What you see is what you get? Negative advertising in U.S. presidential elections

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WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET?

NEGATIVE ADVERTISING IN U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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Political Science Honors Thesis

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The issue at hand

In every election, whether it’s presidential, gubernatorial, or any other, advertisements are incredibly prevalent. It also seems that negative ads are rampant among the most prominent candidates. There has been a lot of research indicating whether ads in general make a difference in election outcomes. The research usually focuses on the whether there is an ad or not, or whether the ad is simply negative or positive. The results of these types of research have been truly mixed. Some scholars believe advertisements do not make a substantial difference in the outcome of an election while others believe they do. Other research indicates the importance of whether an ad is negative or positive, while some refutes the importance of the type of ad all together.

I believe it is important to take the next step in analyzing election/candidate advertising during presidential years. Because the data and results gathered by other research at this point are certainly not clear cut, I think this is the perfect opportunity to delve deeper into not only the types of advertisements, but the content of them.

In order to assess if and how election ads make a difference there needs to be a greater understanding of what is IN those ads. In looking at election advertising I have noted that there are generally two types of ads important to my study. First, there are ads that cater to the entire population as a whole. These ads are simple in nature, easily understood in content, and create a clear, if not obvious message. I believe this first type of ad to be for people with a much lesser understanding of political content and happenings or political knowledge in general. These ads do not require outside knowledge to form an opinion. The second type of ad is one of greater sophistication. These are ads that require a much deeper level of understanding and require a
higher level of background knowledge. These are ads that would bring up complex and complicated issues and perhaps necessitate higher levels of political interest.

Given the two types of ads discussed, I would like to understand how each type affects the electability of the candidate. I would also like to explore the implications of how an ad is presented might change vote choice. If an ad is clear, or convoluted must certainly make a difference in vote decision. It is important to note that all of the advertisements I would like to study will be negative or “attack” ads. I want to get to the root of whether the understandability of attack ads makes a difference in how people view/would vote on the candidate. In exploring these two types of ads against the outcome of the election the question I seek to answer is:

**Does the type of content and type of presentation in a negative election advertisement for presidential elections and level of political knowledge of the viewer make a difference in the outcome of which candidate is more appealing and subsequently elected?**

**LITERATURE**

**The importance of exploration**

Elections are highly competitive, forceful events. It seems that during presidential election years our televisions, internet, newspapers, etc. are flooded with information about one candidate or another. It always feels like most of the information is nasty, cold-blooded contempt against the contenders. Attack advertising plays a crucial role in understanding elections, at least in terms of its constant presence and infiltrating nature.

However, it is critical to realize that attack advertising is a source of serious debate among scholars. There has yet to be a consensus on the true effect of these types of ads. Some
sources say it’s a mobilizer, others say it puts a damper on how a citizen will vote, while some initiate that attack advertising makes no difference whatsoever in vote choice. In exploring an imperative portion of the literature available on the subject, we will see that this inability to come to one conclusion is hindering the process of further understanding the effect of negative campaign advertising. This is where I would like to show that going deeper into the content of these negative ads is what will make the difference in reaching a more definitive result.

**The question literature**

In doing extensive research into the area of attack advertising there are a number of what I will call “question literature”. These types of literature prove in themselves that election advertising is still such an unknown topic. *Does Political Advertising Persuade?* ask Franz and Ridout. *Negative Campaign Advertising: Demobilizer or Mobilizer?* wonder Wattenberg and Brians. Much of the research indicates that there is a level of uncertainty in comprehending the effect of attack ads on voters and election outcome. As it turns out, Franz and Ridout take quite a similar look into advertising as I do in this thesis. In determining whether “exposure to presidential advertising… influences voters’ evaluations of candidates and the choices they make at the ballot box” Franz and Ridout conclude that these ads persuade depending on what each viewer/voter is like (2007). While Franz and Ridout have made important implications regarding the types of viewers political ads receive, this is where I would like to explore the type of ad and its content instead, although this literature is very significant in helping my discoveries as well.

Wattenberg and Brians have already taken it into their hands to refute earlier research concluding that attack advertising drives voters away from the polls. By using NES data, this literature indicates that there is no substantial evidence to suggest negative advertisements affect
voter turnout or the types of votes in general (1999). In contrast to Franz and Ridout, this shows stark discrepancies between political advertising literature. Using NES data is perhaps a less direct indicator of attack ad effects, leaving another area where I can use more straightforward research techniques.

There is an even broader realm of scholarly research that questions whether political advertising is effective at all (Granato and Wong 2004). The scheme of literature on political ads can take into account this type of overarching question, or it can ask some of the most specific questions about particular circumstances like advertisements during the Iraq War and their impact on midterm elections (Dulio and Trumbore 2009).

By investigating the literature and articles that begin with any type of question, we as readers are intrigued to learn more about this disputable area of political science. Literature that makes us think right off the bat, or try to make up our own minds before reading, is some of the most productive, no matter what the conclusions may be.

**Anti-attack ad**

Finding concrete literature expressing the downside of negative advertising was perhaps the hardest part of this research. It seems that as time has gone on, the theories put forth indicating the inherently bad effects of using attack ads have been taken into serious question. In all of the sources I gathered to help in understanding attack advertising during elections there was only one piece of literature that suggested negative ads have an unconstructive side to them. *Remembering Attack Ads: An Experimental Investigation of Radio* by Geer and Geer seeks to answer whether people’s memory about ads is different when the ad is positive or negative. It turns out that people have significantly more inaccurate and factually incorrect memories of
negative ads. However, even this is not very persuasive seeing as Geer and Geer also find that the memories made no difference in voter decisions (2003).

