

Audience frames elicited by televised political advertising

by

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ABSTRACT

This study used audience analysis to examine the audience frames elicited by political advertising. Eighteen participants between the ages of 25-60 were interviewed and asked questions about their individual responses to political advertising. Overall, this study found that five common frames were elicited: political cynicism frame, issue frame, third person frame, gender frame and ad frame. This study also examined audience frames elicited uniquely by positive and negative ads as well as the role that political advertising plays in the meaning-making process for voters. Overall, the study concluded that voters do not get much, if any use out of political advertising anymore and that political advertising must undergo some drastic changes if it wishes to remain a useful form of campaign communication in the future.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the last 30 years, the amount of political advertising in American society has grown by leaps and bounds. According to Robert McChesney (2000), big media conglomerates now dominate the media market and actual election coverage by local news stations is at an all time low. McChesney (2000) argued that political advertising by the candidates brings in more revenues to news stations, hence they do not cover election news as well or as often as a democratic system of government requires, which forces the candidates to pay for expensive political advertisements.

Regardless of the reason, it is easy to see that the amount of political advertising has increased. For example, in 1990 candidates spent more on political television advertising than on any other type of campaign communication (Ansolabehere & Gerber, 1993). In the 1996 presidential campaign, over 162,000 political spots were aired in local markets all around the country (Goldstein & Freedman, 2002). According to Devlin (2001), the combined spending on political advertising by both candidates in the 2000 election was around \$240 million dollars; not including any commercials produced by third party interest groups (Devlin, 2001, p. 2338). More shocking perhaps is the 235% increase in the 2004 presidential campaign, where the candidates spent a combined total of \$620 million (Devlin, 2005, p. 279). More recently, from the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama raised a record breaking \$750 million dollars over the course of his campaign, three times the amount that President Bush raised. President Bush had previously held the record (*Final fundraising tally for Obama exceeded \$750 million*, p. A05). While the overall numbers spent specifically on political advertising remain unclear, the Obama campaign had the money to

do what no other candidate has done recently. His campaign bought half hour infomercial spots on primetime television during the week before the campaign, showcasing a very large amount of money to spend on political advertising. These numbers and examples exemplify the dominance of political advertising as a dominant form of campaign communication.

A large amount of literature already exists concerning political advertising and its impact on voter attitude and behavior. Some common topics of study include affect (or attitude) toward the sponsor of an ad, voter turnout, affect (or attitude) toward the target, voter intention, memory for an ad, and affect (or attitude) toward the ad. While important, this offers a somewhat narrow range of possible responses to political advertising. While attitudes and behaviors are important, they are not the only types of responses that could be elicited by political advertising. People may, for example, get something out of a political advertisement that does not alter their previously held attitudes or behaviors.

A smaller amount of research also exists about cognitive effects, such as learning from political advertising. This research frames political ads as a legitimate and even critical campaign tool for voters. Patterson & McClure (1976) first raised the idea that political advertising might be a way for voters to gain accurate political knowledge. They found that political advertising has no significant impact on how the candidate's *image* is viewed, but that it plays a significant role in increasing voter knowledge of *issues*. In the 1972 election, voters exposed to heavy amounts of political advertising became more informed about the issues of the campaign. Brians & Wattenberg (1996) found that political advertisements contributed to accurate information about the issues within a campaign. However, there is still much discussion in this area as other authors (i.e., Zhao & Chaffee, 1995) contend that television news is still a viable player in the political arena and political advertising makes no

significant contribution to voter political knowledge. (Zhao & Chaffee, 1995). In light of these conflicting viewpoints, it is pertinent to ask: Exactly what do people get out of political advertising?

A useful way to look at this problem is by examining audience frames through the lens of framing theory. Framing, according to Entman (1993) is the process of selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient, or prevalent, in communicating a text (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In short, framing is the process of highlighting certain aspects of a situation over other aspects.

Framing occurs through the use of identifiable frames in communicated messages. According to Entman (1993), a general definition of frames are trains of thought that “define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies.” It is generally thought that frames exist in four different parts of the communication process: the communicator (sender), the text (message), the receiver (audience) and the culture (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Large amounts of research exist on communicator frames and textual frames (see Entman, 2001; de Vreese, 2004; Dimitrova & Strömback, 2005), however there is significantly less research on the subject of receiver or audience frames.

Audience frames perform the same role as media frames, but they exist in the audience instead of coming from a communicator. Audience frames, just like media frames, define what the problem is, diagnose what the cause of that problem might be, make judgments about the problem, and suggest how the problem may be fixed (Entman, 1993). However, very little is known about how audience frames function, as there has been little research on the subject.

The analysis presented here will examine the different audience frames that are elicited by negative and positive political advertisements. This study will provide a qualitative look at how people make meaning from political advertising. Audience analysis will be used to address this topic, because most previous studies that examine audience frames use survey research. In essence, participants' responses are pigeonholed into a predetermined set of possible frames. Often, researchers define these frames based on common "cultural frames", which are a "stock of commonly invoked frames" (Entman, 1993). In this study, a qualitative approach will allow for a broader range of responses by participants, and a possibility that new frames which do not fit in with the generally accepted "cultural frames" will come to light.

This study has implications for many different groups. First of all, this study contributes to the current literature that exists on political advertising by using a more audience-oriented approach, audience analysis, to study the interpretations of political advertising messages. This study will add to the body of knowledge by expanding the possible types of research that can be conducted in political advertising. It also has the potential to discover new "effects" of political advertising as articulated by the receiver instead of the sender. This allows for a broader interpretation of how people (a) construct meaning from political advertising and (b) how effects-driven research can be studied. There is the potential to uncover "effects" that are not specifically behavior or attitude driven. Secondly, this study also contributes to the current body of literature that exists about framing, by taking a more qualitative approach to audience frames. There is not much research on audience frames, and indeed none on audience frames elicited by political advertising. Hence, this study will act as a pilot study, to help guide future research in this

area of framing. It also has the potential to uncover new audience frames that are (a) unique to political advertising or (b) hard to reach via quantitative research.

There are significant implications for political campaigners as well. It is generally accepted that political advertisements are framed to make viewers react to or think about them in a certain way. However, since not much is known about audience frames, this study will reveal audience frames elicited by different types of political advertising. Therefore, political campaigners will be better able to determine how they should frame a political advertisement, based on the types of audience frames that they wish to elicit. This is significant because it could increase the effectiveness of political advertising, which is an important campaign tool for political advertisers.

This study will also be beneficial to media practitioners. While the study was limited in focus simply to political advertising, media practitioners could extend the results to political news reports as well. If indeed media practitioners are trying to frame certain news stories in certain ways, then knowing what audience frames are elicited regarding political topics and issues can help them choose how they wish to frame their political news stories. In conclusion, this study will benefit mostly professionals who use advertising or media frames, as well as scholars studying the fields of political communication and framing.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most research in the field of political advertising has been aimed at understanding, explaining and predicting the effects that political advertising has on audiences. There are three general types of effects research that dominate the field: research on cognitive effects, research on attitudinal effects and research on behavioral effects.

The research about cognitive effects has been largely focused on learning from political advertising. Under the category of attitudinal effects research, scholars have examined the effects of advertising concerning affect toward the ad sponsor, affect toward the ad target (if negative), and affect toward the advertisement itself. The two main topics studied by those who conduct behavioral effects research are voting intention and voter turnout. A brief summary of the main findings from each category is presented below.

Cognitive Effects

There is a small body of literature that investigates political advertising as a learning tool for voters. Patterson & McClure (1976) first raised the idea that political advertising might be a way for voters to gain accurate political knowledge. They found that political advertising has no significant impact on how the candidate's *image* is viewed, but that it plays a significant role in increasing voter knowledge of *issues*. In the 1972 election, voters exposed to heavy amounts of political advertising became more informed about the campaign issues (Patterson & McClure, 1976). Briens & Wattenberg (1996) found that political advertisements contributed to accurate information about the issues within a campaign.

