

Attack Versus Advocacy: Advertising Tone That Mobilizes

JAEHO CHO

University of California, Davis, USA

This study examines the role of attack ads in encouraging citizen communication. Using a national survey merged with ad tracking data, this study finds that attack advertising elicited negative emotions about the candidate the voter opposed, which in turn fostered political conversation. However, such indirect effects of campaign advertising were not observed for advocacy advertising. Data also reveal that attack ads outperformed advocacy ads overall when it came to promoting political discussion. Taken together, it is attack advertising, not advocacy advertising, that promotes political discussion, and negative emotions explain, at least in part, how the attack ad effects occur.

Keywords: political advertising, political discussion, political affect, negative advertising, campaign effects

Over the last few decades, attack advertising has become a key feature of election campaigns in U.S. politics. With the increasing negativity in campaigns, scholars have focused more attention on assessing its impact on democracy. Yet research to date has differed in its conclusions (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007). Some researchers suggest that attack advertising undermines democracy by spurring political cynicism and discouraging voter turnout (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, & Simon, 1999); others claim that the harmful effects of attack advertising are overrated (Finkel & Geer, 1998). In fact, recent studies have even found that attack advertising promotes political learning and participation (Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Geer, 2006; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002; Martin, 2004).

Despite the amount of study it has drawn thus far, the role of attack advertising in democracy is not completely understood. Not only does the literature show mixed results, but the range of ad effects considered is largely limited to voter attitudes and turnout (cf. Cho, 2008). An underlying assumption of the research to date is that ad messages directly influence the voter. That is, voter processing of the ad message is completed at the moment of ad exposure, and the message directly affects voters, independent of other sources of communication. Although the immediate and direct impact is probable, it is also highly likely that, especially during the campaign period, there is an intersection of different communication forms, initiated by both elites (e.g., political advertising, televised debates) and ordinary citizens (e.g., political conversations, posting opinions/information online). Thus, political ad effects take place, at least in part, within the context of communication actions subsequent to exposure to the campaign messages.

Jaeho Cho: jaecho@ucdavis.edu

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In this light, some work has started to consider certain communication behaviors, such as information seeking and conversation, as either a criterion of ad effects (Cho, 2008, 2011, 2013) or as a mediating process behind the effects ads have on political outcomes (Cho et al., 2009; Shah et al., 2007). The present study extends this stream of research by exploring how the tone of political advertising influences the extent to which voters engage in political discussion. Specifically, this study (a) examines voter emotions as an intervening mechanism that accounts, at least in part, for how political ads induce citizen communication and (b) compares the two types of campaign ads (i.e., attack and advocacy) in terms of their impact on citizen communication.

This study extends previous research on campaign advertising and citizen communication in several ways. Cho (2008, 2011) showed that political ads encouraged citizens to engage in information seeking and discussion. However, this research examined the *total* volume of advertising and did not distinguish between attack and advocacy ads. Other work (Cho et al., 2009; Shah et al., 2007) considered the tone of ads by using the ratio of attack ads in assessing ad effects on news use and political discussion, yet did not examine the mechanisms linking campaign ads and citizen communication. A study by Cho (2013) demonstrates that, in the context of the 2000 presidential campaign, attack ads induce political discussion by provoking emotions. One important feature missing in this study, however, is a formal comparison of the impact of attack and advocacy ads on citizen communication.

Understanding the relationship between advertising tone and citizen communication not only broadens the horizon of ad effects by addressing a new criterion of effects but enriches the discussion about the role of political advertising in the democratic process. If political advertising facilitates citizen discussion, then political ads have the potential to promote vibrant democracy rather than functioning merely as the machinery for political maneuvering. Further, given the central role of political discussion in citizens' political lives (McLeod et al., 2001), the link between campaign ads and citizen discussion also sheds light on the understudied communicative underpinnings of political mobilization fostered by campaign ads.

Another contribution of this study is to empirically compare the effects of attack ads and advocacy ads by imposing and testing equality constraints. Thus far in the literature of political advertising, the comparison of attack and advocacy ads has been tested largely in experimental settings where participants are exposed to one of the two types of ads. Given that voters in the real world are exposed to both types of ads, however, a more realistic and precise comparison can be made when both are considered simultaneously. The equality test of attack and advocacy ads in the presence of one another adds empirical evidence to the current debates about the role of attack advertising in democracy.

Psychology of Negativity

The functional theory of emotion posits that emotions function as an adaptive system to help humans deal with changes in the environment (Frijda, 1988; Lazarus, 1991). Emotions are thought to represent an alarm system to warn of problems that demand attention and an immediate real-time resolution. For example, when individuals sense a change in their environment, they first assess how the change is relevant to their lives. This cognitive appraisal then translates into an action state, the most

basic forms of which are approach and avoidance. It is the resulting awareness of this action state that constitutes emotional experiences. As a last step in this adaptive process, the action state allocates psychological resources to maintain mental and physical well-being (see Frijda, 1988; Izard, 1993). In sum, the emotional system is expected to facilitate the interaction between an organism and an internal or environmental stimulus.

