

POLITICAL AFFILIATION AND THE AD ATTITUDE OF NEGATIVE POLITICAL ADVERTISING: A LONGITUDINAL EXAMINATION

DOUGLAS ROBIDEAUX, *Grand Valley State University*

This study examined the political party affiliation of respondents and their cognitive and affective ad attitudes toward political ads that were positive in content and negative in content. Additionally, data from both the 1992 and the 2000 presidential races were examined for differences and trends toward negative and positive political ads. Trends and differences in the cognitive and affective evaluations were found that may offer guidelines when political ads reach out to members of their own party or to members of the opposing party.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of political advertising is reflected by the willingness of campaigns to spend more and more on advertising, particularly television advertising. The 2002 election saw national expenditures of one billion dollars, a 50 percent increase over the presidential election of 2000 (Teinowitz 2002). The tenor of the advertising has increasingly become more negative (Lippert 2002), and opinion polls and focus groups consistently show that the voting public dislikes this type of advertising (Warren 2003). However, the creators of negative ads often label them "informational ads," and point out that the ads provide important information that voters may find useful.

Opponents of negative advertising claim that its use will hurt the sponsor by driving up feelings of negativity toward the candidate (Hill 1989; Pinkleton, Um and Austin 2002) or even driving the voter into the arms of the competitor ("Negative" 2001; Hockstader and Nossiter 2002; "United" 2002). However, research has shown that these ads with negative statements and a negative tone are useful because: they convince existing voters to stay loyal (Fletcher 2001); the ads are more believable to voters (Robideaux 1998); they avoid source derogation (Meirick 2002); they help female candidates achieve parity on "male" issues (Gordon et al. 2003);

and even because they benefit from the sleeper effect found in other disliked advertising (Lariscy and Tinkham 1999). One commentator goes on to state that "Politicians who make positive ads about themselves tell the voters nothing, except about their ability to fantasize" (Miller 2000). These negative ads are useful in disclosing the true nature of candidates, but it is usually the opponent — not the sponsor — that these ads are telling the "truth" about (Feder 2000), perhaps making "attack ads" a better label than "informational ads."

Negative political advertising has received a substantial amount of attention by both academics and practitioners, and with good reason. The use of such ads is increasing and their impact on the political process is worrying (Djupe and Peterson 2002). One study showed that on the campaign web sites of 2000 candidates Bush and Gore, nearly three quarters of the news releases contained an attack on the opponent (Wicks and Souley 2003). Another (Teinowitz 2002) showed that during the month of October, 2002, 35 percent of candidate ads, 72 percent of political party ads, and 36 percent of independent committee ads were negative. The fears expressed about negative advertising are generally macro or normative concerns. Examples would include driving voters away from the voting booth, as evidenced by low turnouts (Djupe and Peterson 2002), and generally driving negative attitudes towards politicians, as shown by their low respectability in public polling (Yoon 1995). The practitioners, on the other hand, develop strategies to work in the micro world of getting their individual politicians elected.

On what support then, do political strategists continue to believe that negative ads are essential to a winning campaign (Abbe et al. 2000), or simply part of the ongoing search for votes (Nelson 2002)? Clearly, there continues to be an inconsistency and lack of conclusiveness about the value of negative campaigning (Sigelman and Kugler 2003). This study will examine how the attitudes toward these negative ads, as well as positive political ads, have changed over the eight-year period from the 1992 to the 2000 U.S. presidential campaigns.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Ad Attitude

The construct of attitude has received more attention than any other in consumer research (Erevelles 1998). Attitude is defined as "a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner in respect to a given object" (Runyon and Stewart 1987, p. 460) or as "an individual's internal evaluation of an object such as a branded product" (Mitchell and 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.

An "ad attitude" is 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 and Twible 1988; Aylesworth and MacKenzie 1998). Having 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 important because there are two relatively distinct dimensions of attitude toward the ad, one cognitive and the other emotional (Shimp 1981; Vakratsas and Ambler 1999). In most studies, ad attitudes are only examined as an affective, emotional construct (Derbaix 1995; Assael 1998). But it has been found that ad attitude toward political advertising is composed of two attitude components, the affect/emotional and the cognitive/belief dimensions, and that the evaluations of ads would differ depending on different types of political ads (Robideaux

1998) and differ depending on party affiliation (Robideaux 2002).

