Visual Inferences and Advertising Spending in Political Marketing

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This paper explores how advertising spending and candidate appearance influence Congressional electoral outcomes. Our analyses reveal that campaign spending and visual inferences about candidate personality traits significantly predict vote share, but these factors have asymmetric effects across the major parties.

Introduction
Political campaign managers are increasingly utilizing marketing tools, and spending on political advertising is growing rapidly (Teinowitz 2004), yet political campaigns have received little attention within marketing. Our research considers the role of two marketing variables in political campaigns: product appearance, (i.e. the physical appearance of the candidate) and advertising spending strategies. In particular we explore how the role of party brand image and incumbency moderate the influence of these factors in political campaigns.

Background
Candidate Appearance and Impression Formation
Almost all products are subject to visual inferences that arise out of initial exposure when reactions can result in an established attitude before other information is considered. For political candidates, where visual contact with the candidate is often solely through short news clips or advertisements, personality inferences based on brief visual exposure may be critical. Research has demonstrated how personality inferences based on photographs of political candidates can influence elections (Todorov et al. 2005). Todorov et al. had study participants make relative personality judgments of U.S. Senate and Congressional candidates based solely on their photographs. Results indicated that the appearance of competence was highly predictive of electoral success.

The results of Todorov et al. (2005) are striking but may be incomplete. Because political parties function like brands in that they strive to develop distinct positions, such stereotypes likely differ across party. Thus, the visual qualities that mean success for a Republican may differ from those that mean success for a Democrat. We investigate this possibility.

Advertising Spending
We also consider the role of advertising spending. A consistent finding in prior research on campaign spending is that while challenger spending is found to influence vote shares, spending by incumbents usually has a statistically insignificant effect. The main explanation is that much like an early market entrant, incumbents start with advantages in awareness, which impacts the marginal effects of advertising investments. In contrast, challengers often start from a point of relative anonymity, so marginal spending has a greater effect. We examine this effect and also consider whether asymmetries exist across political party.

Finally we explore effects of advertising tone to see whether the effectiveness of negative advertising is altered as a function of incumbency and political party. As the later entrant into the market, challengers may gain relatively more by employing negative ads that highlight familiar deficiencies in their competitors because they enable alignable comparisons. On the other hand, negative advertising by incumbents that emphasizes the risk of switching to the challenger may be relatively more effective. Party affiliation may also have an effect. Given that political parties have established brand images and distinct positions, negative advertising may be differentially effective for Democratic versus Republican candidates.

Data
We obtained personality judgments based on candidate photographs for 112 congressional races from 2000 and 2002. Participants were presented with photographs of the two main candidates side by side, labeled “Candidate A” and “Candidate B” (picture position counterbalanced). Participants provided relative ratings on four personality trait questions (competence, intelligence, likeability, and trustworthiness), each on a seven-point scale from “Candidate A looks much more [intelligent]” to “Candidate B looks much more [intelligent].”

Advertising tone data was obtained from the University of Wisconsin’s Political Science Department, which has compiled a database containing information on elections in the top 75 media markets in 2000 and the top 100 markets in 2002. The database includes information on whether campaign ads were primarily positive or negative in tone, as well as estimated costs for each airing. We use the estimated costs and tone judgments to calculate the percentage of negative advertising used by each candidate. In addition, we use campaign fundraising and spending statistics from the Federal Election Commission.

Results
We first conduct an analysis of only the visual inference data for Democrats and Republicans. As predicted, the results suggest that the various visual assessments operate differently for the two parties. Republicans benefit from being perceived (visually) as more competent and trustworthy. Appearing more likeable or more intelligent has negative effects. The pattern is strikingly reversed for Democrats.

In the second stage of the analysis we examine the relationships between candidate spending, advertising tone and vote shares. Consistent with results in the political science literature, we find spending for challengers has a significant positive impact but for incumbents has a negligible effect. We also find that spending on negative advertising by Republican challengers is found to be significantly more effective than for Democratic challengers.

As a final step we use the personality inferences data and the spending data in a combined model. We find that spending levels and candidate appearance both significantly influence election results. Including the spending variables and the visual effects in a single model provides an opportunity to quantify the value of inferred personality traits. For example, a Republican incumbent gains the same benefit in vote share from a competence appearance as the views of the Wisconsin Advertising Project, Professor Goldstein, Joel Rivlin, or The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Footnotes
1The data were obtained from a project of the Wisconsin Advertising Project, under Professor Kenneth Goldstein and Joel Rivlin of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and includes media tracking data from the Campaign Media Analysis Group in Washington, D.C. The Wisconsin Advertising Project was sponsored by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Wisconsin Advertising Project, Professor Goldstein, Joel Rivlin, or The Pew Charitable Trusts.
advantage of .1 as from shifting from a spending ratio (incumbent spending to total spending) of .5 to .56. If the Democratic challenger is spending the average of $450,000 this represents an incremental investment of approximately $115,000.

**Discussion**

Our research extends previous work in political marketing by examining how party brand image moderates the effectiveness of certain marketing variables in political campaigns. We show that visual inferences of candidate personalities have asymmetric effects on elections across the parties. We also extend research on the effectiveness of negative advertising by showing that effectiveness varies by party and incumbency. Future research is needed to understand the drivers of these asymmetries.

**REFERENCES**