The functional theory of emotion suggests that attack ads, as an external stimulus, provoke a sense of threat and elicit negative emotions about the opposing candidate, which, in turn, lead to cognitive and behavioral responses. This would likely occur regardless of which candidate (the opposing or the favored) is under attack. The reason is twofold. First, voters feel threatened by ads that attack the candidate they support because their political values and preferences are denied. This, in turn, evokes negative emotions about the attacking candidate. On the other hand, voters have similar feelings in response to ads that attack the candidate they oppose, because, in such ads, the opposing candidate's policy is portrayed as a threat/problem.

For instance, when a campaign ad sponsored by a Republican candidate criticizes a Democratic candidate's policy to pay for health care via reduced tax cuts for corporations, Democrats likely feel that their values are being directly criticized and threatened by the ad. At the same time, Republicans likely find the target of the criticism in the ad (i.e., government spending at the expense of tax cuts) disturbing and dangerous. In this scenario, *both* Democrats and Republicans respond to the negative commercial as a threat, even though those whose political values are criticized, Democratic voters in this case, would probably feel so more strongly. Thus, whether voters accept the overall claim of the attack message or not, they experience similar emotions, through different mechanisms, toward the opposing candidate. The former case (i.e., the Democratic voters' response) refers to negative emotions stemming from a defensive motivation against the attitude-challenging message, and the latter case (i.e., the Republican voter's response) describes similar emotions evoked through persuasion by the attitude-consistent, fear-appeal message.

Positive advocacy ads, on the other hand, have much less potential to elicit feelings of threat. If voters agree with a positive ad, the ad poses no threat. If voters oppose what is advocated, they might feel threatened because the ad indirectly denies their own view. The sense of threat provoked by advocacy ads, however, will not be as strong as that when their views and values are directly attacked in negative ads. Thus, although both criticism and advocacy in advertisements give rise to a sense of threat in voters' minds, the criticism in attack ads will do so more strongly than positive advocacy ads. In a similar vein, an experiment conducted by Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000) provides evidence that negative ads elicit negative emotions in voters' minds. The experiment randomly exposed participants to negative or positive political ads and asked them to describe their feelings. People in the negative commercial condition exhibited considerably stronger negative emotions than those exposed to positive ads or those in the control (no political information) condition. The negative messages led people to describe their emotional states as upset or distressed, and the positive messages had no discernible emotional effect. Neither positive emotion, such as enthusiasm and hope, nor negative emotion was brought about by positive messages.

Given that people respond much more strongly to attack ads than to positive ads, the negative ads would be expected to motivate voters to engage more actively in mental processes. In fact, a wealth of research indicates that negative ads, as compared to positive ads, are psychologically more stimulating (Lang, 1991), draw more attention and processing resources (Fiske, 1980; Kellermann, 1984), generate more enhanced memory and learning (Lang, 1991; Shapiro & Rieger, 1992), and have a larger impact on individual voting decisions (Lau, 1985; see also Allen & Burrell, 2003 for a meta-analysis of campaign ad effects). Altogether, research to date reveals that negative ads retain overall supremacy over positive ads for encouraging active processing. This is consistent with the functional approach to emotion that suggests that negative emotions are more persistent and become a stronger motivating force because they are elicited by circumstances demanding action in the face of survival threats. Positive emotions, on the other hand, are relatively short-lived and have less mobilizing power than their negative counterparts, because, since one's survival is not at stake, there is no urgent need to act (Frijda, 1988).

Negative Ads and Political Discussion

Although research has primarily focused on the role of negative ads in voter information processing and decision making, the functional theory of emotion suggests that emotional responses elicited by negative ads impact communication behavior. As outlined above, negative commercials are expected to generate a sense of threat, which, in turn, elicits negative emotions such as fear and anxiety. Then, the emotions, as an action state, guide subsequent actions to maintain individual goals and values. Such actions might include not only the active processing of external stimuli (i.e., negative ads) but the seeking of information related to the stimuli or discussing the stimuli with others. That is, it is likely that when people feel a sense of threat and become anxious when exposed to negative campaign messages, they become vigilant in monitoring their environment and attempt to acquire relevant information beyond what they have learned from the negative message (Marcus et al., 2000). This is because when one's political identity or value is attacked, the immediate response is a desire for self-protection and security, which translates first into surveillance and accuracy motivations and then into increased communication with others. Through the communicative actions, individuals are expected to explore how others assess the criticisms in negative messages and how they react to them, all of which is relevant to helping them maintain their psychological equilibrium and deal with the environmental changes.

Inoculation studies are suggestive of this possibility. The theory of inoculation posits that inoculation treatment triggers a sense of threat. This threat perception then motivates people to actively argue, in their own minds, against the position advocated in the treatment. As a consequence, people acquire resistance to subsequent persuasive messages (see McGuire, 1964; Pfau et al., 2003). Compton and Pfau (2009) argue that the counterarguing takes place not only within one's own cognitive realm but also in interpersonal discussion, especially within one's close communication networks. Testing this possibility more formally, the experiment by Ivanov and his colleagues (2012) finds that participants receiving inoculation treatments exhibit a higher level of negative emotions than those in the control group, which in turn spurs postinoculation conversation about the issue in the treatments. Thus, if attack ads provoke threat perception in voters' minds, voters will likely engage in counterarguing, which would likely be not only cognitive but also behavioral, communicative processes.

