote for a sitting duck. You need an advocate, and that is me, Chris Blanton, candidate for State Senate. I'm Chris Blanton, candidate for State Senate, and I approved this message.