Ad Attitude and Political Ads

Both general product and political advertising seek to be persuasive by presenting themselves as rational-oriented and believable (a cognitive construct). General marketers' comparative ads ask consumers to logically, cognitively, conclude that the sponsor's product is better and their competitors' brands inferior. Negative political ads may, or may not, provide positive sponsor attributes, but the ads explicitly or implicitly provide claims of the opponent's inferior attributes. This informational goal is likely to be represented in the cognitive evaluative dimension of attitude.

Hill (1989) investigated the use of comparative political advertising (ads including negative elements) 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). Several studies (Faber et al. 1990; "Negative" 2001; Meirick 2002; "United" 2002) also found that negative political advertising tends to backlash against the sponsor. However, Faber et al. (1993) found that negative ads may be more retrievable from memory than positive appeals and have a greater role in voting preferences, consistent with the sleeper effect of negative advertising described by Lariscy and Tinkham (1999).

Hill (1989) also felt that the use of negative comments about an opponent in an ad (comparative or negative) "may reflect negatively on the ad sponsor, and may have little impact upon the opposing candidate . . . compared to sponsor-positive ads" (p. 20). This helps explain why general advertisers hesitate to use comparative ads (Barry 1993), but the politician-sponsor may be willing to lose some votes if that sponsor believes that he/she can cause a greater loss of votes for the competitor (Rickard 1994).

Most early measurements of A_{ad} investigated only the affect portion of attitude, so it was not clear whether the

studies' results would have been different by examining the cognitive-belief and affect-emotional portions of ad attitude separately. Other researchers (e.g., Meirick 2002; O'Cass 2002; Robideaux 2002) are starting to look at the different component dimensions of ad attitude. In both high- and low-involvement decisions, the cognitive component of attitude precedes the affect component (Droge 1989; Assael 1998; Morris et al. 2002; Solomon 2002), and that affect is derived from cognitive, attribute beliefs (Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy 1994; Desai and 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.

HYPOTHESES

An earlier study investigating the 1992 presidential campaign demonstrated that both the cognitive and affective components of ad attitude were present and statistically different, and therefore warranted separate examination (Robideaux 1998). For Hypothesis One, this study will examine, along the same ad attitude dimensions, and along the same positive versus negative ad content, whether ad attitude toward political ads has changed from the 1992 presidential campaign to the 2000 presidential campaign. Ads were designated as: Positive (for ads that have only sponsor-positive content); and Negative (for ads that have only opponent-negative content).

Hypothesis One-A: For Positive political advertising, the Cognitive component of Ad attitude and the Affective component of the 2000 campaign ads will be statistically different from the Cognitive and Affective components of the 1992 campaign ads.

Hypothesis One-B: For Negative political advertising, the Cognitive component of Ad attitude and the Affective component of the 2000 campaign ads will be statistically different from the Cognitive and Affective components of the 1992 campaign ads.

As stated earlier, most studies have used the affective portion to represent A_{ad} and have not considered the cognitive aspect of ad attitude. However, the cognitive and affect dimensions of A_{ad} have been found to exist

separately within political ads (Robideaux 1998), and were later found to differ when examined by party affiliation with same-party versus opposing-party candidate's negative and positive advertising (Robideaux 2002). The 2002 study used the 1992 presidential campaign to examine those dimensions and found that the different dimensions had separate responses on both same-party respondents and opposing-party respondents. This study will use the 2000 campaign candidates to see if the same conclusions can be drawn (Hypothesis Two). Additionally, this study will look for trends and statistical differences between the two campaign results for each party affiliation (Hypothesis Three).

Hypothesis Two-A: The Affective component of Ad attitude will differ across political party affiliation when examining Positive and Negative candidate's ads.

Hypothesis Two-B: The Cognitive component of Ad attitude will differ across political party affiliation when examining Positive and Negative candidate's ads.

Hypothesis Three-A: The Affective component of Ad attitude will differ within political party affiliation when examining Positive and Negative ads from 1992 versus 2000 campaigns.

Hypothesis Three-B: The Cognitive component of Ad attitude will differ within political party affiliation when examining Positive and Negative ads from 1992 versus 2000 campaigns.

METHODOLOGY

Instrument

Respondents were given simulated advertisements for actual presidential candidates, with a pencil and paper questionnaire attached. The cover sheet explained that the subjects would see a "simulated ad for one of the two presidential candidates" and a questionnaire concerning the ad. Respondents had an equal chance of receiving one of four ad treatments—Positive or Negative, for either candidate (the sponsoring candidate was clearly identified at the top of the ad). Positive ads were composed of sponsor-positive statements only. Negative

ads were composed of opponent-negative statements only.