Consistent with expectations from the functional theory of emotion and inoculation research, recent research suggests that exposure to attack ads spurs political conversation. In the context of the 2000 presidential campaign, attack ads were found to motivate voters to engage in both interpersonal discussion and intrapersonal reflection (Cho et al., 2009). Likewise, recent work by Cho (2013) that analyzed a national survey merged with ad tracking data for the 2000 campaign found that exposure to attack ads triggered political conversation with like-minded others. Other available evidence also points to the potential for attack advertising to encourage political discussion. Exposure to negative advertising was found to provoke psychological involvement in the campaign (Faber, Tims, & Schmitt, 1993; Pinkleton, 1998). Temporary or situational campaign interest, once triggered by negative advertising, likely activates surveillance motivation and fosters political discussion (Chaffee & McLeod, 1973). Research on affective intelligence (Marcus, 2002; Marcus et al., 2000) also lends support to this view. This research demonstrates that emotional states, particularly political anxiety, lead people to tune in to politics and to seek more accurate information about political developments. More specifically, they turned to news media for campaign information and increased their attention to the news content.

Hypotheses

In sum, heightened criticisms characterizing attack ads trigger a sense of threat to one's political identity and values, which, in turn, elicits negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, fear). These negative emotional states are expected to lead voters to engage in interpersonal political discussion within their communication networks. In this view, interpersonal conversation is considered part of voters' efforts to resolve their negative emotional states. Through conversation, voters are expected to exchange information relevant to the perceived threat and share their opinions and feelings with their routine communication partners. The reasoning outlined above leads to the following hypothesis of emotion-mediated negativity effect:

H1: As the number of attack ads increases, voters will have stronger negative emotions toward the candidate they oppose; these negative emotions will then be positively related to voter political discussion.

However, this is not to suggest that positive ads have no such effects. Advocating an idea or a candidate in positive advertising would, likewise, be a threat to voters and elicit negative emotions if they opposed the idea or candidate advocated. However, direct attacks negating one's political identity or preference provoke stronger negative emotions than the advocacy of opposite political values. Accordingly, this study offers the following hypothesis:

H2: The negative emotion-mediated ad effects will be more pronounced for attack ads than for positive ads.

The discussion up to this point has explicated negative emotions elicited by political advertising as a mechanism that underlies advertising's effect on citizen communication. There might, however, be other mechanisms responsible for the advertising effects. Learning induced by political advertising, for example, would serve as a factor mediating advertising's effect on citizen communication. As Chaffee

(1982) points out, voters try to find out more when they learn something from political advertising. That is, immediate learning from ad exposure prompts information seeking and information sharing within a person's communication networks. In addition, political advertising as a mobilizing agent stimulates a sense of partisan attachment that is likely to turn into campaign attention and engagement involving such voter-to-voter interactions as political discussion (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Although advertising messages in general, whether positive advocacy or negative criticism, encourage voter learning and partisan mobilization, the superiority of negative ads over advocacy ads in arousal, recognition, and recall implies that negative advertising will more strongly encourage learning and stimulate partisan attachment than positive advertising. In sum, given the supremacy of attack advertising in stimulating voter psychology (i.e., emotions, learning, partisan motivation), it is expected that overall attack advertising is a stronger force than positive advertising in activating voter discussion about the campaign. To examine this expectation, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: The number of attack ads will be a stronger positive predictor of political discussion than will the number of positive ads.

Method

Data Merge

This study takes advantage of two national data sets: (1) the Wisconsin Advertising Project's collection of 2004 campaign advertising, and (2) the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES). To test the hypotheses, a record of the number and location of attack and positive ad airings during the 2004 campaign is merged with survey data that measure the patterns of individual communication behavior during the same campaign.

Ad tracking data. The Wisconsin Advertising Project at the University of Wisconsin obtained and coded data originally collected by the Campaign Media Analysis Group, which tracked the airing of every political ad in each of the nation's top 100 markets during the 2004 election season. Using a satellite tracking system, the Campaign Media Analysis Group's software automatically tagged each ad broadcast for where and when it aired (i.e., what local market and which date). Then the data were coded by the Wisconsin Advertising Project for relevant content features, including the tone of the ad, the sponsoring party, and the office the candidates were contesting. Of particular importance for the purposes of this study, each ad was categorized as being positive (i.e., only favorable statements about the sponsoring candidate with an absence of criticism of the opponent), negative (i.e., only critical commentary about the opponent with no positive statements about the sponsor apart from sponsorship acknowledgement), or contrasting (i.e., favorable statements about the sponsor coupled with criticism of the opponent). Although Goldstein and Freedman (2002) point out that contrast ads and purely negative ads are similar in many cases, this study uses only positive and negative ads to be consistent with the conceptual discussions of positive advocacy and negative attack.

Although the ad collection includes ads for the presidency, House and Senate races, state and local offices including governorships, and numerous ballot propositions, this study focuses only on ads

from the presidential campaign sponsored by the candidates, political parties, or interest groups. This is because the survey with which the ad tracking data are merged only measured voters' negative emotions for presidential candidates. It is less likely that voters would feel negative emotions toward presidential candidates in response to ads for congressional campaigns, gubernatorial campaigns, or ballot propositions. Nonetheless, attack ads and positive ads from all other races were also counted and included in the analyses as controls.