McChesney (2000) and Patterson & McClure (1976) raised some alarm when they found support for the hypothesis that political knowledge no longer results from exposure to television coverage of political campaigns. This may be an offshoot of the declining political coverage of news stations that went in tandem with the priorities of big media conglomerates (McChesney, 2000). As candidates are forced to buy advertising, television is becoming more and more a medium that shows political ads rather than discusses political issues with substance (McChesney, 2000). Indeed, Patterson & McClure (1976) found that watching network news did nothing to increase their subjects' knowledge of candidate stances on issues. A main reason for this is that news networks simply do not mention candidate issues more than once or twice (McChesney, 2000). Brians & Wattenberg (1996) also reported similar findings, reporting that a weak association existed between watching television news and political knowledge.

Attitudinal Effects

Some studies have shown that negative advertising has the intended attitudinal effect: to raise opinions of the sponsor of the ad and to lower opinions of the target of attack (Kaid, 1997; Kaid & Boydston, 1987). However, others have observed a strong negative effect, called the boomerang effect, against the sponsor of negative advertising (Garramone, 1988; Haddock & Zanna, 1997; Geske & Dimitrova, 2006). The boomerang effect occurs when “the source of the attack is evaluated more negatively as a consequence of the advertisement” (Haddock & Zanna, 1997). Negative political advertising can also produce two other possible effects: the victim syndrome effect and the double impairment effect. The victim syndrome effect occurs when the targets of negative advertising are evaluated more positively after the advertisement. The double impairment effect occurs when both the

sponsor of the ad and the target of the ad are evaluated more negatively after the advertisement (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991).

Another aspect of attitudinal effects that has been studied is that of political cynicism. Cappella & Jamieson (1996) documented this cynicism with the political process, linking distrust of the political system to a distrust of the media.

Another important aspect to consider when discussing attitudinal effects is party affiliation. This variable has been shown to mitigate the attitude change desired by political advertising. Garramone & Smith (1988) found that the more a viewer identifies with the political affiliation of the advertisement sponsor, the more likely they are to view an advertisement as trustworthy. Geske & Dimitrova (2006) found that strong party affiliation led to little emotional effect by negative political advertising. Obviously party affiliation can be a potential confounding variable, and must be taken into account when considering audience responses.

Behavioral Effects

There is also a body of research that focuses on behavioral effects of political advertising, again with a strong focus on negative political advertising. Many of these studies examine voting intention and turnout as dependent variables and how different types of political advertising can effect intention and turnout.

The research results in this area have been mixed as well. For example, Ansolabehere et al. (1994) found evidence to support their claim that attack (or negative) political advertising actually demobilizes the electorate, although the reason for this remains uncertain (see also Kaid et al., 1992). They posited three possible explanations for this demobilization:

a “plague on both your houses” effect, partisan demobilization, and general cynicism (p. 835). However, their conclusion was that as campaigns become more negative and cynical, so does the electorate. (p. 835). Voters believe that the political process has become corrupt which discourages them from voting.

Some studies indicate, however, that negative political advertising in fact mobilizes the electorate (Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Kaid, 1997). This is the case, some explain, because negative advertising signals to voters that something important is at stake in the election, and therefore they should feel more compelled to vote. Some scholars have also suggested that negative advertising can raise awareness of and interest in the election, following the adage that negative information is better than no information (e.g. Freedman & Goldstein, 1999).

If audiences are now getting important campaign information from political advertisements rather than from traditional news programs, it is important to determine if audiences interpret advertisements the way that advertisement sponsors want them interpreted. This phenomenon is best understood and explained through framing theory.

Framing

Framing theory has roots in the disciplines of cognitive psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics, linguistics, social-movements research, policy research, communication science, political communication, public relations research, and health communication (Van Gorp, 2007). Of particular interest to this thesis are the contributions of cognitive psychology and political communication to this theoretical formulation.

The roots of modern day framing theory were originally posited by cognitive psychologist Bartlett (1932), whose work was largely focused on how “remembering” occurs, both in individuals and groups. He concluded that “the temperament and character by which individual remembering is effected involves a large group of coordinated and organised ‘schemata’” (p. 310). He also noted that “the image, with its sensorial character, is apt to go farther in the direction of the individualization of situations than is biologically useful” (p. 303). Even in 1932, Bartlett recognized that images were created with a particular intent and can convey meaning, which can be interpreted by audience members in many different ways.

Gitlin (2003), exploring the *Times* coverage of the Vietnam War, found that the stories were consistently framed to be in line with current government policy. He also further developed the idea of media frames, defining them as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (p. 7). He explains that journalists use frames to help them organize large amounts of information quickly and routinely.

Framing as a Mass Communication Theory

Entman (1993) was one of the first to define framing within the context of mass communication. According to him, to frame is to:

Select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem

definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (p. 52).

Entman (1993) locates frames in four parts of the communication process defined by Laswell (1948):

Who → Says what → Through what medium → To whom → With what effect?

According to Entman, frames have four different locations in this process: the communicator, the message, the receiver and the culture (p. 52). Communicators are those who produce mediated messages such as journalists, editors, producers, directors, authors, politicians and advertisers. These agents frame messages, consciously or unconsciously, and the frames they use are influenced by the culture within which they operate (Entman, 1993, p. 52, see also Van Gorp, 2007). Media frames are manifested through the use of certain keywords, stereotyped images, or stock phrases that reinforce a theme (p. 52). Receiver frames, or audience frames, are the cognitive organizing frameworks audience members hold, which may or may not reflect the frames in the media as intended by communicators. To Entman (1993), “culture is the stock of commonly invoked frames” (p. 53).

Van Gorp (2007) describes “frame packages” as being made up of three individual parts: the manifest framing device, the latent reasoning device, and the implicit cultural phenomena. The manifest framing devices include the words, metaphors, examples, and arguments that journalists use to create or imply a certain frame. The latent reasoning devices are just statements, whether explicit or implicit, that “deal with justifications, causes, and consequences” (p. 64). Implicit cultural phenomena are common frames rooted in culture that reoccur frequently. These include archetype frames, mythical figure frames,

value frames and narrative frames (p. 64). These types of frames all fall within the broader category of media frames.

Media Frames

A media frame is defined as “ a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events...The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). In the realm of political advertising, there can be very broad general frames, or there can be any number of smaller sub-frames within general frames. Within a frame, individuals, topics, objects or groups can be cast in a negative or positive light. This attribute of a frame is called orientation or valence. There also exists a common set of media frames themselves, among them being human interest, issue, and conflict framing.

The following studies on political advertising specifically examine the orientation or valence of political ads and how these valences can be determined. Freedman & Goldstein (1999) define positively-oriented political advertising as “mostly positive appeals by the sponsor” (p. 1193). Chang et al. (1998) argue that candidates use issue appeals in positive political advertising to establish their positive image (p. 2). In this study, a positively oriented political ad is one that focuses on the image or issue stances of a sponsoring candidate, with no mention, direct or indirect, of any opposing candidates (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991).

Researchers agree that there are two distinct types of “negative” political advertising: comparative advertising and purely negative or “attack” advertising (e.g. Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Hill, 1989). According to Freedman & Goldstein (1999), a comparative political ad is one that contains “a fairly even mix of positive appeals by the sponsor and

criticisms of his or her opponent” (p. 1193). According to Hill (1989) comparative ads identify the opponent in order to claim the superiority of the advertisement sponsor, while negative advertisements identify the opponent to show his/her inferiority (para. 7). In general, there is little agreement as to whether comparative ads should be considered “negative advertising”, as they may not be entirely negative. Purely negative advertising exists when there are predominantly negative messages toward the opponent, with only a brief mention of the sponsor (Freedman and Goldstein, 1999; Hill, 1989). For the purpose of this study, negatively oriented political advertising is defined as any political ad that focuses on the negative personal characteristics or political issues of an opponent, with only a token mention of the sponsor. This definition, therefore, excludes comparative advertising.