In turn, attack advertisements are still up for serious debate. There is no conclusive finding, or large group that sides with the bad effects of negative ads. Many scholars agree that attack advertising during elections tends to lower general moral and political efficacy, but not many agree on a forceful conclusion about attack advertisements’ overall effect in voter turnout (Lau et al 2007). For every piece of literature that disapproves of negative ads, there is a piece of literature that supports their validity. This also goes the other way for literature supporting negative ads. Most of the literature, as we will see, has no solidified conclusion one way or another.

**Pro-attack ad**

Although most of the research out there appears to support a mixed conclusion, there are a fair number of articles that are outright proponents of attacks ads in election campaigns. There is a definite expression among academics of the need for better testing of ad effects in general (Freedman and Goldstein 1999, 1189). The article also firmly concludes that “exposure to negative ads appears to increase the likelihood of voting”. By using a more precise level of measurement they have debunked the idea that attack ads are a depressant of voter turnout.

In addition to this article, there are a few other clear cut cases of siding with pro-attack ads. Some scholars see at least three obvious measures of the upsides of negative advertising (Martin 2004) while other researchers not only take a stance for negative ads, but in fact refute previous research by “casting doubt on the demobilizing effect of attack advertising”. (Finkel and Geer 1998, 69).
It is evident that the literature featuring proponents of attack ads in mobilizing voters or changing vote choice is prominent, although still somewhat limited among the political science world. However, as we will discuss next, the most typical type of literature on this subject is that of mixed variety; literature that does not fully side one way or another on the effects of attack advertising.

**Neither here nor there**

Perhaps the most prolific aspect of attack ad research is that it is still so opened ended. The vast majority of literature out there indicates that this field has room for immeasurable amounts of new information and investigation. This is hopeful for my research project in the sense that I will have quite a bit of leeway in deciding how much and exactly what I can contribute to this area.

It is still essential to examine the literature that only covers the surface level because it helps us prepare for a more extensive look later. *Retrospective and Prospective Performance Assessments during the 2004 Election Campaign: Tests of Mediation and News Media Priming* is a nice example of exploring the fundamentals behind what it takes to create ads, use them effectively in campaigns, etc. (Malhotra and Krosnick 2007). Along with this, we get a variety of sources that scrutinize one dimensional aspects of advertising during elections. The effect party preference and identification have on viewing campaign advertisements is incredibly strong and, as it turns out, no matter what the ad, viewers tend to favor their own party (Robideaux 2002). Although this is perhaps not surprising, it helps us to understand what has already been covered and what sorts of variables need to be controlled for. In addition, Robideaux’s research indicates that there are more aspects to ads that need to be covered.
Much like Robideaux, Theilmann and Wilhite explore the differences between parties in terms of tactics used when creating campaign advertisements. These researchers set up an experiment using hypothetical campaigns with various viewers (1998). This is an incredibly important finding because it shows the step towards creating more realistic and reliable tests/measures and therefore data. While there are mixed results, Theilmann and Wilhite’s measurements are a step in the direction of more sophisticated research.

There is a significant amount of discourse yet to be had about political knowledge when it comes to measuring the effect of campaign ads. This is where I plan to make my biggest contribution. A few scholars take a critical look at how knowledge about candidates, ads, or politics in general results in different election outcomes (Waldman and Jamieson 2003) and (Ridout et al 2004). Waldman and Jamieson observe how the lack of clarification when it came to stance on issues as well as background knowledge in the 2000 presidential election lead to problems understanding campaign ads while Ridout et. al studied the general significance of knowledge about ads and how the effects of exposure to campaign ads is still up for debate. These two studies introduce the presence of political knowledge and what that implicates in terms of campaign ad research and design.

Two studies stuck out among the rest as the most essential to my research and thesis. Changing Minds: Political Arguments and Political Persuasion by Cobb and Kuklinski is the most similar article to my intended research. This piece of literature actually breaks down the ad into the same components that I would like to: easy vs. hard. Cobb and Kuklinski inspect the differences between easy and hard ads along with pro vs. con issues. This makes the study multi-dimensional. Just as I have four different types, this study created “hard-pro”, “hard-con”, and “easy-pro” and “easy-con”. The results were mixed, with some “hard-con” being most effective.
and some “easy-con” being most effective at different times (Cobb and Kuklinski 1997). The concept that ads need to be studied on a more precise level is really what this study accomplishes.

Although this study is very similar to my intended thesis, it is different enough that I can still make a solid contribution to the field. Cobb and Kuklinski used both positive and negative ads. My research will focus solely on attack ads because this allow the data to be more focused on the presentation of the ads rather than dividing them into even more sub-types. By holding the ad type (in terms of negative and positive) consistently negative, my data will hopefully be more akin to my focal point of content. Also, Cobb and Kuklinski researched “hard” and “easy” types of ads, where as I use “hard” and “easy” types of ads as well as the added dimension of “hard” and “easy” issues. I believe this will bring the area of campaign advertisements to the next level of understanding political knowledge and therefore voting behavior. Lastly, Cobb and Kuklinski tended to focus more on policy judgments rather than voter turnout or vote choice, which is my center of attention.

The second piece of literature brought to my attention was *The Two Faces of Issue Voting* by Carmines and Stimson. This study also used an aspect that I intend to cover and take to a place of greater detail. By examining the notion that “issue voters are more sophisticated-educated, informed, and active in politics-than other voters” Carmines and Stimson discredit the belief that “issue voters” and “non-issue voters” are significantly different, at least when it comes to “easy-issues” (1980). Again, much like Cobb and Kuklinski, this study expresses the importance of “hard” vs. “easy” issues as well as the *types* of voters: politically informed, or not.
It is this component, the type of voter, which is imperative to my research. Essentially, by combining the ideas of “hard” vs. “easy”, types of voter, and my own idea of the types of issues the ad covers, I have created a more complex and contributable level of research.