Overall, the 2004 presidential campaign produced more than 645 different political ads that aired over 800,000 times in the country's top 100 markets during the entire election year, including the primary season. Of these, this study counted and merged the positive and negative ads from both the Democratic and Republican sides that were aired during the six-week period from September 5 to October 23, 2004.

National survey data. The selected advertising data are combined with daily survey data collected by the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) at the University of Pennsylvania. Throughout the 2004 campaign, NAES conducted daily telephone interviews with a nationwide probability sample, using a rolling cross-sectional survey technique (see Romer, Kenski, Winneg, Adasiewicz, & Jamieson, 2006, for details about the sampling and interview procedures). For the purpose of this study, surveys conducted during the last six weeks of the campaign (September 19 through October 30, 2004) are used. This was done to ensure that the political ads occurred prior to the voter conversations in the merged data set. More specifically, the respondents' survey responses were merged with the number of spots aired in each respondent's media market for the two weeks prior to the interview week.

With about 300 interviews each day, a total of 14,398 interviews were completed during the six weeks before Election Day. During the data merge, survey responses outside the 100 media markets were excluded. In addition, some of the key variables (e.g., negative emotions) were only measured for respondents randomly assigned to particular question modules in the interview process. Thus, this study uses data from question modules 1 and 2, both of which provide measures of all variables employed in testing the hypotheses. Among the subsample ($N = 8,036$) in the selected question modules, the analyses of this study is confined to a total of 6,965 respondents who intended to vote in the 2004 presidential election. Regardless of their party identification, a total of 86.7% of respondents in the selected sample revealed their commitment to the current election. The reason for using this group of respondents is that constructing the measure of voters' negative emotions about the candidates they opposed requires identifying respondents with the intention of voting and measuring, apart from their partisanship, their current candidate preference.

Measures

From the merged data set, four groups of variables were created: (a) the criterion variables—the frequency of political conversation, (b) the independent variables—the total numbers of attack and positive advertisements aired in each respondent's media market two weeks prior to the week of interview, (c) the mediating process variable—emotional responses toward presidential candidates, and (d) the control variables. Descriptive statistics of all variables are reported in Appendix.

Political discussion. Citizens' everyday conversational activities within their social networks were considered dependent variables. Two forms of political discussion—one for talk with family or friends, the other for talk with people at work—were measured. Respondents were asked how many days in the past week they had discussed politics with their family, friends, or people at work. These responses were recorded on an eight-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 7 (*every day*). The two items of political talk (i.e., family/friends and people at work) were treated separately, because the reliability estimate was not satisfactory (Chronbach's $\alpha = .56$), a fact that might point to multidimensionality in political conversation. Research suggests that political conversation with family and close friends is often more homogeneous than other forms of social interaction (Beck, 1991; Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995). With the degree of homophily as a distinguishing point, this study included the two forms of political conversation as separate variables in the model. The average respondent reported about four days of political talk with family or friends and about two days of political talk at work in the week prior to the interview.

Political advertising. The volumes of negative and positive ads are the independent variables. The volume of campaign ads was determined for each respondent based on her geographical location and the date of the interview. Both attack ads and positive ads aired two weeks prior to the week of the interview were counted for each of the 100 media markets and used as independent variables to predict respondents' political discussion. The temporal dynamics of political advertising imply that campaign ad effects can be cumulative. In a natural setting, if political ads have any impact, individuals' behavior at any given time is likely to be the outcome of the ad airings up to that point. At the same time, it is unlikely that these cumulative effects are indefinite, because ads will surely lose their impact at some point after they air (Hill, Lo, Vavreck, & Zaller, 2008). The cumulative cycle might be long or short, depending on the nature of the outcome variables. Given that individuals' political conversation is a routine part of their lives, ads aired long ago might have lost their influence. Thus, this study sets a two-week time period as a reasonable, albeit imperfect, time frame to capture the cumulative nature of campaign ad effects. Then the raw measures of negative and positive ads are natural log-transformed to ease the normal distribution assumption and to address the issue of nonlinearity; that is, an increase of ad airings from 1 to 500 is expected to generate stronger effects than is an increase from 3,001 to 3,500.

Political affect. Negative emotions were measured for the candidate each respondent opposed. First, two survey questions were employed to assess respondents' emotions about each of the two candidates, George W. Bush and John Kerry. Respondents were asked whether—and, if yes, how much—each candidate makes them feel uneasy/afraid. The responses were reported on a five-point scale with 1 (*yes, very*), 2 (*somewhat*), 3 (*a little*), 4 (*not very*), and 5 (*does not make me uneasy/afraid*). The responses were reverse-coded and averaged to create an index of negative emotions for each candidate (Chronbach's $\alpha = .84$ for Bush; Chronbach's $\alpha = .79$ for Kerry). These negative emotion scores for the two candidates were then recoded to create the variable of negative emotion for the opposed candidate depending on the respondent's answer to the survey question, "Who would you vote for if the 2004 presidential election were being held today?" For example, if a respondent would vote for Bush, his negative emotion score for Kerry would be counted as a negative emotion score for the opposed candidate.