The content in the simulated ads was taken directly from speeches by the candidates during the two campaigns. The positive statements used were on the topics of the economy, national defense, and the future of the nation. The negative statements were on the economy, national defense, and a statement that the opposing candidate's ideas were "not like yours and mine." The ad texts were pretested for candidate-similarity in message content, length, tenor, and tone. The questionnaire was administered four to six weeks prior to the general elections in 1992 and 2000.

Subjects

For the 1992 campaign, a convenience sample of 390 business and non-business students at a Southern state university participated in the study. For the 2000 campaign, 138 business and non-business students at a midwestern state university participated. This population is the type used most often in ad attitude studies (Brown and Stayman 1992). The students were assigned randomly to one of the four messages: positive ads and negative ads, for each of the two candidates.

A_{ad} Measurement

Affective Measurement: The 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 Mitchell and Olson (1981) and Hill (1989), they were used to represent the affective component of attitude (Robideaux 1998, 2002) used for hypothesis testing. The items were coded so that the middle position of the 5-point scale was neutral, or zero, and positive responses were +1 or +2, and negative responses were -1 or -2.

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 and Weaver-Lariscy 1994) were used to measure the content-relevant cognitive dimension. All response scales alternated the position of the positive and negative polar adjective to reduce measurement error.

Construct Scale Development

Reliability and Validity: Before hypothesis testing was performed, all response scales were included in a test for reliability. A Cronbach's Alpha of 0.89 was obtained, indicating a strong internal consistency. High reliability is a necessary, but insufficient, support for validity. To support the validity of the construct scale, theoretical support and literature support have been presented for the existence of affective and cognitive dimensions within attitude, and therefore ad attitude. The finding of two factorial dimensions within this study's extension of previous attitude instruments is supported by the underlying theory, but other (or additional) items in these instruments may provide higher levels of validity.

Factor Analysis: A factor analysis was executed to test whether the individual scales would load up on two constructs, and only on the two constructs expected—the affective and cognitive components of ad attitude. Upon factor rotation (Varimax method), only two factors developed with a minimum Eigenvalue of 1.0. The variables loaded on the factors representing cognitive and affective dimensions as listed above. The scale for the variable "interesting" had loaded on the affective construct in the Hill (1989) and Mitchell and Olson (1981) studies, probably because no other cognitive measurements existed for the "interesting" measurement to load with. This Cognitive factor had an Eigenvalue of 1.17 (with individual factor scores between .671 and .718). The other scales loaded on the affective construct as in the earlier studies. This Affective factor had an Eigenvalue of 5.47 (with individual factor scores between .593 and .827).

Composite Scale: Construct means were created (e.g., Mitchell and Olson 1981) for the two constructs of A_{ad} . Because of the zero mid-point item scaling, these construct means could be positive or negative, reflecting the positive or negative direction of the responses. These construct means were used for the subsequent testing of hypotheses one through three.

RESULTS

Hypothesis One looked for changes from 1992 to 2000 for both the affect (Ad-A) component of ad attitude and the cognitive (Ad-C) component of ad attitude. Hypothesis testing used MANOVA to analyze for statistically significant differences between Affect and Cognition between 1992 and 2000. The means and Significance of the F-statistic are shown in Table One. Again, positive composite score means indicate a positive reaction to the ads by subjects and negative means indicate a negative reaction to the ads by subjects.

TABLE ONE
Changes in Ad Attitude

Hypothesis One-A — positive ads by year		
	Ad-C Pos	Ad-A Pos
1992	0.1231	0.2942
2000	0.4058	0.6682
MANOVA-F Sig. level ≤	0.010	0.001
Hypothesis One-B — negative ads by year		
	Ad-C Neg	Ad-A Neg
1992	0.3346	-0.0795
2000	-0.0290	-0.3879
MANOVA-F Sig. level ≤	0.004	0.011

Table One shows the results of Hypothesis One testing. Hypothesis One-A posited that for sponsor-positive political advertising, the cognitive and affective components of ad attitude would differ from the 1992 campaign to the 2000 campaign. The

Cognitive/believability component of ad attitude (shown in the table as Ad-C Pos) has significantly increased from the 1992 to the 2000 campaigns. The Affect/feeling component of ad attitude (shown in the table as Ad-A Pos) has significantly increased from 1992 to 2000. The direction and magnitude indicate that respondents have developed stronger, more positive feelings and beliefs toward political advertising that is sponsor-positive. A closer examination by party affiliation will be done in Hypothesis Three.