**My own contribution**

The process of discovering what is already out there and what needs to be found is one of the most vital aspects of this thesis process. If what I intend to research, study, explain, and left unexplained has already been covered, then my contributions are moot. This is exactly why I chose campaign advertisements; it is an area that has left room for my own ideas and thought processes. Many scholars believe negative advertising is something that lights a fire under voters and is a true deciding factor in vote choice. Other scholars believe the opposite and express attack ads’ detrimental outcomes. The majority of scholars, however, seem to leave the door open for interpretation. Many understand that this area of research needs expansion, and the level at which we dive into election advertisements needs to be dug a little deeper.

My research plan begins to accommodate these desires. I want to expand to the types of ads that are not simply positive or negative, but scrutinize the content of negative ads, the level of difficulty of those ads, and finally the political knowledge viewers hold in relation to these two components. There are certainly studies that indicate a yearning to develop the research in this way, namely Cobb and Kuklinski and Carmines and Stimson, and I believe my thesis is on track to accomplish at least a portion of this. These texts will help me gain insight into the types of research that have been done over long periods of time and the history behind American politics.
As we approach an age in which media has expanded the ability to create any sort of advertisement for almost any type of person, the type of content and advertisement politicians create is vital to scrutinize. This thesis is concerned with content and presentation of attack advertisements that looks specifically at “easy” versus “hard” components. I chose this focus for a variety of reasons. Overall, I was very tempted to write a thesis describing the differences between positive and negative advertising. However, when I put thought into action, I decided that perhaps there is a lot of undecided and inconclusive research on how effective political advertisements are because the scope needed to be narrowed. Attack ads are abundant during elections and by focusing on just this type I felt there was actually room for more detailed analysis rather than trying to encompass so much data into too little a space. The main reason for choosing “easy” versus “hard” advertising in terms of content and presentation was from pure, real life experience. As I have reached adulthood in the last few years, I find some political advertisements to be compelling, and others something to be ignored. By brainstorming what types of attack ads “failed” versus which ads “succeeded”, at least in terms of convincing my own mind, I landed upon studying how an ad is received by the public and whether how difficult the ad is to follow makes a difference in vote choice. There is plenty of research on republican versus democrat election ads, a lot of research on moral versus practical issues, and even a plethora of research about whether negative advertisements are an effective mechanism for voting all together. However, I found very little research on what was at the root of those advertisements and how they were structured. This thesis was the perfect opportunity to take the substance of the ad and measure it on a variety of levels. It was also a great chance to measure a voter’s political knowledge and see how that compared to the content and presentation of an attack ad in order to branch out into and add to a newer realm of research.
The hope is to produce a study that initiates a new wave of research into campaign and election advertising. Through a much more detailed look at what is in the ads themselves and what each viewer has the capability to understand, my thesis will expectantly shed light on further discovery into this topic.

HYPOTHESIS/THEORY

There are two hypotheses I will be testing using the data collected for this paper.

The first hypothesis I am testing is:

As the level of difficulty of the ad and of the content of the ad increases, the willingness to support/elect the candidate that is being attacked will increase.

I believe that difficult ads, or ads that require too much background knowledge to understand will deter people from voting for the person doing the attacking. I feel the simpler the ad, the more likely the voter will vote for the candidate putting out the ad. Because advertisements that cater to the “lowest common denominator” are likely to affect all people, logic would dictate that the more straight forward an ad is, the more likely the viewer will believe the attacks put forth against the candidate pictured and in turn vote for the attacker. However, I have a very strong proposal that when ads are presented in a complex manner and with content that requires more than a surface level of knowledge to comprehend, the attacker loses the interest and commitment of the voter. I believe voters need issues and politics explained in a way that is understandable and relatable. When an attack ad increases in difficulty in terms of content and presentation, I believe voters will find the attacker superficial, confusing, and unrepresentative of a thoughtful and coherent candidate. While this wisdom may seem unconventional, perhaps it is this “opposite” sort of thinking that could lead us to a better
conclusion of how to create and employ effective political techniques. I ultimately want to explore the content and understanding of attack ads on a greater level. There is a point at which studying only the surface of ads is not informative and I would like to take this research project to a place where critical information can be gathered.

The second hypothesis I am testing is:

The better a participant scores on the PEW political knowledge test, the more likely that participant is to support/elect the candidate that is being attacked.

This hypothesis is an extension of my first hypothesis, but it essentially flips the spectrum and allows us to look at the data from another perspective. Those participants who are essentially “smarter” about political issues and have a generally higher level of political knowledge to start with, are likely to see right through the veil of an attack advertisement. I believe participants who score higher on the PEW political knowledge test are apt to view an attack ad NOT as an effective way to show the attacked candidate’s weaknesses, but will view the attack ad as an opportunity lost for the attacker to have shown his/her personal strengths rather than “wasting” time demeaning an opponent. In addition, instead of the higher scoring participants getting lost in a more complicated and content heavy advertisement, it is these voters that will have the knowledge to see the slanderous and often weak material of an attack ad, and again, feel the desire to vote for the attacked candidate instead. It seems that the more politically savvy a voter is, the more likely it is that he/she will understand the cheap ploys often used in attack ads and simply won’t fall for it.

**Research Design**

*How will this research be conducted?*
I felt that the best way to conduct my research was through original data collection. It is key to use my own original data because this type of study would be incredibly difficult to control for outside influences or alternative explanations otherwise. Using digital images, I created advertisements from scratch because the advertisements from any previous presidential election cannot be guaranteed to have the conditions of “easy” vs. “difficult” and “easy presentation” vs. “hard presentation” as the only variables. I created ads that hold everything else equal except the level of difficulty of content and how that content is presented.