Audience Frames

Wicks (2001) defined audience framing as “the process of negotiating meanings as a result of interpreting new information in the context of previously stored knowledge”(p. 90). For Wicks, the most important aspect of framing is “ how people interpret media information through their own personal field of meaning” (p. 90). Shen & Edwards (2005) found similar results, showing that individual frames or values as they call them, interact with media frames, and shape how people respond to the media frames. A common set of cultural frames that guide people’s thinking comes from meanings that are shared within a culture.

Scheufele (1999) categorizes audience frames into two main categories: global long-term political views and short-term issue-related views. He submits that because global frames are so firmly entrenched, they have little influence on the perception of current political problems. However, audiences apply short-term frames to organize current information that is more salient and timely to contemporary political problems (p. 107).

Entman (1993) defined audience frames as “mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals’ processing of information” (p. 53).

While this study does not have any predetermined frames it expects to find, there are some common frames that are expected to emerge. The first is issue frame, which focuses on issue content and discussion. This study expects to see some mention of issues or lack thereof. Second is a political cynicism frame. Participants are expected to have some inherent distrust of political advertising and politics in general. Beyond these two anticipated frames, this study holds open expectations regarding the possible frames that will be found.

Individual Construction of Meaning

Meaning is a concept that is directly at the heart of communication, yet it rarely receives discussion. According to Hall (1997), we give things meanings in part by how we use them but also in part by how we represent them. This idea of meaning from representation is at the heart of this particular study. However, representation must first be defined and discussed.

Representation

According to Hall, “representation is the production of meaning through language” (Hall, 2001, p. 16). But what does this definition really encompass? Hall defined two processes, or “systems of representation” that can be used to explain how representation works. In essence, this short definition can be broken down into two parts: “production of meaning” and “meaning through language.” These are both important, yet fundamentally separate concepts, and each system of representation, as defined by Hall, speaks to one of these concepts.

There is a first system of representation where “all sorts of objects, people and events are correlated with a set of concepts or *mental representations* which we carry around in our heads” (Hall, 1997, p. 17). This system speaks to the first part of the definition of representation. That is, people produce meaning for all things in their head by correlating actual “things” with mental representations (Hall, 1997, p. 17). One example of this is a tree. The actual “thing” is the big thing in the ground that may or may not have leaves. The meaning in our head is what we associate with a tree, including the word tree. However, we might also associate the tree with ideas or concepts such as shade, leaves, majesty, or types of trees. In essence, the list is nearly endless, and the thing that we call a tree in reality produces many different “meanings” inside our heads.

The second system of representation is language, and speaks directly to the second part of the definition of representation. Language is the tool which allows us to share our meanings with other people. If we did not have common, organized signs (common languages), we would not be able to share our meanings (Hall, 1997, p. 17). However, because there are many meanings attached to any one sign, such as the word “tree” or a picture of a tree, the meaning that any one person chooses to understand by that sign is inherently related to their own production of meaning. That is, the ability to use language to transmit meaning is dependent not only on the sender’s production of meaning but also the receiver’s.

Stuart Hall, in a 1973 article, constructed a model by which representation is constructed and interpreted through the media. He viewed mediated communication as a three stage model, which looks something like this:

Sender → Message → Receiver

While this model looks like the typical direct effects model, it is in reality very different. In the first stage of this process, the sender or producer of a text encodes a specific meaning into some mediated communication. Producers in a media sense include reporters, editors, producers, and directors, just to name a few. There are many possibilities.

The second stage of this process is centered on the message or communication itself. One must recognize that the meaning of the producer has been encoded using language, or signs. However, signs have many different ways of being interpreted, based on our personal mental representations associated with any particular sign. Thus, any mediated communication will have multiple interpretations.

The final stage concentrates on the interpretation of the receiver. Hall suggested that people must decode the meaning from the signs which are transmitted to them. However, during this process, people bear in mind not only the communication they have received, but also their own personal “maps” or “schemas.” That is, receivers don’t always decode exactly what was encoded into a mediated communication.

Constructionism

This approach to understanding the interaction between sender, message and receiver is a common tenant of the theory of constructionism. When Hall’s idea of constructionism is combined with framing, his original model changes a bit to look like this:

Sender → *Framed* Message → Receiver

This is not so different from his original model; only the meaning that is inserted into the mediated message is now being explicitly referred to as a media frame. This is an important link to connect the constructionist approach with framing. According to Van Gorp (2007),

The constructionist approach highlights the interaction between the interpreting activities of the receivers and the power of the frame that is present in a number of elements in media content. (p. 73)

This blending of constructionism, representation and framing allows for audience interpretation of frames that are presented to them through the media. Van Gorp (2007) asserts that the “framing process is interactive, vulnerable and in all the phases prone to counterframes, because the audience actively interprets news messages” (p. 69). That is, audience members may recognize embedded frames, but instead of passively accepting these frames, they may actively add to them or change them based on their own individual frames, creating essentially “hybrid frames.” In essence, this study proposes to look at how people interact with different types of political advertising and what hybrid frames, or meanings they produce, which leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: How does the general valence of political advertisements (positive or negative frame) impact the audience frames developed?

RQ2: What audience frames are activated by viewing positive political advertisements?

RQ3: What audience frames are activated by viewing negative political advertisements?

RQ4: How do voters use televised political advertising?

RQ5: How do demographic factors (gender, political party, etc.) affect frames activated by political advertising?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

As the last chapter has shown, very little research has been done on audience frames. Most of these studies only infer audience frames based on an analysis of media discourse. Others have sought to elicit public opinion by analyzing responses to close-ended items asked of survey respondents. These types of inquiry and assumption do not lead to a full understanding of how people process information derived from political advertisements.

This thesis used audience analysis to thoroughly investigate the meaning constructed by audience members by analyzing the mental frames people use to interpret the messages conveyed in political advertisements. This study examined audience frames based on responses to open-ended interview questions and probes.

Qualitative Research

According to Taylor & Bogdan (1998), qualitative research is the driving method of the phenomenological theoretical perspective, as contrasted with the positivist theoretical perspective. Phenomenological theory seeks to understand “social phenomena from the actor’s own perspective” and seeks to examine “how the world is experienced” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 3). Berg (1989) stated that “qualitative techniques allow researchers to share in the understandings and perceptions of others and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives” (p. 7). In short, qualitative research is a more in-depth look at how people construct and interpret realities. In this thesis, qualitative research offers a deeper explanation of how participants experience political advertising.

Audience analysis was used in this study because audience frames, by their nature, are unique to each individual and may vary in complexity. This degree of complexity can be

hard to uncover through structured questionnaires. The ability to probe deeply into the minds of participants, as accorded by in-depth interviewing, enabled the gathering of richer and “thicker” data. This method allowed participants to explain exactly what an advertisement makes them think about or exactly how an advertisement makes them feel and also allows the investigator to probe further into topics of special interest. This level of participant interpretation and interaction is nearly impossible to reach through survey questions and allows for more in-depth answers.

Audience Analysis

Audience or reception analysis is a type of research inquiry that has only recently come into stronger popularity. According to Laura Edles (2002), audience analysis “focuses on how readers/viewers *interpret* texts (rather than the texts themselves)” (Edles, 2002, p. 74). Audience analysis thus concerns itself more with how a viewer creates meaning from a communication and not with the actual content of the communication. This study proposes to focus itself on meaning construction by the viewer, but also takes into account the actual content of the communication as well.

Edles continues saying “audience analysts argue that meanings shift and slide, not only between individuals and social groups, but according to different contexts and situations” (Edles, 2002, p. 74).

There are two very important ideas imbedded in this quote that one must keep in mind when conducting an audience analysis. The first is individuals vs. groups. This quote implies that meaning constructed by individuals may not be the same meaning they would construct in a group situation. Since this study is concerned with individual frames, and not group frames, participants will not be interviewed in groups.