Hypothesis One-B stated that for opponent-negative political advertising — the traditional form of what is called negative political advertising — the cognitive and affective components of ad attitude would differ from the 1992 campaign to the 2000 campaign. The results are shown in Table One. For both the Cognitive component (shown as Ad-C Neg) and the Affect component (shown as Ad-A Neg), there were statistically significant differences from the 1992 campaign to the 2000 campaign. Therefore, Hypothesis One is supported.

In the earlier 1992 research, subjects had indicated a positive response to the cognitive component of negative ads, indicating a positive level of believability. That no longer seems to be true. The cognitive/believability construct is now negative. The affective response to negative ads was negative in the earlier 1992 study, and continues to be, but at a much greater level.

Hypothesis Two-A tested the affective dimension of A_{ad} toward political advertising by the two political parties, and Hypothesis Two-B questioned the cognitive dimension. Hypothesis testing used MANOVA to analyze for statistically significant differences between party affiliation and the two political parties' Positive (sponsor-positive) ads and Negative (opponent-negative) ads.

Table Two illustrates the results for the 2000 campaign in columns three and five. In column one, the ad treatments are listed: The Republican candidate's ad with positive-only statements, the Republican candidate's ad with negative-only statements (about his opponent), and then the same for the Democratic candidate. Column two lists the affective and cognitive means of Democrats for each of the four ad treatments for 1992, and column

TABLE TWO
Party Affiliation and Ad Attitude Toward Message Type 1992 and 2000 Campaigns

Message Treatment	Democratic Respondents' Means		Republican Respondents' Means	
	1992	2000	1992	2000
Republican Ad — Positive Message	Affect: -0.0651 Cognitive: -0.1548	Affect: 0.3482 Cognitive: -0.1786	Affect: 0.4173 ^b Cognitive: 0.1961	Affect: 0.9812 ^{a c} Cognitive: 0.6750 ^a
Republican Ad—Negative Message	Affect: -0.6460 Cognitive: 0.0196	Affect: -0.6875 Cognitive: -0.4545	Affect: 0.2485 ^b Cognitive: 0.4078	Affect: -0.0795 ^{a c} Cognitive: -0.0455
Democratic Ad —Positive Message	Affect: 0.7247 Cognitive: 0.3556	Affect: 0.9557 ^c Cognitive: 0.7391	Affect: 0.1107 ^b Cognitive: 0.0952	Affect: -0.1000 ^a Cognitive: 0.0500 ^a
Democratic Ad—Negative Message	Affect: 0.1492 Cognitive: 0.6429	Affect: -0.0470 Cognitive: 0.5526	Affect: -0.3189 ^b Cognitive: 0.2571	Affect: -0.5682 Cognitive: -0.1818 ^a

^a (H_2) Democrat versus Republican for 2000; Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

^b Democrat versus Republican for 1992; Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

^c (H_3) Democrat 2000 versus 1992; Republican 2000 versus 1992; Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

three for 2000. Column four does the same for Republican subjects in 1992 and column five lists the results of the 2000 campaign. The fifth column means that are marked with the "a" superscript were those found to be statistically different between the Democratic and Republican respondents for the 2000 campaign. For comparison purposes, the means marked with the "b" superscript in the fourth column were the statistically different means for the 1992 campaign. Six of the eight dimensions investigated were found to be statistically significant, providing strong support for Hypothesis Two.

Table Two shows that for the 2000 campaign, Republicans and Democrats differed on both the affect and cognitive dimensions of ad attitude for the Republican-Positive ad. The same was true for the Democrat-Positive ad. For the Republican-Negative ad (negative toward the opponent), party affiliation only differed for the affect dimension. For the Democrat-Negative ad, party affiliation only differed for the cognitive dimension. Again, the composite scores were designed so that positive scores reflected positive responses toward the ads and vice versa. Compared to the 1992 results, when only the four affect dimensions

were found to be different between Democrats and Republicans, in 2000 three of the four affect dimensions and three of the four cognitive dimensions were found to be statistically significant.