The next step was creating an online study that invites students to look at one of four types of ad: “easy presentation-easy issue”, “easy presentation-hard issue”, “hard presentation-easy issue” or “hard presentation-hard issue”. The study then directed the participants to answer questions about the persuasiveness of the ad and whether this ad would steer them towards voting for or against the particular candidate. Students from the PSCI 1101 Spring 2012 class were the most ideal test pool available. Although they are not a perfect representation of the population, the study was randomized by the computer thus creating a true experiment. A key element left to test was the political knowledge/current events knowledge level of the participants. This was a quiz of 13 questions put together by the PEW Research Center. This way, I can know how the difficulty level of the ad corresponds with needing that higher level of understanding or “smarts” on the viewer’s behalf.

In order to explain this experiment it is best to show through a graphic:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Abortion</th>
<th>Tax amendments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Easy presentation”</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Difficult presentation”</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this experiment I have chosen abortion as the “easy” topic (one that most people have a very firm grasp and opinion on) and changing taxes on some section of the population as the “difficult” topic (one that most people probably need more political and economic knowledge to decide on). The Os represent the opinion of the participants on whether these ads answer the questions I want this entire study to ask: will the difficulty of the ad AND the involvedness of the ad’s topic change the outcome of vote choice?

Gathering approximately 50 participants per stimulus was the goal for this experiment.

**How the research turned out**

The hypothesis I tested involved conducting a true experiment. Because I was able to create original data, every aspect of the experiment was controlled for allowing me to gather clear results about the stimulus. The broad overview of this research design included creating “still advertisements” for a mock presidential election campaign. Using these images I asked various questions about each ad, collected the results, and compared them with the results of a small political knowledge/current events quiz each participant took.

The unit of analysis for this experiment was people. The dependent variable was vote choice/willingness to vote for the candidate. The independent variables are type of ad viewed: “easy presentation-easy issue”, “easy presentation-hard issue”, “hard presentation-easy issue” or “hard-presentation-hard issue” and level of political knowledge/current events knowledge of the participant.

**Outline of Sequence**
The participants of this study were students from the University of Colorado at Boulder. The students were recruited from the PSCI 1101 Spring 2012 class. The professor offered a small amount of extra credit for the course in order to incentivize students to participate in the study.

Each student was randomly assigned one of four types of advertisements: “easy presentation-easy issue”, “easy presentation-hard issue”, “hard presentation-easy issue”, and “hard presentation-hard issue”. All of the advertisements presented were negative or “attack” ads. Because I am concerned with studying how the ad is presented, its level of content, and required knowledge, not whether the ad is positive or negative, I believe it is important to keep the ads consistently negative. All of the advertisements contain the same candidate so as to control for biased results based on gender, race, ethnicity, etc. The advertisements also use an unknown person for “presidential candidate” in order to control for biases against identified political figures. Each ad can be viewed in the appendix of this paper. For this study I decided to make the “easy” issue abortion. This means that abortion is an issue I believe most people have a solid opinion on one way or another. The “hard” issue I chose for the experiment was tax amendments. Although there was no specific tax amendment used, I feel that in general people have a less solidified opinion about tax bracket changes and the implications these changes create. This is what makes tax amendments a “harder” issue than abortion.

I felt that the best way to conduct the experiment was to create ads that did not take a direct political side, or stand for a particular political party. The ads you see were purposefully made to take a neutral stance. This was critical because the ads were intended to test participants’ reactions to how the content was presented and difficulty level of the content itself. Had the ads been clearly Republican, Democrat, or other, responses would inevitably be based primarily on one’s political affiliation.
In order to make the ads it was key to be as consistent as possible in every aspect except the changing independent variable. Every ad features the exact same picture of a white middle-aged male. Every ad uses red font and grey tones to give the effect of negativity and a daunting nature. The candidate pictured has been named “Congressman Richardson”, while the candidate running the ad has been named “Congressman Jones”. There is a large print block reading “SAY NO TO RICHARDSON” at the top of every ad, as well as a disclaimer at the bottom explaining how the ad was paid for and endorsed. The only differences between ads can be read in the text and the length of that text. Although there are some minute differences such as a slight change in picture size or font size, these were small enough that we can expect they did not affect the responses.

All of the information within the ad is entirely fictional. The candidates’ names are made up, as well as the names of the tax amendments, congressional bills, etc. By using any real world information or candidates, the participants of the study would have given responses based on already formed opinions of political figures or issues. The goal was to create the most realistic presidential campaign advertisements possible.

With this research design in mind, every student was asked a series of questions about how the ad helped persuade him/her in willingness or unwillingness to vote for the candidate in the ad. I decided to ask a series of eight questions, some in the form of multiple choice and some in the form of written-in answer. Each student was also given a “political knowledge/current events IQ” quiz from the PEW Research Center to examine whether the results of vote choice and answers to the survey questions based on the advertisements are affected by how much background knowledge a voter/participant has. The survey was given over the internet using the program Qualtrics. A link was sent to all students enrolled in the PSCI 1101 Spring 2012 class at
CU-Boulder. Students had five days from January 29th, 2012 to February 2nd, 2012 to participate in the survey in exchange for extra credit in the course. In total, 163 students participated and 158 responses were recorded and used for data.

There are a couple hypotheses I intend to test using the data and results of my survey. The first hypothesis is that as the level of difficulty of the presentation of content and the topic of the ad increases, the willingness to support/elect the candidate that has created or supported the attack on his/her opponent will decrease. The second hypothesis is that the better a participant scores on the PEW political knowledge test, the more likely that participant is to support/elect the candidate that is being attacked. By using the computer to randomly generate the data collection, I was able to directly test these hypotheses with original data and a true experiment.

**DATA AND ANALYSIS**

The results of this experiment gave insight into a variety of effects. There are three main questions this paper asks: Does the level of difficulty of the content of an attack ad matter in terms of vote choice? Does the level of difficulty of the presentation of the content in an attack ad matter in terms of vote choice? And lastly does the level of political knowledge a voter has matter in terms of vote choice when viewing an attack ad?