Control variables. This study considered a set of control variables. First, two variables that capture the local campaign contexts were considered as controls. Presidential campaign competitiveness at the local level was measured as the difference in vote share between Bush and Kerry in each of counties included in the survey data. Then the total number of attack ads and positive ads from all other campaigns were counted for each of the 100 media markets. By including these two measures, this study considers the local political environments (i.e., the campaign intensity of the presidential race and the overall campaign complexity shaped by multiple races) that might influence the candidates' advertising decisions and residents' political discussion.

Second, television news use was included as an important control in the assessment of ad effects on political discussion. The reason for this is twofold. First, given that much of political advertising is aired on news programs (Freedman, Franz, & Goldstein, 2004) and news often triggers political conversation (Cho et al., 2009; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005), news consumption, if not properly considered, might cause endogeneity in the relationship between ad exposure and political discussion. That is, frequent news consumers, as compared to infrequent users, have a higher chance of encountering spots, and they tend to have more political conversation. Thus, if exposure to advertising leads to political discussion, it could be because political discussion is elicited not by advertising but by the shows they are watching when the ads air. This is less of a concern in this study, however, because the contextual measure of ads (i.e., ad counts at the market level) is not necessarily a function of news consumption. Nonetheless, the potential for endogeneity exists unless news use is properly considered.

In addition, as past research (Cho, 2008, 2011) suggests, the market-level ad volume likely encourages news consumption, which, in turn, stimulates political discussion. The link of ads–news use–political talk has been tested at the individual level as well (Cho et al., 2009; Shah et al., 2007). The potential of news use to function as a mediator raises the concern that the omission of news use in the analysis will lead to an estimate of ad effect reflecting both the indirect (via news use) and direct effects of advertising. Because this study's theoretical discussion focuses only on direct effects of advertising on political discussion, news use should be included in the analysis to accurately assess the hypothesized ad effects. Based on this reasoning, all the analyses in the present study controlled for television news watching (national and local news). Two forms of television news use—one for national news, the other for local news—were measured by asking respondents how many days in the past week they had watched the national network news and local news, respectively. The responses were recorded on an eight-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 7 (*every day*).

Third, general political interest and strength of party identification were measured as controls. Political interest was gauged by the degree to which people routinely followed what was happening in government and public affairs. Their responses were recorded using a four-point scale, from 1 (*hardly at all*) to 4 (*most of the time*). When compared with the specific interest in the current campaign, this measure represents a deep-seated general political disposition. The strength of party identification was calculated from the traditional seven-point party identification scale that ranges from 1 (*strong Democrat*) to 7 (*strong Republican*). The party identification scale was folded and rescaled to run from 1 (*independent*) through 4 (*strong party identifier*). As a snapshot, the typical respondent was somewhat interested in general politics and was a moderate party identifier.

Last, demographics (i.e., age, sex, income, education, and race) were also considered as control variables.

Results

Political Advertising, Emotions, and Political Discussion

Structural equation modeling techniques were employed to test the mediating role of negative emotions in the relationship between political advertising and citizen political discussion (Hypotheses 1 and 2). To examine the effects of advertising tone, the measures of negative ads and positive ads were entered into a path model at the same time as the exogenous independent variables. Two types of political discussion—talk with family/friends and talk at work—were the criterion variables in the model, and negative emotions toward the opposing candidate was set to be an endogenous mediating variable. The above-mentioned control variables were entered to partial out their effects on all of the endogenous factors (i.e., negative emotions and two types of political discussion).

After fitting this initial path model to the data, the model was trimmed to identify the most parsimonious and best-fitting model, from which the reported fit indexes were calculated. The trimming of the model was guided by the theoretical concern of this article and an initial assessment of paths in the model. First, paths constituting the theorized indirect ad effects were kept in the final model regardless of whether they were statistically significant. Then other paths not driven by our theoretical discussion (i.e., effects of control variables, paths estimated in the φ - and ψ -matrices) were excluded from the final model if they were not statistically significant at a p value of less than .05. When compared to the results from the initial model, the model trimming resulted in a much improved model fit but did not lead to substantial changes in the estimates of coefficients for the remaining paths. Results reported in the following section are all from the final trimmed models. LISREL 8.51 (Jöreskog, 1993) was used to perform the analyses.

The path analysis as shown in Figure 1 suggests that attack ads are positively associated with negative emotions about the opposing candidate ($\gamma = .03$, $SE = .01$, $p < .05$), while advocacy ads have a negative relationship with the emotions ($\gamma = -.04$, $SE = .02$, $p < .05$). As the number of attack ads aired in a media market increases, individuals in that market tend to feel stronger negative feelings toward the candidate they oppose. In contrast, positive ads reduce voters' negative emotional responses. The negative emotions toward the opposed candidate were found to be a significant and positive factor predicting political conversation. As voters' negative emotions toward the opposing candidate increase, they engage in political conversation more frequently both with family/friends ($\beta = .30$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$) and at work ($\beta = .16$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$).

The path estimates between campaign ads and negative emotions and between negative emotions and political conversation suggest significant indirect effects of both attack and advocacy ads on political conversation via negative emotions. This study relies on the LISREL estimates of indirect effects to examine the negative emotion-mediated ad effects hypotheses. Given that only one mediating factor is specified in the path model, there is no need to conduct separate tests for specific indirect effects.