Also in Table Two are the results of Hypothesis Three testing. Hypothesis Three looked at the longitudinal changes by party affiliation. Hypothesis One demonstrated that overall changes were present, and statistically significant, for the basic ad attitude constructs of cognitive and affect (Table One). Hypothesis Three examines whether those changes will still be significant when broken down into the four ad treatments and the two party affiliations. In Table Two, the means marked with the superscript "c" in columns three and five indicate the means that were found to be statistically significant between 1992 and 2000 for each of the two party affiliations along the ad treatments. These results provide partial support for Hypothesis Three.

As shown in Table Two, there were fewer differences over time within each party than shown in the general trend discussed in Hypothesis One. For Democrats, only the Democrat-Positive ads showed a statistical

difference. Democrats were obviously responding much more positively toward their own party's positive ads on the cognitive/belief level. No other statistical differences were found for Democrats from the 1992 campaign to the 2000 campaign. For Republicans, they too were found to be statistically different only for their own party's positive ad, but on both the cognitive and affect/feeling dimensions. For Republicans, no other ad treatment was found to be statistically different between the two campaigns.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The results of Hypothesis One testing demonstrated that for positive political ads, respondents are reacting much more positively toward them, both on the cognitive/belief dimension of ad attitude as well as the affect/feeling dimension. For the negative political ads, a stronger reaction to them is also evident. For both of the ad attitude dimensions, respondents are evaluating them more negatively. This is especially evident for the cognitive dimension, where 1992 found respondents finding negative ads on the positive side of "believable," which is no longer the case. Therefore Hypothesis One has reiterated that sponsor-positive ads continue to generate positive reactions on both the affect level and cognitive level of ad attitude. This longitudinal look has shown how much that positive reaction has grown. Subjects in 2000 found that the cognitive/believability of the positive ads to be greater than in 1992. The more recent subjects also demonstrated a stronger, more affirmative affective/emotional reaction to the positive ads.

Earlier studies have indicated that the believability of negative advertising (e.g., Merritt 1984; Robideaux 1998) perhaps rested on the cynicism toward politicians or the general cynicism of younger voters — the subject population (Yoon 1995). This cynicism was feared to be 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 may have come full circle, or come to a saturation point, to where one finds nothing believable in negative ads because of the ads

themselves, even if the cynicism toward politicians still exists.

What Hypothesis Two has continued to illustrate is that when party affiliation is examined, differences can be found between the parties and how their members react to different ad treatments. Practitioners of political advertising may find some interest in these results. In the past, they could count on the negative ads to still have a cognitive/believability component that would possibly sway undecided voters as well as strengthen the commitment of their own party's voters. This study has shown that the positive cognitive component may no longer exist. Because these results conflict with past research, more study needs to be done to see if these results are consistent and robust.

A close examination of Table Two will show not only those differences that are statistically significant, but also trends not yet significant but perhaps revealing nonetheless. For example, observe the reaction of Democrats to negative Republican ads and vice versa. In 1992, Democrats evaluated the cognitive dimension of these negative ads on the positive side of the scale (i.e., they found these negative assertions about their own candidate to be possibly true). By 2000 however, this cognitive dimension is firmly in the negative territory. Another example may be respondents' reaction to their own party's negative ads. For both Democrats and Republicans, they feel and think less positively about them. In fact, for three of the four dimensions illustrated, the response has gone from the positive side of the scale to the negative side.

This study also found that when examining either Democrats or Republicans, their responses have not dramatically changed between the 1992 and 2000 campaigns. Democrats have shown a statistically different increase in the cognitive/believability toward their own party's positive ads. Republicans showed an increase on both the cognitive and affective/feeling dimensions. The trend here, supported by Hypothesis Three, is that respondents of both parties are reacting much more positively toward their own candidate's positive ads than in the past. The trend for both party's members is to also react more negatively toward the

negative ads of either party, but the trend was not shown to be statistically significant.

Past research has shown that attitudes are linked to the increased likelihood of behavior (Barry 1993; Vakratsas and Ambler 1999). This study has shown that the more positive (or at least less negative) attitudes are associated with positive political ads, so one would think that practitioners would utilize positive ads, especially when appealing to all voters. However, negative political advertising will still have its proponents, and for differing tactical purposes and due to differing motivations (Damore 2002). The goal of these attack ads is not to attract voters to the sponsor candidate, but to push more voters away from the opponent than they might lose for themselves because of using the negative ads. However, this study has indicated that a change has occurred in the reaction and usefulness of negative advertising. The users of negative advertising may no longer be able to claim that their ads are believable or informative.

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