By taking the information and results collected by the survey, I was able to use Stata to recode all the variables and questions in order to test the three questions and the two general hypotheses in an assortment of ways. The first step was to take every informational question the survey asked, a total of eight, and rename them for easy manipulation on the computer. Therefore the first question asked was labeled q1, the second question asked was labeled q2, etc. In addition, the four advertisements were renamed as “abortioneasy”, “taxeseasy”, etc.
“abortionhard”, and “taxeshard”. In order to examine how participants scored on the political knowledge quiz, I divided the scores in half with a score of less than or equal to 9 out of 13 as “low knowledge”, and a score of greater than 9 out of 13 as “high knowledge”. The scores were divided this way because approximately 50% of participants scored on either side of 9 which gave me an easy way to separate the lower scores from the higher. The second step in breaking down the data was to recode each variable in a binary fashion. For example, in the crosstab comparing the tax ads to the abortion ads, and how those participants viewing each ended up voting, abortion was coded as 1, while any ad NOT dealing with abortion became 0. This simply gives the computer an understanding of how to separate variables and throw out any incomplete data. Within each crosstab created, all variables were recoded as either a 1 or 0 depending on the situation.

There were essentially two types of data I ended up collecting. The hard data, the raw numbers, is something to explore first, and will give the most concrete understanding of how my hypotheses played out. However, the more theoretical data where participants could write in feelings and observations about each ad is just as crucial, and will be discussed after the empirical evidence.

**The Hard Facts**

We’ll begin by exploring the most basic way to analyze the data for this project. My initial hypothesis regarding how people will vote based on the content and presentation of a presidential election attack ad was fairly linear: As the level of difficulty of the ad and of the topic of the ad increases, the willingness to support/elect the candidate being attacked will increase. It was easier to break this down into two separate tables when doing the data analysis.
First, let us look at the outcome of how those participants who viewed either of the advertisements on taxes or either of the advertisements on abortion would have voted in terms of candidate Richardson (the candidate being attacked/pictured).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Issue</th>
<th>Vote choice=FOR Richardson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>16.0% (n=75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
<td>19.3% (n=83)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What this table tells us is that 16.0% of participants who viewed either the hard or easy presentation of the tax issue would vote for the candidate being attacked, while 19.3% of participants who viewed either the hard or easy presentation of the abortion issue would vote for the candidate being attacked. Although the t-statistic, .5929 in this case, indicates that this finding is not statistically significant, there is still a notable difference in these numbers. It might be important to explore why those people viewing an attack on Richardson’s opinions about abortion are 3.3% more likely to vote for him. However, it is also important to notice that overall, the percentage of participants, no matter what the content of the ad, were far more likely to vote against Richardson, as 16.0% and 19.3% are rather low percentages in Richardson’s favor.

Now let us take a look at the data indicating vote choice for Richardson depending on whether a participant saw an easy presentation versus a hard presentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Presentation</th>
<th>Vote choice FOR Richardson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hard</td>
<td>16.7% (n=72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy</td>
<td>18.6% (n=86)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This table and information is slightly less compelling than when we compared the type of content with vote choice. 16.7% of participants who viewed an ad presented in a hard manner chose to vote for Richardson, while 18.6% of participants who viewed an ad presented in an easy manner chose to vote for Richardson. These percentages are 1.9% different, and in addition, the t-statistic is again statistically insignificant at .7526. The important factors to consider here are why are those people seeing different types of presentation more similar in their choice to vote for Richardson than those people seeing different types of content? Perhaps content is a more compelling variable when deciding on a candidate, or maybe the advertisements presented differently needed more differences to make the data less similar.

By putting these two tests together, the data that comes out gives the most accurate representation of the hypothesis at hand. I created two crosstabs that measured vote choice within the easy presentation as well as within the hard presentation. A four by four table allows us to see the outcome of presentation and content of all the ads combined.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Easy presentation</th>
<th>Hard presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hard issue (Taxes)</strong></td>
<td>18.4% (n=38)</td>
<td>13.5% (n=37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Easy issue (Abortion)</strong></td>
<td>18.6% (n=48)</td>
<td>20.0% (n=35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The set of data in this table answers one of the quintessential question being posited in this paper. Do the type of content and the level of presentation in an attack ad make a difference in vote choice? As it turns out, the answer is essentially no. Again, the two crosstabs put together in order to create this table turned out statistically insignificant results. The t-statistic for abortion versus taxes within easy presentation was .9694 while the t-statistic for abortion versus taxes within hard presentation was .4675. Ideally these numbers should be .05 or less. However, just
because the overall hypothesis, as the level of difficulty of the presentation and content increase so will the willingness to vote for the candidate being attacked, was rejected, there are some influential data here that are meaningful and certainly worth exploring.

My thought process behind this first hypothesis was based on my real life experience, especially as I’ve just recently been able to vote and really take part in elections. Upon watching attack ads election after election that seem confusing, unclear, and entirely convoluted, I always wonder why would a candidate put out an ad that doesn’t simply lay out the facts in a straightforward manner? The idea behind many endeavors is to cater to the lowest common denominator. In the commercial industry we are often bombarded with funny and idiotic slapstick routines enticing consumers to buy the product. My thinking was the same for political advertisements. If an ad is to-the-point, and in a way “dumbed down”, the candidate doing the attacking should be more successful in making his or her point and therefore garner more votes.

The creation of four different types of ads to measure this thought turned out to be helpful and insightful. By looking at the table, we can see that there is essentially no difference in terms of voting for or against Richardson when it comes to viewing an easy tax ad, an easy abortion ad, or a hard abortion ad. However, there was one percentage that ended up much farther off than all of the others. While 18.4% of participants who saw an ad that presented taxes in an easy way, 18.7% of participants who saw an ad that presented abortion in an easy way, and 20.0% of participants who saw an ad that presented abortion in a hard way would ALL have voted for Richardson, only 13.5% of participants who saw an ad that presented taxes in a hard way would have voted for Richardson. Why is this particular ad, the “hard presentation-hard issue”, about 5-7% more compelling in terms of convincing voters that Richardson is a “bad” candidate than any of the other ads? The attack on Richardson has worked much more successfully when viewers
see a convoluted issue presented in a difficult way. Even though we cannot say with certainty that this difference is not just due to random error or chance, it is entirely worth investigating.