The second implication is that meanings, even at an individual level, may change based on the context and situation that the participant finds themselves in. This could mean that interpretations of political advertising differ according to level of candidacy, political party, or time of election cycle. By conducting research based on stimuli featuring out-of-state senatorial candidates at an off-peak political advertising time, this study hoped to remove most of the preconceived ideas about a candidate, as would be found from presidential advertisements or senate advertisements run during an election year. Therefore, since the sample came from Iowa, this study picked political advertisements that did not run in Iowa, for candidates that should be relatively unknown to Iowans.

The Theoretical Sampling Technique

This study examined the open-ended discourse of a convenience sample, composed of residents in central Iowa. To arrive at the sample, theoretical sampling was employed.

According to Taylor & Bogdan (1998) :

In theoretical sampling, the actual number of cases studied is relatively unimportant. What is important is the potential of each case to aid the research in developing theoretical insights into the area of social life being studied. After completing interviews with several informants, you consciously vary the type of people interviewed until you have uncovered a broad range of perspectives held by the people in whom you are interested. You would have an idea that you had reached this point when interviews with additional people yield no genuinely new insights (p. 93).

This sampling technique is unique because it allows the researcher to continue until no new responses are given. Since this was an exploratory study, the researcher did not have any predetermined ideas of what participants would say. There are many different ways that

people may construct meaning from political advertising, and this particular sampling technique allowed the researcher to continue until no new meanings were given.

According to Neuman (1997), theoretical sampling also involves focusing “attention or interaction on different kinds of people” (p. 370). Neuman (1997) continued in this vein saying “as a research identifies types of people, or people with opposing outlooks, he or she tries to interact with and learn about all types” (p. 370). Therefore, an important aspect of the theoretical sampling technique is to purposely choose subjects from different groups of people, in the hopes of receiving more varied responses. This study chose participants based on two demographic characteristics that may influence responses to political advertising: gender and political affiliation. While there are obviously many other factors that can influence responses to political advertising, these two are the specific focus of this thesis . As such, the participants were chosen based on gender and political affiliation.

Overall, the theoretical sampling technique was best suited for this exploratory study. As this study did not wish to generalize results, but only to provide direction for further research, a random sample was not necessary. Also, this sampling technique ensured that participants were chosen from different groups of people with different outlooks, and thus the largest possible number of varied responses were accumulated. As such, this study did not have a pre-determined sample size. The number of cases was dependent on the variety of perspectives elicited in the responses. However, the researcher estimated that approximately twenty interviews would be needed to reach redundancy in the responses.

Participants

This study had eighteen participants in total. This included nine women and nine men as well as six democrats, six republicans and six independents. The following table shows the name¹, gender and political affiliation of each participant.

Table 1. Participants by political affiliation and gender.

	Democrat	Republican	Independent
Male	1. Ian 2. Walter 3. Kyle	1. Don 2. Martin 3. James	1. Todd 2. Mike 3. Derek
Female	1. Beth 2. Caitlin 3. Neva	1. Mary 2. Missy 3. Elise	1. Jill 2. Grace 3. Lydia

All participants were between the ages of 25 and 51. The mean age of all participants was 38.² This age range was chosen because it represents the group that votes more in all elections. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (2002), only 40 percent of voters age 18-24 made it to the polls while 70 percent of voters aged 25+ voted in the 2000 presidential election. Overall, their longitudinal study shows that adults in the 25+ age range consistently show up at the polls in greater percentages (CIRCLE, 2002). The range was capped at 60 because this study was aimed at working adults and 60 is the generally accepted age of retirement in the United States. All participants were also residents of Iowa. This somewhat homogenous group offers a very in-depth, focused look at one particular voting block.

¹ Participant names have been changed to assure confidentiality.

² For a more detailed description of participants, see Appendix B.

In-depth Interview Procedures

In-depth interviews will be used as the main method of inquiry in this study. Berg (1989) defines an interview as a “conversation with a purpose. Specifically, the purpose is to gather information” (p. 57). Taylor & Bogdan (1998) hold that interviews are “directed toward understanding informants’ perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words” (p. 7). They also noted that interviewing is better suited to studies where a clear research objective is already defined, as is the case in this study. In this instance, in-depth interviewing enables the researcher to better understand the meaning constructed by participants after viewing political advertisements because the interviewer may ask follow-up questions to better understand participant responses.

Also, as Berg (1989) noted, interviewing has the ability “to provide maximum opportunity for complete and accurate communication of ideas between the researcher and the respondent” (p. 63). Because this study did not have any predetermined audience frames that it expects to find, this type of inquiry strengthens the ability to uncover frames specific to political advertising that have been undiscovered by the use of more medium- generic frames of references (e.g. economic, political, military frame) often used to categorize content analysis and survey data.

For this study, a semi-standardized form of interviewing was conducted. Semi-standardized interviewing involves the use of a pre-determined list of questions that interviewers are expected to adhere to and receive answers to. However, there is freedom of structure in the interview, in that the interviewer is allowed and even encouraged to probe deeper into a specific topic, to ask relevant follow-up questions, or to invent new questions altogether, depending on the flow of the conversation (Berg, 1989, p. 61-62).

Participants were recruited via word of mouth. As some of these participants from different groups were difficult to find, participants found were asked to recommend other people who might be willing to participate. Those who were willing to participate were scheduled for interview times and location. During the interview, participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent document. They were told that they may discontinue the interview at any time, and that they were under no obligation to answer any questions that they felt uncomfortable responding to. During the interview, conversation between the interviewer and the participant was digitally recorded and later transcribed by the interviewer.

Four different advertisements were used as stimuli. These advertisements included a positive and negative advertisement each from two opposing candidates. Because party affiliation can play such a strong role concerning affect toward a candidate, this study used advertisements for candidates that are relatively unknown to most Iowans. As such, the advertisements were taken from Senate elections, instead of the highly politicized presidential elections. Each advertisement focused on a senatorial candidate running in the 2006 campaign for Senate in Missouri, with either a positive or negative valence regarding that senatorial candidate. These ads were chosen because the candidates represent something similar to candidates in Iowa, as Missouri and Iowa are both Midwest states. Furthermore, the candidates are unknown to most Iowans, which controls for the possibility of previous attitudes influencing responses. The candidates chosen were a male Republican incumbent, Jim Talent and a female Democratic contender, Claire McCaskill. The sponsorship of the ads was acknowledged, per current regulations regarding political advertising. These current

regulations require candidates to approve any messages which their campaign directly produces. The four advertisements used are described briefly below.

Advertisement 1

The first advertisement was sponsored by Jim Talent, the Republican incumbent in the Missouri Senate race. It is a positive advertisement and shows many pictures of many different people doing different jobs within a community. The main message of the ad is that Jim Talent doesn't care about party lines, but that he works for the people and cares about getting things done. At the top of the ad, bills that Talent has sponsored across party lines are listed. The final concluding thought is "Jim Talent. Works."

Advertisement 2

The second advertisement was also sponsored by Jim Talent but it is a negative ad attacking his Republican opponent Claire McCaskill. This ad accuses McCaskill of lying to the people when she ran for state auditor and won. According to the ad, she promised to audit nursing homes and revoke funds for those who were found guilty of elder abuse. The ad goes on to use statements by McCaskill herself to show that she has not done what she promised to do. This is a purely negative ad as no mention of Jim Talent is made, save the obligatory "I'm Jim Talent and I approve this message."

Advertisement 3

The third ad was sponsored by the Democratic contender from Missouri, Claire McCaskill. In this ad, McCaskill is sitting at a kitchen table and listing off the things she stands for such as: the death penalty, the troops in Iraq, traditional marriage, stem cell research and no amnesty for immigrants. This is a positive ad because she talks only about herself and makes no mention of her opponent at all.

Advertisement 4

The fourth advertisement was also from Claire McCaskill. This is a negative ad against Jim Talent. It opens on a farmer talking about how high gas prices are and how his farm won't be able to survive if gas prices continue to climb. This is followed by a voice-over saying that Jim Talent voted for \$14 billion in tax breaks for oil companies and voted against alternative energy. The ad ends with Claire McCaskill saying that she approves the message.

