Does Confirmation Trump Valence? Confirmation and the Effects of Negative and Positive Political Advertising

Joan M. Phillips, University of Notre Dame, USA
Joel E. Urbany, University of Notre Dame, USA
Thomas J. Reynolds, University of Texas at Dallas and SRDA, USA

Recent research suggests that negative political advertising may be ineffective because it appeals only to those who already favor the candidate sponsoring the ad. The current study is unique in examining the effects of positive and negative advertising on voter reactions, while accounting for prior candidate preferences. This experiment, conducted shortly before the 2004 U.S. presidential election, found that negative advertising produced more critical responses than positive advertising even for the voter’s favored candidate. Surprisingly, negative advertising was more likely to shift voting intention in the direction of the ad, even when the ad was for the non-favored candidate. An analysis of costs and returns suggests why negative advertising may in fact be effective.

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Joan M. Phillips, University of Notre Dame, USA
Joel E. Urbany, University of Notre Dame, USA
Thomas R. Reynolds, University of Texas at Dallas (Emeritus) and SRDA, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
In spite of long discussion of the detrimental aspects of negative advertising in a political domain, it continues to be a widely used, almost fundamental element of many election campaign strategies. Recent academic research has suggested that negative advertising may actually be ineffective because it only appeals to those who are already predisposed to dislike the targeted candidate (i.e., “preaching to the choir”). Yet, this research does not provide direct evidence of advertising reactions. We explore negativity by comparing the effects of negative (anti-opponent) and positive (pro-sponsor) advertising on voting intentions shortly before the November 2004 U.S. presidential election, accounting for voters’ prior preferences. Our initial hypothesis that confirmation (i.e., seeing an ad for the preferred candidate) would trump valence (positive or negative advertising) did not hold true—negative advertising got generally poorer reviews and produced more counterarguing than did positive advertising whether it was for the favored candidate or the opponent. In spite of this, however, negative advertising was more likely than positive advertising to produce shifts in voting intention in the direction of the ad. While small given the strong priors of our participants at this late date in the election cycle, these effects included both reinforcement/strengthening of priors and preference-changing shifts. We explore the implications of our results for the effectiveness of negative advertising.