In the first table when comparing the content of the ad to vote choice, it was the case that those participants seeing advertisements dealing with taxes were 3.3% less likely to vote for Richardson. The harder issue, taxes, seems to be a common denominator when comparing that 3.3% difference to the 13.5% who would vote for Richardson when viewing a difficulty presented ad. In addition, although the difference between those participants viewing a hard presentation versus easy presentation ad in the second table above was only 1.9% in terms of voting for Richardson, it was again the more difficulty presented ad that had a lower rate of vote for Richardson just like in the 13.5% viewing the hard-hard ad.

Based on these implications, it seems that not only was my first hypothesis incorrect, but perhaps the real life case is the exact opposite. Again, we cannot say for certain due to the t-statistics that were generated with the data, but it appears that as the difficulty level of the presentation of the ad increases as well as the difficulty level of the content of the ad increases, support for the candidate being attacked in fact decreases. While my initial hypothesis was based upon a need for the viewers to have all information about a candidate given in an obvious manner in order to believe the attack, we might conclude that the reverse is true. When given negative information about a candidate, viewers are more likely to see right through the thinly veiled stupidity of an obvious ad and in turn actually trust the candidate being attacked. Perhaps the more complicated the ad in terms of both presentation and content, the more likely viewers are to distrust the attacked candidate and even view the ad as an example of the intelligence and knowledge the attacker candidate holds. The data speak for itself. 5-7% fewer participants are going to vote for candidate Richardson when the ad is complicated and intricate. In this case the
candidate who ran the ad, Jones, has the best chance for gaining more votes if he uses advertisements that cater to participants interested in a more thorough explanation of Richardson’s deficiencies. This conclusion can easily be translated into the real world of political advertisements. The more thoroughly an advertisement run by candidate B explains candidate A’s bad qualities, and as long as it’s done in a clear way, the more likely it seems candidate B will collect votes. Candidate B must be strategic in how a denser ad will be put together, but the data of this paper suggests that voters do not necessarily need to have a simplistic advertisement to be convinced of the attacked candidate’s insufficiencies.

While the specific numbers within each table are a large part of analyzing the results, we need to examine the overall trends that occur across the data. Without a doubt, the number of participants willing to vote for Richardson (the attacked candidate), was relatively low. The largest percentage of respondents in any of my given cases who would vote for the attacked candidate was approximately 30.0% (as we will see in the next section). Even with these small advertisements, the participants were very opinionated. However, just because participants were not very willing to vote in favor of Richardson, does not necessarily mean they were in high favor of the attacker either (Jones). While there was not a question asking whether a participant would vote for or against the attacker, participants were asked how intelligent they found the person who ran the ad (Jones). Approximately 9% of participants found Jones intelligent or very intelligent, while 19% found Jones unintelligent or very unintelligent, and approximately 36% of participants found Jones neither intelligent or unintelligent. These percentages begin to show that just because one would choose not to vote for the attacked candidate, Richardson in this case, that that same participant wouldn’t necessarily vote for the attacker, Jones. There is definitely
something to be said for negative advertising being appropriately named negative. On some level, these ads are most likely a turnoff to a number of voters in terms of both candidates.

**The Hard Facts II**

The second hypothesis I intended to test with this data is one of comparing level of political knowledge with the outcome of vote choice. I postulated that the better a participant scored on the PEW political knowledge test, the more likely that participant was to support/elect the candidate being attacked. Almost the opposite of my first hypothesis, I entertain the idea that people who are more attuned to current events, and have higher levels of political awareness will see right through the “ruse” of a negative ad and assume the candidate that has created the advertisement is the worse choice when it comes time to vote. There were many participants who commented on this particular paradigm in sections of the survey where they could fill in the blank with personal thoughts about what made the ad unlikeable. One respondent explained “I dislike the fact that the opposing candidate is trying to destroy Richardson's campaign rather than focusing on [his] own campaign”. Another participant wrote “This is an unfair political attack that seeks not to undermine a stance or ability to lead, but only to make people wary of the [Richardson]”. Many other participants commented on exactly what we hear in every election. The fact that candidate A spends time highlighting what candidate B does wrong, instead of what candidate A does well, is a commonplace complaint among citizens. Attack ads are almost always vicious, and I believe only deter citizens from voting for the attacker.

In order to test this theory, I ran two different crosstabs that utilize vote choice for Richardson against the difficulty level of how the ads were presented. In this analysis, I was able to pool all of the respondents who saw the tax ads and the abortion ads because as we saw in the
earlier tables, there was not a statistically significant difference in terms of vote choice between the ads with different types of issues. As mentioned in the research design section, the “knowledgeable” participants were those who scored greater than 9 out of 13, and the “unknowledgeable” participants were those who scored 9 out of 13 or less. The political knowledge quiz given to participants has been provided in the appendix of this paper. In the end we get two crosstabs: one that compares the level of political knowledge to those respondents who saw only “easy presentation ads” and one that compares the level of knowledge to those respondents who saw only “hard presentation ads” and how each of these looks in terms of vote choice for Richardson. We’ll begin by examining those who saw only the easy ads.