Each participant was shown all four political advertisements. After exposure to the advertisements participants were asked a series of questions designed to probe their reactions to and interpretations of (1) the political advertisement shown and (2) political advertising in general. A conversational tone was adopted to ease interviewee anxiety and to make participants feel more comfortable about the ensuing discussion.

Collecting and Analyzing Data

This study aimed to arrive at a more in-depth understanding of audience responses to political advertising. Participants were asked a series of questions dealing with both cognitive and affective responses to political advertising. What did they learn from the ad? How did they feel about the candidate being portrayed? Did they trust what they have just seen? Do they trust the source of the ad? These questions were designed to better understand what mental representations people have regarding political advertising.

Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis. Notes taken during the interviews were analyzed along with the transcripts. This is important because hesitations, body language, or participant reaction are not things that can be recorded digitally, but are still important to the analysis. A hesitation to answer a question can be

assumed to mean that the question requires some thought on behalf of the participant.

Transferring to a hostile body position could indicate that the participant is uncomfortable with a question they were asked. These non-verbal cues were recorded along with the verbal exchange. Commonly occurring ideas, themes, or frames were noted.

All transcripts were analyzed multiple times and small sub-frames were noted. These small categories were eventually combined and collapsed into the overarching five frames found in this study. The frames emerged from the literature and were combined only after all transcripts had been analyzed, to preserve the integrity of the study. The sub-components of the five frames are discussed further later on.

Strengthening the Inquiry

Morse et al. (2002) outlined four verification strategies that they recommend using to enhance the reliability and validity of qualitative research. This study used the first three to enhance the validity of the study. The first of these is methodological coherence. This strategy checks for congruence between research questions and the method used to answer those questions. In this study, the method is designed to answer the research questions about how people construct meaning from different types of political advertising. First, these meaning constructions and audience frames take time and in-depth conversation to tease out, which lends itself more to an audience analysis than perhaps a survey or experiment. Secondly, this study does not have any pre-determined audience frames that it wishes to test for; as such, participants must be given the opportunity of expressing all frames that are activated by political advertising. Since the researcher does not know of all possible frames participants could have, asking them using in-depth interviews will have a better chance of

reaching the full range of frames. Thus, in this case, the research questions dictate that an audience analysis will provide rich enough data to sufficiently answer them.

The second verification strategy is to choose a sample that best represents the research topic, and to “saturate the data pool” until all discernible and identified frames are replicated. This study chose to use a purposeful sampling technique in order to ensure that participants come from a range of different political orientations, ages and genders. Thus, participants were selected to have maximum differentiation across these three categories, in an attempt to tease out as many different audience frames as possible. Participants were included whether they have had experience with political advertising or not.

The third verification strategy is to collect and analyze data concurrently. According to Morse et al. (2002), this “forms a mutual interaction between what is known and what one needs to know” (para. 25). Therefore, the transcript and notes for each interview were analyzed immediately after the conversation. This allowed for clarifications or adjustments that aim to improve subsequent interviews.

Interview Schedule and Questions

Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes. Participants were shown four political advertisements: two positive and two negative. Then, participants were asked a series of questions about their cognitive and affective responses to the advertisement, as well as some basic demographic questions. For a complete list of interview questions, please refer to Appendix A. Although each participant was asked every question on the list, others were added based on the direction that the discussion took.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The original research questions that guided this study asked what audience frames were elicited by political advertising in general and also what unique frames were elicited by positive and negative advertising specifically. This study also sought to understand how voters use televised political advertising when making a voting decision and how demographic factors influence political advertising responses. Three common audience frames were found to be elicited by televised political advertising in general. This section begins with a discussion of research question one, which explains the three frames elicited, in order of frequency: political cynicism frame, image/issue frame and gender frame.

Political cynicism frame

The political cynicism frame was the most common audience frame elicited by the political ads. This frame has four components, as follows: political ads are not trustworthy, politicians are not trustworthy, politicians cannot always do what they say they will do and politicians' actions need to back up their words. Each of these dimensions will be discussed individually. The first component, that political ads are not trustworthy, was the most common reaction to political ads, as all eighteen participants expressed this sentiment throughout the course of their interviews. Not one participant believed that political ads are telling the whole truth. Caitlin, a medical student, summed it up best, saying "I just don't think they're really that factual. I don't want to say not factual because some of what they're saying probably is true, but maybe misleading and untrustworthy." Don, a scientist, was slightly nicer, saying simply that "all commercials have a little deception" while James, a researcher, lambasted political ads saying "I don't believe anything they say...they're always

contradicting. They'll put out a positive for this person and a negative for this person and they're never telling the truth." Others, such as Mike, a student, felt that there was some truth in advertising but "the truth is just skewed when it comes to being out of context." Todd, a scientist, concluded "you look at the little doll commercials they try to sell little girls and all the dolls are moving in the commercials, arms shaking and they're dancing and at the very end of the commercial they say dolls really don't dance." This is an apt description of how all participants felt not only about political advertising but about politicians in general. The dolls do not really dance and politicians do not really do what they say they will. .

In continuing with this vein, some participants felt that there has not been anything new or different in political advertising in the last decade and that political ads have a particular "formula" that they follow. Don commented on the ads showed to him, saying "they're pretty much the same set of ads, just with different politicians in them." Lydia agreed, saying that "they're just kind of the usual political ads. I mean, I could say I saw the same thing in Iowa." Grace continued saying "you could put any two candidates and any two states in there." Overall, no one believed that they had been shown anything new or particularly interesting.

Participants also expressed cynicism and distrust towards the politicians themselves. Don said "[politicians] will say what they need to get the vote and later you'll find out that they didn't do what you wanted them to." Derek, a graduate student, agreed with this, saying "it's tough in politics to know anyone's true character because when the time comes down to it, what they say they're going to do and what they do can be two different things."

Participants commonly expressed the feeling that politicians are not trustworthy people. As Beth, an accountant, said, "I think most politicians manipulate the truth." This feeling was

shared by Kyle, a medical student, who explained that “[politicians] have something to gain, they have a reason to manipulate.” Caitlin continued in this vein, concluding “she’s (McCaskill) obviously got something to gain...so it’s really difficult to believe that what she’s saying is the entire truth.” The participants were very cynical and jaded and unlikely to believe what was told to them through political advertising. However, even the most jaded recognized that politicians aren’t always capable of doing everything they say they will do.

Walter, a church communications specialist, expressed this saying “McCaskill’s argument that she gave in that attack ad, that she didn’t really have the authority to do that, that is a reality in bureaucracy.” Beth continued, saying “ I think a lot of times...[politicians] tell you something that they support something on their way to election that they really have no way of bringing about once they’re in office because they don’t have responsibility for that.” Missy, a project manager, agreed with this point of view, and asked, “does any candidate actually fulfill every single promise they make?” Other participants felt that while candidates may not always have the power to keep their promises, it still reflects badly on their image. James summed it up well when he said: “it seems like she made these promises then didn’t go through with them but again it seems like that wasn’t something she maybe even had power to do.” Missy echoed this view: “It makes you look like even though you had good intentions that you lied and actually it was just that you had too high of expectations of what you could be able to accomplish.” All participants seemed to understand that politicians do not always have the power to keep their promises, which is perhaps what contributes to the distrust of what politicians say and do during the campaign season.

The final component of political cynicism frame to be discussed is that of politicians' actions backing up their words. Many participants felt that they would be more likely to trust what politicians were saying if their actions on the campaign trail backed up their words. Walter explained when he said: "see that's the thing about the ads, they need to match what the guy is doing in real life." Don agreed by indicating that he "liked the things that [McCaskill] said she was for and hopefully in the future she'll actually act on those things." Todd questioned McCaskill's ad and said, "I support all kinds of things emotionally but action-wise am I doing anything?" Participants felt that in order for them to be able to place greater trust in political advertising, they needed to see that a candidate's actions backed up what they were saying in their ads. If their real-life actions did not match what they were saying in the ads, then trust in politicians and their ads could not happen.