The test of indirect effects reveals that attack ads exert positive indirect effects on both types of voter political conversation: talk with family/friends (.01, $t = 2.35$, $p < .05$) and talk at work (.01, $t = 2.29$, $p < .05$). In contrast, results indicated inverse indirect effects of positive ads on political conversation, mediated through negative emotions (-.01, $t = -2.12$, $p < .05$ for talk with family/friends; -.01, $t = -2.07$, $p < .05$ for talk at work).

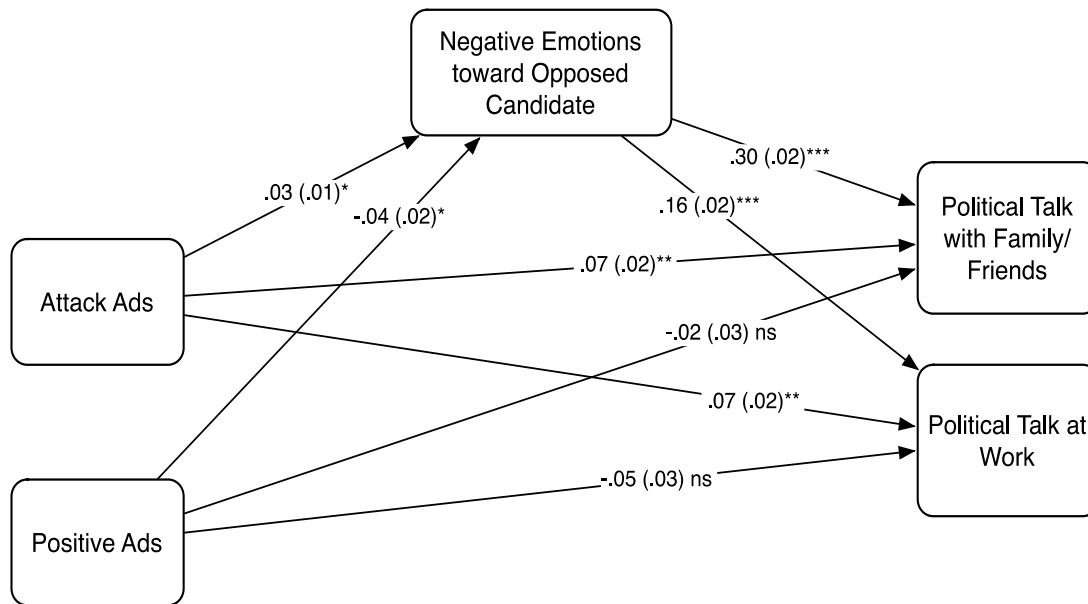


Figure 1. Indirect effects of attack ads and positive ads on political discussion.

Notes. Goodness of fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 16.38$ ($df = 78$, $N = 6,139$, $p = 1.00$); root mean square error of approximation = .00 (90% confidence interval = .00-.00); standardized root mean square residual = .004; comparative fit index = 1.00; non-normed fit index = 1.00. Entries are unstandardized path coefficients and standard errors. Control variables (attack and positive ads from other campaigns, presidential campaign competitiveness, partisanship strength, political interest, national and local news exposure, and demographics) are included in gamma matrix to explain endogenous variables (emotion and talk) simultaneously with attack ads and positive ads.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

This finding does not suggest that campaign ads exert no direct effects on political discussion. In fact, the opposite appears to be true. As shown in Figure 1, an increase in the number of attack ads is directly associated with an increase in the frequency of political conversation ($\gamma = .07$, $SE = .02$, $p < .01$ for talk with family/friends; $\gamma = .07$, $SE = .02$, $p < .01$ for talk at work), even after positive ads, negative emotions, and control variables are considered. In contrast, no significant direct effects were found for positive advertising.

Overall, the findings support Hypothesis 1: Among voters, attack advertising elicits negative emotions toward the opposing candidate, which in turn leads them to engage in political discussion in their social networks. Although significant direct effects of attack advertising on political discussion still exist, this mediation process was found to be significant. In contrast, indirect effects of positive advertising on political conversation were significant but in a negative direction, and no direct effects, positive or negative, were found. These findings suggest that positive ads discourage voter conversation at least indirectly by lessening negative emotions voters feel toward candidates they oppose, lending support to Hypothesis 2.

Attack Versus Advocacy in Promoting Voter Discussion

To test Hypothesis 3, the analyses compared how much political discussion negative and positive advertising elicited. First, an ordinary least squares regression equation was estimated to predict political discussion with attack ads, positive ads, and the same set of control variables employed in the earlier analyses, as follows:

$$\text{Discussion} = b_0 + b_1 \text{Attack ads} + b_2 \text{Positive Ads} + \sum b_k \text{Control}_k + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

The results suggest that attack advertising activates political conversation (see Table 1). The number of attack ads was positively related to both types of political discussion ($b = .075$, $SE = .025$, $p < .01$ for talk with family/friends; $b = .071$, $SE = .024$, $p < .01$ for talk at work). In contrast, positive advertising was not found to encourage political conversation. The number of positive ads was related to neither of the two types of political discussion. These relationships were observed above and beyond all the control variables considered. In sum, the results suggest that attack advertising is a stronger force in fostering political conversation among voters than is positive advertising.