**EASY AD FRAME**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vote choice FOR Richardson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Knowledgeable (score of 9 or less)</td>
<td>8.82% (n=34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable (score of greater than 9)</td>
<td>29.5% (n=44)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference we see here was a nice initial confirmation of my second hypothesis. Approximately 9% of less knowledgeable participants who saw an “easy presentation” ad were willing to vote for candidate Richardson, while almost 30% of the knowledgeable participants who saw an “easy presentation” ad were willing to vote for him. Not only is there a 21% greater compliance to vote for the attacked candidate when a participant has a greater level of political consciousness but these results turned out to be statistically significant. With a t-statistic of .0246, we can say with a greater than 95% confidence level that this isn’t simply due to random chance. Scoring higher on a current events quiz undoubtedly changes the way people vote in
reaction to attack advertisements that are presented in a straightforward manner. Half of the hypothesis has been confirmed. However, we still need to look at those participants who viewed the “hard presentation ads”.

**HARD AD FRAME**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Knowledgeable (score of 9 or less)</th>
<th>Vote choice FOR Richardson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.8% (n=39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable (score of greater than 9)</td>
<td>20.0% (n=30)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the difference here is not quite as big as 21%, the difference in these numbers is still notably large. Approximately 13% of those participants with less political knowledge who saw a “hard presentation” ad were willing to vote for Richardson, while 20% of more knowledgeable participants were willing to vote for Richardson. With this 9% difference, and no statistically significant results (the t-statistic for this crosstab was .4268), we must ask why this did not turn out as clearly and evidently as those respondents who saw the easy presentation ads? And we also must ask, why is this not statistically significant, while the easy presentation ads were?

Let’s begin by making some general observations. Although the political knowledge crosstabs were some of the only ones analyzed that actually gave statistically significant results, and even the most interesting results perhaps, there is no doubt that measuring political knowledge is exceedingly difficult. To accurately calculate how well informed someone is about current events, political awareness, etc. is not standardized and cannot ever truly be. Much like IQ tests, the small quiz given to these participants was to gain a sampling of the differences, and
not intended to measure the entire gambit of the respondents’ political understanding. However, because there is no standard measurement for knowledge, the political IQ quiz given to participants from the PEW research center, a highly regarded database, is as good as any in getting a sense of the participants’ level of current events, political understanding, etc. If we were to expand on this research, a larger political IQ quiz or test might be a more thorough way to go, but for this research, the quiz was a nice baseline.

Putting aside the imperfect knowledge test, these results are a mere stepping stone to branch out into the arena of how political ads are presented. As previously indicated, the content of the advertisements when testing vote choice against political knowledge became irrelevant in the data we analyzed. It seems that how the advertisement is presented makes a difference in vote choice rather than what is in the advertisement. We can extrapolate from this data that no matter how controversial or mundane the topic is, if it’s presented in an easy to comprehend manner, people with greater political perception are 21% more likely to vote for the candidate being shamed. As hypothesized, those people with a deeper background for politics and global affairs are often turned off by an attack ad as well as the candidate running it.

Although the hard presentation ads cannot be gauged with this same statistical certainty, it seems that the case is much the same. Those people who have political milieu even when viewing an ad presented in a difficult manner are still more likely to sympathize and vote for the candidate being attacked; in fact, 9% more likely than those people who do not have as much political savvy.

In terms of measuring political knowledge against the type of ad participants saw, I predicted that the better one scored on the political knowledge quiz, the more likely that person would be to vote for the attacked candidate. When broken down into “easy presentation” and
“hard presentation” ads, the results were visibly different. We must ask, why did the attack ads hurt Richardson more among the “less knowledgeable” than the “knowledgeable” in only those ads presented in an easy manner? I believe this can be tied back into the conclusions made from the first hypothesis’ analysis. I found that, in general, viewers were more likely to vote for the attacker if the advertisements were presented in a harder rather than easier way. Essentially, if the ad is thorough and a little more complex in nature, it turns out that viewers actually respond to the competence this suggests the attacker holds. We can now apply this logic to the issue of hard and easy presentations among the knowledge tests. The attack ads presented in an easy manner hurt Richardson more among the less knowledgeable than the knowledgeable not because of political knowledge, but because of the presentation level of the ads themselves.

Overall, viewers respond less in favor of the attacker if the advertisement is presented in a “dumbed down” manner. We probably get the 8.82% of less knowledgeable participants voting in favor of Richardson compared to the 29.5% of knowledgeable participants voting in favor of Richardson among the easy presentation ads because this type of presentation is less favorable to viewers on the whole. When we switch to looking at the hard presentation results against political knowledge, the “hurt” Richardson experiences in terms of vote choice is much less because that more in-depth presentation style ad, no matter what the knowledge level of a participant, is more appealing to voters by and large as the data showed when concluding the opposite of my first hypothesis.

The implications of this test are particularly important for this paper. The basis for my thesis and idea came from a lack of understanding when it comes to political ads. I always asked myself why there are dense and rambling advertisements every election cycle? Shouldn’t it matter how an ad is presented? After all, your message does not matter if it cannot be received in
a clear way. The data gathered here indicates a strong import when it comes to how a presidential advertisement is put together and given to the public. As discussed in the analysis of the first hypothesis, that 5-7% of people who are more likely to vote for Richardson when the ad is easily presented says something imperative. Overall, this data presents us with a breaking-off point to research how candidates might better compile advertisements, gain more votes, and in the end, win the election.

**So much more than numbers**

While delving into hard data is always crucial, it is limiting in many ways. I setup the survey for this paper in a way that would allow for some “real life” feedback having little to do with hard data. A theoretical understanding of the process of electing a presidential candidate is just as critical as validating choices based on numbers and graphs.