The existence of this frame is in line with previous research in the area. Ansolabehere et al. (1997) posited two ideas: first that as elections become more cynical, so does the electorate and second, that political cynicism demobilizes the electorate and causes voters to lose interest in politics. The first part of this finding held true for the participants: all were very cynical about the political process. However, the second part of their findings did not occur among participants. Even though political cynicism was high, all voters remained very interested in politics and being informed about political information. This supports Cappella & Jamieson's (1996) idea that political cynicism is growing among the electorate. However, the effects do not appear to be as dire as Ansolabehere et. al. (1997) predicted.

Issue frame

Issue frame, or lack thereof was the second most common frame elicited by political advertising. This frame had three main components. First, participants felt that political ads lacked any substantive issue content. Secondly, participants believed that beyond not having issue content, political ads are trying to elicit purely emotional responses instead of informed decisions in voters. The third and final component of this frame consisted of what participants would rather see: records and job experience.

The first dimension of this frame is the belief participants have that ads do not contain enough substantive issue content. Ian, a graduate student, explained the problem, by saying that “the message you can deliver in thirty seconds or a minute is either so limited in scope or so simplistic that it either has to be of no interest to the majority of viewers or of such vacuity that it has no meaning.” Neva, an administrative assistant, echoed this sentiment: “it’s just not enough time to provide real information about your campaign.” Other participants did not really think that lack of time was the problem, just that political ads contained no real issue content. Beth argued that the ads “had no substance so it’s more like candidates have a popularity contest instead of having any kind of substantive issue content.” Grace, a sales professional, agreed by saying “I dislike the fact that [the ad] doesn’t really tell me anything.” Mike said, “I don’t feel like [the ads] convey much valuable information.” Ian, perhaps, summed it up best: “there’s no solution, there’s no policy, there’s no actual statement there.”

However, there was a common further complaint beyond simply that ads do not contain enough substantive issue information. Many participants felt that ads were designed purely to elicit some sort of emotional response, which they did not consider to be useful

when making an informed voting decision. James said “I think these ads are just directed to make people make decisions emotionally. I guess as a scientist I just want to see things in a table...the rest of it was just emotion and not really a use. I mean, it has its political and emotional sway but if you want to make an informed decision, there’s no help there I don’t think.” Beth agreed that she “usually [finds] ads to be soundbites and not really substantive...they’re more emotional vehicles to get people to like certain people or to dislike certain people.” Many of the participants felt that ads were nothing more than an emotional appeal, which they did not believe had any use in making an informed decision. This is an interesting finding indeed, as it goes directly contrary to the content analysis research in the area, which shows that political advertising is mainly issue focused, rather than emotional appeals (see Joslyn, 1980; Patterson & McClure, 1976; Kaid 1998, 2002).

The most common solution posited by participants to improve this lack of non-emotional issue content was to make running for office a little bit more like a job interview and a lot less like a personality contest. Mary, a teacher, proposed to just “get some facts out there: voting records, history, how long has the person been in office? Let’s just throw some résumé information out there.” Jill, a business manager, agreed with this and said she would “like to see more specifics about an individual candidate’s actual stand and actual history of voting.” The common conclusion among the group is that a candidate’s record is the most useful type of information. Lydia, a secretary, said that if she “really wanted to know about Claire McCaskill or Jim Talent then I would go look at their record.” Caitlin agreed: “if you want my vote, you want this position, I want to hear what you’re going to do and why you’d be good for it.” Missy thought that ads could be more useful if there were more lists of records, and said, “I think lists are a great thing. We need to have more lists instead of all

this flowery stuff.” Mary agreed and said: “I think we need more factual information in ads rather than just ‘I believe in this’”. Todd said that he “would prefer to see positive ads where they say ‘here’s what I’ve done’ because that’s an actual record.” Overall, participants felt that ads lacked any substantive issue coverage and were instead designed to elicit emotional responses. They would prefer instead to see candidates treat the campaign more like a job interview, where candidates discuss only a) why they are qualified to take this job and b) what they have accomplished that supports their desire to take office. Since running for office is similar to interviewing for a job, most participants felt that candidates should treat it like an interview for any other job: with no negativity and an emphasis on accomplishment.

This is obviously a difficult feat for advertisers, not least of which include production constraints as well as the double bind they find themselves in. Many participants explained that the only part of the ads they liked is that they were short in length. However, all participants wanted more concrete issue information. This type of in-depth information is impossible to impart in the thirty or even sixty second political spot. This catches advertisers in a difficult place, as participants wanted more information but not more length, which is impossible to do from a production standpoint.

Gender frame

Among some participants and especially among the female participants, a strong gender frame emerged and in particular a bit of a backlash against Claire McCaskill and her “kitchen ad.” Of the nine women interviewed, six made a direct reference to this ad and McCaskill’s kitchen table. Of the nine men interviewed, only three made any mention of the kitchen table scene. There were two common reactions to the ad featuring McCaskill sitting in a kitchen at the kitchen table: extreme dislike and slight favorability.

Women have long been in a sort of “double bind” when it comes to political advertising. Wadsworth et al. (1987) found that female candidates were evaluated higher when she was portrayed in a career setting rather than a home setting. Kaid, Myers, Pippis and Hunter (1984) found similar results. They found that female candidates received higher evaluations when they portrayed themselves in more masculine settings. However, there is the danger that women can present themselves as “too masculine.” Bystrom et al. (2004) found similar results, showing the female candidates are much more likely to portray themselves in more masculine ways in their political advertising. However, female candidates must walk a fine line between being tough enough and too tough. For example, Hillary Clinton was forced in Iowa, during the 2007 primary season, to run an ad featuring her and her mother in her mother’s kitchen, because voters perceived her as too cold and too tough. Clinton had to use the image of the kitchen and family setting to soften her image among voters. This double bind situation adds a second layer of difficulty to the process of running for office.

Ian was one of the most outspoken participants against McCaskill’s ad, claiming he intensely disliked “what it said about the role of women and you know, that women should be in the kitchen or in Washington but with a housewife point of view. But the dish rack was empty and it was a spotless kitchen and she was wearing a suit. It was completely fake.” Jill echoed these sentiments: “it was a very heartwarming and homey situation in her kitchen with pretty flowers behind her, nice clean kitchen counter rather than the usual kitchen with last night’s dishes still on the counter but you know, they aren’t going to show that.” Beyond the obvious fakeness of the kitchen, some participants, such as Mary and Grace protested the kitchen setting at all. Mary mused “it’d be nice if we could get the woman out of the kitchen,

even in politics. Come on, let's show her in her office or at a desk or something, doing more for society than sitting at her kitchen table." She continued in this vein, and observed that "you would never show a man in a political ad sitting at his kitchen table. That wouldn't even cross anybody's mind to say 'here, let's sit here.'" Grace agreed: "she's a woman and of course they're going to have her sitting at the kitchen table because it's a folksy kind of thing and 'I'm right there with you.'" Grace touched on and Mary agreed that McCaskill had chosen the location to present a certain image to voters. As Mary hypothesized, "the image they needed to project for her is that she cares about family, she cares about home and she cares about where she comes from and that is just a quick and easy way to do it."

Mary's conclusion appeared to be true for some of the participants. As Derek concluded, "it seemed like a family ordeal with being in the home and being at the table in her house. It's kind of nice with the kitchen in the background and the kitchen table. I guess that would kind of make me think about her being your mom." Neva agreed that the ad made her think of McCaskill and said " 'here's me, I'm in my house, in my kitchen.' You could almost get the feeling of very home-centered." Jill continued, "she's trying to promote herself as the woman next door, maybe your sister or your aunt or even your mom." So if Mary was correct and the McCaskill campaign was trying to project a message of home and family, they achieved what they were hoping for in the minds of some participants. Of the three male participants who mentioned the kitchen setting, only one, Ian mentioned it in a negative way, while the other two, Derek and Martin (coincidentally the youngest male participants) praised the ad for its home-like setting. Only one of the nine women interviewed, Neva, expressed any positive feelings toward the kitchen setting. Three women expressed no

reaction, while the other five expressed mild to extreme dislike at the idea of putting a professional woman in the kitchen to do her political ad.