Although there is a difference in the partial regression coefficients from equation 1, it is still necessary to test whether the effects of advertising differ by campaign tone. To formally test the difference in the partial regression coefficients for attack ads and positive ads, this study conducted an incremental F test. In this test, an equality constraint was imposed in regression equation 1 by forcing the estimated effects of attack ads and positive ads to be equal. As noted in equation 2, this constrained model regressed political discussion on a new variable that is equal to the sum of the attack ads and the positive ads and the same set of control variables.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Discussion} &= b_0 + b_1 \text{Attack ads} + b_1 \text{Positive Ads} + \sum b_k \text{Control}_k + \varepsilon \\ &= b_0 + b_1 (\text{Attack ads} + \text{Positive Ads}) + \sum b_k \text{Control}_k + \varepsilon \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

An incremental F value was calculated using the sum of squared errors ($SSEs$) of the unconstrained (equation 1) and the constrained (equation 2) models, as follows: $F_{1, N - K - 1} = [(SSE_c - SSE_u) \times (N - K - 1)] / SSE_u$. The test was conducted twice, once for each of the types of political discussion. The results demonstrate that the coefficients for attack ads and positive ads are statistically different in the regression models predicting both types of political discussion ($F_{1, 6152} = 3.72$, $p = .054$ for talk with family/friends; $F_{1, 6160} = 5.93$, $p = .015$ for talk at work). The regression analysis results coupled

with the incremental *F* tests suggest that attack ads promote more political discussion than positive ads, a fact that lends support for Hypothesis 3.

Discussion

Research has suggested that campaign advertising in general encourages voters to engage in political conversation (Cho, 2008, 2011). Furthering the overall effects of political ads on communication, this study aims to investigate whether such effects differ by the tone of the campaign ads. Empirical tests reveal that negative ads do indeed bear stronger relationships to political discussion. More specifically, it was found that attack advertising led voters to feel negative emotions about candidates, especially candidates they oppose. In turn, these negative emotions fostered voter political conversation. However, such positive indirect effects of campaign advertising via negative emotions were not observed for positive advertising. Although positive advocacy might come as a threat to those who oppose the messages in the ad, positive advertising did not provoke negative emotions in voters. Indeed, positive advertising was found to reduce such negative affective responses toward candidates.

Beyond the indirect effects via negative emotions, the data also reveal that negative attacks outperformed positive advocacy overall when it came to promoting political discussion. Indeed, attack advertising encouraged political discussion with friends and family and at work, while positive advertising bore no relationship to political discussion. Taken together, the data suggest that campaign ad effects on political conversation depend on the tone of the advertising messages. It is attack advertising, not positive advertising, that promotes political discussion among voters, and negative emotions voters feel about candidates explain, at least in part, how the attack ad effects take place.

Overall, this study's findings are consistent with previous studies, suggesting that negative ads stimulate campaign engagement, foster learning about the campaign, and promote voter turnout (Cho, 2013; Cho et al., 2009; Faber et al., 1993; Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Martin, 2004). The current study extends the idea of the positive role of negative advertising in campaign processes by shifting the context of ad effects from psychological campaign involvement, learning, or turnout to political conversation. Negative advertising was found to facilitate individual political communication through which ordinary citizens interact and become attuned to the race and politics in general. Thus, negative ads not only lead voters to engage in the campaign individually but motivate them to discuss the campaign with other voters, an action that may further mobilize voters. In sum, when coupled with previous research that demonstrates positive functions of negative advertising, the results of this study suggest that attack advertising should not simply be viewed as a strategic exchange of blows or political fracas among political elites that turns voters away from politics. Rather, contrary to the popular criticism that negative ads debilitate democracy, the results suggest that negative ads encourage citizen political communication, thus at least indirectly contributing to pro-democratic outcomes.

**Table 1. Testing Equality Constraints:
Effects of Attack Versus Positive Ads on Political Discussion.**

	Political talk with family/friends				Political talk at work			
	Unconstrained model		Constrained model		Unconstrained model		Constrained model	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Attack ads (Pres. campaign)	.075	.025**	—	—	.071	.024**	—	—
Positive ads (Pres. campaign)	-.025	.028	—	—	-.051	.027	—	—
Attack + Positive (Pres. campaign)	—	—	.029	.005***	—	—	.014	.005**
Competitiveness (Pres. campaign)	-.275	.171	-.273	.171	-.139	.165	-.137	.165
Attack ads (other campaigns)	-.009	.011	-.002	.011	-.004	.011	.005	.010
Positive ads (other campaigns)	.021	.013	.021	.013	.011	.012	.011	.012
Partisanship strength	.137	.028***	.137	.028***	.110	.027***	.110	.028***
Political interest	2.632	.110***	2.635	.110***	1.254	.107***	1.258	.107***
National news use	.226	.016***	.226	.016***	.080	.015***	.080	.015***
Local news use	.010	.011	.009	.011	.027	.011*	.026	.011*
Neg. emotions (Pres. candidates)	.292	.020***	.294	.020***	.160	.019***	.162	.019***
Sum of squared errors	29,094.27		29,111.91		27,263.82		27,290.15	
R ² (%)	25.8		25.7		15.1		15.1	
N	6,152				6,160			

Notes. Demographic variables were included in all models.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