This section of data and analysis gives us a chance to reflect upon what might change in future surveys and endeavors to better appreciate attack advertising and the effect it has on vote choice. There were two goals when creating the advertisements I did; they needed to reflect particular content and they needed to reflect how that content was presented. I modeled these still ads after an attack ad presented by Martha Coakley against Scott Brown in the Massachusetts’s special election to fill Ted Kennedy’s senate seat ([www.cbsnews.com](http://www.cbsnews.com)). For all of the effort put into what these ads were to represent and measure, the responses from participants were more varied and insightful than I could have imagined. Many respondents were completely unimpressed with the graphics and effects of the ads. With the intention of measuring something related to content and presentation, survey takers ended up criticizing a lack of flashy illustrations and visual interest. While a lot of these responses had nothing to do with how I
imagined participants to answer, in the end it put a great deal of emphasis on my hypotheses after all. Especially with a younger demographic filled with i-Phones, computers, and apps, candidates must begin to target my contemporary generation. Boring ads, or ads that are not to-the-point in an eye-popping way are unlikely to attract the attention of the youth. Much like Obama did in his 2008 campaign, candidates are going to have to attract the 18-25 demographic with enticing visuals, and relatable interests. Fresh and new methods are entwined with how an advertisement is presented. It is incredible how my data intended for one purpose can end up serving two.

There aren’t really numbers for how to present an ad in the best way to an emerging generation. There are few percentages on what looks “cool” and “enticing”. The results of the survey used for this paper however, are positively a stepping stone towards greater research into showing presidential election advertisements in a much more effective style.

CONCLUSIONS

“Unfair”. “Smear campaign”. “Rude”. These are all some of the words used by participants of this study to describe the slanderous attack advertisements created for this research. Presidential elections are hot-button, captivating and entirely consuming events in the United States. While we all like to believe in the saying you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, over the decades, presidential candidates often take the opposite approach. Negative advertisements are a rampant component of elections, and probably always will be.

This paper intended to test two hypotheses.
1. As the level of difficulty of the presentation of content and the topic of the ad increases, the willingness to support/elect the candidate that has created or supported the attack on his/her opponent will decrease.
2. The better a participant scores on the PEW political knowledge test, the more likely that participant is to support/elect the candidate that is being attacked.

By testing these two theories using a survey created and designed for the occasion as well as having the ability to use original data, we are able to see the implications of the hypotheses and perhaps further research to come. As it turns out, as the level of difficulty of the presentation of content and the topic of the ad increases, the willingness to support/elect the candidate that has created or supported the attack on his/her opponent actually increases. Although this was not proven or substantiated by statistically significant data, exploring the numbers and outcomes was still an important first step in understanding the reasoning behind the results. In terms of the second hypothesis, the better a participant scores on the PEW Political Knowledge test, based on this data, it is in fact true that the participant is then more likely to support/elect the candidate being attacked. There were some statistically significant findings when it came to easy presentation advertisements with regards to this second hypothesis as well, further validating the theory behind hypothesis number two.

The reaction of the students who took the survey of a greater need for intricate and impressive advertising in general, goes hand in hand with many of the findings here. How an advertisement is presented can make a truly impactful difference. Especially because of the prevalence of attack ads during such rigorous and altering elections, the research gathered in this paper, although a small start, is available to help researchers take the next step into attack advertising during presidential elections.

WORKS CITED


Geer, John G., and James H. Geer. "Remembering Attack Ads: An Experimental Investigation of


APPENDIX

Ad 1: Easy presentation-Easy issue

**SAY NO to Richardson**

**America can’t afford this kind of thinking. Don’t elect a president who can’t deal with abortion the right way.**

PAID FOR BY THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION COMMITTEE OF AMERICA AND AUTHORIZED AND APPROVED BY CONGRESSMAN JONES FOR PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA 2012
Say NO to Richardson

America can’t afford to let the middle-income tax bracket suffer. Let’s not elect a president who supports Tax Amendment 147B.

Paid for by the Presidential Election Committee of America and authorized and approved by Congressman Jones for president of the United States of America 2012
While in the 112th Congress, Richardson voted against H.R. 32h (IH) in favor of changing the current abortion laws in over 32 states.

When it comes to abortion and the legality around these difficult medical decisions he cannot be trusted.
Say NO to Richardson

During his time in the 112th Congress, Richardson didn’t even show up to vote for the imperative H.R. 1326b Tax Amendment.

This Congressman failed to convince the House of the need for changes in alternative minimum tax and elimination of the federal estate and generation-skipping taxes.

Paid for by the Presidential Election Committee of America and Authorized and Approved by Congressman Jones for President of the United States of America 2012.
Question 1 of 13

What position does this person hold?

☐ Secretary of Education
☐ Commissioner of the National Football League
☐ Chairman of the Federal Reserve
☐ CBS Evening News Anchor

Question 2 of 13

What European country is facing severe debt problems and possible default?

☐ Switzerland
☐ Germany
☐ Great Britain
☐ Greece

Question 3 of 13
Which country is Brazil?

Question 4 of 13

Thinking about Congress, do Republicans currently have a majority in...?

- The House of Representatives
- The Senate
- Both the House and Senate
- Neither the House nor the Senate

Question 5 of 13

Which person co-founded Apple?
Question 6 of 13

Is the national unemployment rate as reported by the government currently closer to…?

☐ 5%
☐ 9%
☐ 15%
☐ 21%

Question 7 of 13

Who is this?

☐ Elena Kagan
☐ Maria Bartiromo
Question 8 of 13

Who is the Prime Minister of Great Britain?

- Angela Merkel
- David Cameron
- Tony Hayward
- Richard Branson

Question 9 of 13

Which of these symbols is associated with Islam?

- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]
- [ ]

Question 10 of 13

Who is the current Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives?

- Mitch McConnell
- Nancy Pelosi
Question 11 of 13

What Middle Eastern country is highlighted on this map?

- Egypt
- Saudi Arabia
- Israel
- Turkey

Question 12 of 13

Since the start of military action in Afghanistan, about how many U.S. military personnel have been killed? Around…?

- 180
- 1,800
- 18,000
- 180,000
Question 13 of 13

Which political party does this symbol represent?

- [ ] Democratic Party
- [ ] Green Party
- [x] Republican Party
- [ ] Libertarian Party