Two participants also made some slightly gendered comments about Jim Talent. Elise commented that “Jim McCaskill³ is just a good old boy.” Mary made a similar comment, saying that “he’s probably just a good ol’ boy that you’d like to have a beer with.” This brings to mind the good old boys club that has long dominated politics. This juxtaposition of the good old boy running against the housewife turned politician created an interesting gender dynamic that many of the female participants picked up on.

Frames elicited by negative and positive political advertising

The second and third research questions asked what audience frames were elicited by negative and positive political advertising. While there were some effects specific to negative ads, they fit in better with research question four, as they relate to how voters use political advertising, not necessarily frames elicited. As such, no unique frames were elicited by either negative or positive political advertising.

Uses of political advertising

A commonly elicited effect from political advertising was the phenomenon the third person effect. The third person effect occurs when “many people seem to think that other people are affected by various kinds of media content but not they themselves” (McQuail, 2005, p. 521). According to McQuail (2005), this helps explain the widespread belief in the power of the media (p. 521). In the case of this study, the third person effect occurred when

³ Called candidate Jim Talent by the wrong name. The name has not been changed here to preserve the integrity of the participant’s words.

participants claimed that they were not swayed by political advertising but that voters at large are. Nearly all participants believed that they were more politically interested, active and aware than the majority of voters. Beth described the phenomenon saying “I don’t think most people have an interest really in politics.” Todd agreed that he “[doesn’t] think people spend a lot of time to learn about the candidates themselves.” Ian separated himself even further when he said that he “[feels] like an outsider to the values of most people who see those ads.” Kyle echoed this sentiment, and stated: “I don’t know what the average voter thinks. It seems like [political advertising] does influence the average voter.”

Other participants felt that while they didn’t learn anything from political ads, other voters did. Elise, a professor, said “I fear [voters] do [learn]. I’m afraid they make decisions based on advertising.” Neva concurred: “I do not think that most people take the time to dig deeper. I think a lot of people look at these and that’s where they get all their information.” Grace, a sales professional, went even further when she said “ I am frankly shocked and frightened at how a thirty second attack ad on somebody can make someone’s voting decision change. So do I think people you know, pay attention to those ads and make decisions based on these ads? Yeah, unfortunately, I think they do.” Jill concluded that “people don’t like to read or research. It’s easier to just have it splashed at you on the television.”

Overall, the participants all felt that other voters were a) less interested in politics than they were, and b) more likely to be influenced by political advertising. Interestingly enough, not one participant said that they made their voting decisions based entirely off of political advertising. All participants explained that they do their own research as you cannot trust the information presented in political ads. As all participants expressed differing levels

of political interest and political involvement, the third person effect seems to explain this phenomenon rather well. Participants felt that political advertising needed to be fixed because it affects the voting decision of other people, not them.

The fourth research question was very open-ended and asked simply what do people get out of political advertising? A more specific way to phrase this question is what use does political advertising serve in the voting process? According to the participants, there is not much of a use for political advertising. That said, very few believed that political advertising should be eliminated completely. So what role does political advertising play? The participants felt that political ads were useful for two things: as a way for politicians to achieve name and face recognition and as a launching point for further research. Most participants agreed that political advertising was necessary for candidates as a way to get their name out there. Lydia stated that candidates needed to be allowed to make their own ads “because I think there is top of mind awareness. I mean, the more you hear a name, a face I think you’re more likely to get someone to vote for you.” Mary agreed that “a lot of people get their information off the Internet and TV so if [politicians] want their name to get heard and recognized and part of household conversations, that is the quickest, easiest way to do it.” Missy agreed as well, and said she watches political advertising “to know which candidates are out there and so that I could put a face when I’m reading different information.” As we saw earlier, participants felt that seeing the candidate was a good thing and political advertising served the purpose of allowing them to connect a name and a face in the future.

Most participants also agreed that political advertising is useful in acting as a starting point for further research. Mary stated that “just seeing these ads would actually make me

want to internet research on my own to check the voting record of both of these people.”

Mike agreed saying that “what would be almost efficacious for me to see would be simple statements of values and of stances on the issues so that when I go and research it otherwise or look deeper then I kind of know something going into that.” Elise believed that political advertising “raises [voter] awareness of key issues” which gives voters a platform for further research in the area. Jill kept it simple, saying that political ads “might make me want to look further into knowing more about the candidates.”

This is an interesting contradiction that exists within the participants. Although all believed that they did not use political advertising to make a decision, they all did in fact use political advertising to perform an important function: starting research. While participants believed that only other people used political advertising, they themselves mentioned several ways, as stated above, that they themselves use political advertising as well. In short, political ads are doing their intended job: getting people interested in finding out more about a particular candidate. Any voter interested in doing more research as a result of a political ad surely counts as a success in any advertiser’s mind.

What is important to consider along with this phenomenon though is what participants did not get from watching these political ads. The most obvious information that not one participant was confident on was what political party each candidate belonged to, despite Talent’s affiliation being shown at the top of his ad. Some participants confidently assumed the wrong political party while others guessed only when pressed. Some guessed right, but not one participant confidently answered the correct political party for the two candidates. This is actually a documented trend in recent elections. Bystrom et al. (2004) found that only three percent of female political ads mentioned party affiliation and only

twelve percent of male political ads mentioned party affiliation. This is a more common new strategy that candidates take, possibly to appeal to independent voters. However, the more interesting aspect is that candidates could not tell parties correctly based on the issues that candidates discussed in their ads. Are political candidates deliberately trying to appear more middle of the road or are there really just only minute differences between the parties these days? The question bears some future investigation. The other thing that participants did not get out of the political ads was any sort of good recall of the candidates or the ads. About half of the participants could not remember the names of the candidates or the main issue that each ad was concerned with. The only aspect of the ads that participants consistently got correct was tone, so whether the ad was positive or negative. Beyond that, recall for the actual content of the ads was minimal at best.

One potential factor that affected this recall for candidates was the visuals, or lack thereof, of an ad. Many participants also expressed frustration with Jim Talent's ads, saying that they didn't have a clear picture of what he looked like⁴. Missy commented after watching them "I have no idea what he even looks like, so the ads did nothing for Jim Talent at all." Neva agreed, saying "I didn't even know which guy was him in that first ad." Grace commented that she "wasn't really sure until the negative ad on her what he looked like." Many participants felt that it was important to see candidates, to get a better understanding of who they are and also simply for recognition purposes.

The spokesperson also appeared to play a role in what participants remembered from an ad. Some participants agreed that the spokesperson and identifying with the spokesperson

⁴ This response is most likely elicited as a result of ad selection, however it makes an important point about the desire to see and connect visually with a candidate.

in an ad can influence how they perceive the ad. Beth commented that she didn't like Claire McCaskill's negative ad against Jim Talent because "I didn't identify with the farmer and I didn't identify with the whole pick-up thing because I don't think God granted every farmer that he should drive a huge pick-up." Missy agreed: "I didn't like the pick of the person that they portrayed as the farmer. That was a negative image to me." For other participants, such as Jill, the farmer was the only thing she could remember from the ad. In this case, the spokesperson got in the way of recall for the message for many participants. From an advertising standpoint, it is important to understand how the visuals of an ad impact the audience recall.