By the same token, the finding that attack ads energize voter conversation does not necessarily promise the normative ideals of deliberative and participatory democracy. Research consistently suggests that people construct their everyday communication networks pursuant to their political predispositions by associating with people who have similar political views and preferences (Beck, 1991; Carey, 1989; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Mackuen, 1990). Thus, routine political conversation likely reinforces the political identity to which voters are already predisposed. Given the homogeneous nature of communication networks and the likely partisan bias in political conversation, negative campaigning-induced voter conversation might exacerbate the already intense political polarization in the United States. This is made even more plausible by the finding that negative emotions about the opposed candidate are an intervening mechanism that links attack ads to voter political conversation. If, as found in this study, political conversation is guided by negative feelings, inflamed by attack ads, about the opposing candidate, the resulting outcome is unlikely to confer the expected benefits (e.g., thoughtful reasoning, rational deliberation) of political conversation. To better understand the impact of negative campaigning on the political process, future research should formally examine the content of negative ad-stimulated voter conversation, which aspects of the campaign ads are discussed, and how the conversation impacts opinion formation and voters' attention to the race and politics.

One of the contributions of this study is to theorize and test a psychological mechanism that brings about the effects of attack campaigns. This is important because a simple demonstration of campaign effects does not help us understand the exact nature and implications of the effects. Indeed, as discussed earlier, the negative emotion-mediated ad effects hint that attack ads might further polarize voters. However, it is also acknowledged that only part of the effects of ad negativity on political conversation is mediated through voters' negative emotions. This suggests that other mechanisms may explain how ad negativity encourages voters to discuss politics. Although the current study clearly demonstrates that negative attacks overpower positive advocacy in promoting political conversation, the explanatory mechanisms behind the effects need further examination and explication.

To conclude, I acknowledge the limitations of this study and provide some suggestions for future research. The main limitation of the study is that political advertising was operationalized as a contextual factor (i.e., counts of ads in a local media market). Although this measurement accurately reflects the market-level variation in the opportunity for an individual to be exposed to campaign ads, it still does not capture actual ad exposure. That is, even in the same media market, some individuals encounter spots more than others, depending on their television viewing patterns. Thus, to more fully understand the role of political ads in citizen communication, future research should measure ad exposure at the individual level.

One approach for future research is the algorithmic method by Goldstein and his colleagues (e.g., Freedman et al., 2004; Ridout, Shah, Goldstein, & Franz, 2004). This approach estimates ad exposure at the individual level by multiplying the number of ads aired on specific programs by the extent to which individuals use the corresponding programs. To execute the ad exposure calculation, therefore, two types of data are required: (1) ad tracking data—the counts of spots of the two types (attack and advocacy) aired on particular programs in each media market and (2) survey data—individuals' viewership for the programs. The Wisconsin Ad Project provides the first set of data that was used in the present study. However, the National Annenberg Election Survey does not provide measures of individuals' use of specific programs during which political ads are frequently aired. According to Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein (2004), *Jeopardy!*, *Wheel of Fortune*, daytime talk shows, morning news programs, early evening news, and late evening news are the six program types that drew most of the presidential ads during the general election season. Yet the 2004 NAES provides measures of news use in only three forms (i.e., network, cable, and local news). Due to the lack of viewership measures for programs that carry the most spots, the present study operationalized political advertising by counting the number of ads in local media markets.

Second, it would be useful to further clarify the hypothesized impact of attack ads on political discussion by differentiating between political discussion elicited by ads attacking the candidate one opposes and by ads attacking the candidate one favors. Given that the context of ad effects is negative emotions toward the *opposing* candidate and political discussion, neither the attitude toward the ads nor the vote choice, it is less of a concern to combine the two types of attack ads in theorizing and testing the effects of attack advertising as hypothesized in this study. This distinction, however, allows us to understand the conditions under which attack advertising elicits discussion (i.e., when the favored candidate attacks, or when he/she is under attack, or both).

Nonetheless, the results of this study still add to our understanding of the role of campaign advertising in citizen communication. Abundant research in the literature examines the relationship between the volume of campaign ads at the media market or campaign level and political behavior (e.g., Ansolabehere et al., 1999; Cho, 2008, 2011; Finkel & Geer, 1998; Jackson, Mondak, & Huckfeldt, 2009; Johnston, Hagen, & Jamieson, 2004). The findings of the present study can be discussed within the broader literature using comparable campaign ad measures, broadening the horizon of ad effects (i.e., emotion, political discussion) and expanding the context of campaign (i.e., the 2004 election).

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Appendix: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Descriptive statistics			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
Female (%)	54.6			
White (%)	84.1			
Political talk with family/friends	3.60	2.53	0	7
Political talk at work	1.85	2.29	0	7
Negative emotions	3.41	1.45	1	5
Attack ads (presidential campaign)	2.78	3.16	0	8.02
Positive ads (presidential campaign)	2.21	2.71	0	6.65
Competitiveness (presidential campaign)	0.78	0.17	0.20	0.99
Attack ads (other campaigns)	2.32	2.94	0	8.16
Positive ads (other campaigns)	4.61	2.51	0	7.73
Age	48.25	16.13	18	96
Income	5.54	1.99	1	9
Education	5.54	2.25	1	9
National news use	2.81	2.07	0	7
Local news use	4.02	2.75	0	7
Party ID strength	3.04	0.99	1	4
Political interest	0.73	0.29	0	1

Note. Descriptive statistics for political ads are based on log-transformed scores.