What voters get from negative political advertising

There were two effects that were generally found as a result of political advertising. The first is actually a well-documented effect in negative political advertising research called the boomerang effect. As discussed earlier, the boomerang effect occurs when the image of a politician sponsoring a negative ad is lowered due to producing that negative ad. Walter explained it well, saying he thought that "that kind of attack ad can actually backfire and people could wonder why somebody needs to make such a bitter attack against them." Caitlin continued in this vein, saying "when someone is attacking someone else it rubs me the wrong way and makes me wonder well what's wrong with you?" Lydia felt that negative ads gave politicians an image of desperation and made her think "why is he so desperate to find this trash on her?" Mary went even further, saying "I've actually decided I've like candidates based on the other candidate's attack ads." So what causes this pronounced boomerang effect in some participants? Overall, participants expressed the view that they disliked negative political advertising because it was mean or not fair. Beth stated it simply,

saying “I’ve just never liked negative ads. I don’t like ads that pick on people.” Walter brought up an old adage saying “if you don’t have anything nice to say about somebody, don’t say it.” Kyle commented that “I don’t want a potential leader to be engaged in that kind of behavior. It doesn’t make me think that they’re going to deal well with conflict situations and have that ability to engage in real problem-solving.” It appears that for some participants, the presence of negativity affects what they get from political advertising.

Other participants had different reasons for disliking negative ads. Mike said that he “tends to believe [negative ads] somewhat less because they seem to want to try to trigger an emotional response more. [They] just play off my fear.” Grace stated that she’s “more interested in what somebody stands for than them telling me why I shouldn’t be voting for the other person.” These highly emotional responses to negative political advertising are not uncommon, as previous research has shown. Voters are often turned off by negative advertising, although the overall effect can vary widely. However, the research stated previously on attitudinal effects shows that voters are more likely to respond emotionally to negative ads rather than positive ads.

Demographic differences

Interestingly enough, there were almost no discernable differences along the two main demographic factors investigated here: gender and political affiliation. Political affiliation in particular had little to no mediating influence on the audience frames elicited. There were no frames that could be considered unique to any of the three major political parties and attitudes toward the two candidates were not affected either.

The same is mostly true with gender as well. The only frame where there was a difference was in the gender frame, with the female participants being slightly more likely than the male participants to view McCaskill's kitchen ad through a gendered, gendered lens. Overall though, these demographic factors did not really contribute to the way participants interpreted political advertising.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Until now, the large majority of the research done in the area of political advertising effects has been quantitative survey or experimental research. While this type of research is very useful for making generalized conclusions about the electorate, the range of possible responses to political advertising may limit the kinds of responses that researchers find. This study chose to take a qualitative, bottom-up approach to investigating political advertising effects, with the hope of directing new areas for future research in the area of political advertising. The richness of the data received allowed for more nuanced definitions of audience frames elicited by political advertising as well as a more in-depth understanding of how voters use political advertising.

The three main frames found in this study were political cynicism frame, issue frame, and gender frame. As is common to political cynicism frame, participants did not believe that the information given to them through political advertisements was trustworthy. All eighteen participants believed that political advertisements are either untrue or deliberately misleading. No participants believed that political ads were telling the whole truth. This distrust was extended beyond the political ads themselves to the politicians as well. Participants believed that since politicians have a reason to manipulate the truth, such as winning an election, they will readily stretch or skew the truth to fit their needs. They also believed that politicians will readily make promises that they cannot keep, although participants acknowledged that this is sometimes due to “the system” or bureaucracy, rather than politicians just outright lying. This is in line with a lot of previous literature on political cynicism and fits with the general trend of an increasingly cynical electorate.

However, participants recognized that politicians do not always have the power once in office to accomplish what they said they would accomplish. Finally, participants also felt that they would be more likely to trust what politicians say in political ads if the information in the ads matched what the candidate was doing in real-life. Showing proof of action was considered to be important to participants.

The second frame, issue frame was another expected frame. Overall, participants felt that political advertising lacked any type of useful, substantive issue content. Most felt like they learned next to nothing about the candidates from the ads and what they did learn was too general to be of use. Participants also felt that the ads were trying to appeal to their emotional sides as opposed to their rational sides, which they did not find useful when attempting to make an informed voting decision. This contributed to a negative view of political advertising in general, because these voters did not feel more informed after watching these ads. Participants expressed a desire for political ads to focus more on candidate records and job performance, as opposed to mudslinging and vague issue positions. This would in effect make running for office more like conducting oneself at a job interview: with no negativity, more record information, and more detailed information. Participants would much rather see positive ads about accomplishments and job experience.

However, participants also expressed a liking for short political ads. It is obviously not possible to fit a lot of substantive issue coverage into a thirty second spot. This puts advertisers in an unfortunate double bind as participants did not like ads the way they are now, but instead want more information in the same amount of time. However, as most participants said that political ads simply made them want to do further research, it would appear that political ads are in fact doing their job. While participants may not have

consciously found the ads useful, they were in fact using them to further their voting decision.

The third frame found was the gender frame. This frame was especially interesting as it was mostly females who reacted negatively to McCaskill's ad from a gendered standpoint. Those participants that reacted negatively were disturbed by the idea that putting a professional woman in her kitchen to do a political ad is still acceptable in society. As one participant commented earlier, no ad would show a man sitting at a kitchen table. Many of the female participants were somewhat disgusted and annoyed by McCaskill sitting in her kitchen, as was one male participant who pointed out the "fakeness" of the situation. Participants saw the setting as being contrived and fake because as Ian said "she was wearing a suit." The implication, from Ian's perspective, is what woman would be sitting in her immaculate, unused kitchen wearing a suit? Some participants acknowledged that she was probably trying to create a caring, family values image for herself and that staging her ad in the kitchen is an instant way to accomplish that image. For some participants, especially the very young males, that appeared to be true. More than one participant referred to her as a motherly figure in a comfortable home-setting, which they took to mean that she was home-centered and family-centered. Obviously, for some voters, the image they were trying to elicit shone through. This disparity only highlights the fine line that female candidates must walk when running for office between being too "feminine" and too 'masculine.'" While candidates may wish to convey a certain image by staging their ad in a home-setting, they obviously risk the backlash that was present in this particular group of participants. This is especially salient now, as more and more female candidates have run for high political office. It is a fine line to toe.

Overall, the results of this research question help to advance the comparatively small amount of literature on audience framing. It allows an in-depth exploration of how participants on thoughts, views and beliefs about political advertising colored their interpretations of the advertisements. In the future, this type of study should be done again to compare the media frames present in the advertisements with the audience frames elicited. It appears that one cannot always anticipate what audience frames might develop. Also, while there are some differences in reactions to negative and political advertising, this study found no frames that were unique to one or the other. Overall, the three frames found here were not tone dependent.

The fourth research question asked how voters use political advertising. Overall, participants do not find political advertising to be of much use at all. However, they did feel that political ads served two important uses. The first use is for name/face recognition. This ties back to the ad frame and the idea that seeing candidates is important, so that they may be easily recognizable later on in the campaign. The second use is as a launch point for further research. Many participants said that they would prefer political advertising to state records and facts so that they could use those to begin their own further research on the candidates.

This is an interesting contradiction as the uses that participants described are exactly what advertising professionals hope to achieve when running political ads. Participants were unwilling to admit that they used political advertising for any part of their voting decision, but if a political ad prompted them to do further research, then that ad has indeed played a role.

Furthermore, participants believed that political advertising was important because other people learn from it and other people use it to make voting decisions. This third-person effect is also well documented in studying political advertising effects.

Another interesting aspect of this question is what participants were not getting from political ads. None of the participants were able to correctly and confidently say which party each candidate belonged to. This is an interesting finding, especially for lower-level elections where many voters may not be aware of the political affiliations of candidates before seeing political ads. This is a fairly new strategy in political advertising this is obviously working as it was set out to. As stated previously, many candidates have stopped running political party affiliation, in an attempt to appeal to both independents as well as weakly affiliated party individuals. This is an interesting finding though, as many participants guessed wrong when pressed about the candidates' political affiliations. At least in this set of ads, there was not a clear enough line between the two parties for participants to accurately tell party affiliation.

In continuing the discussion of voter reactions to political advertising, negative political advertising elicited some rather strong emotions in the participants. The first was a backlash effect or a boomerang effect and tied into this effect was a desire for candidates to "play fair." This is nothing new to political advertising as voters have long complained about the presence of negative political advertising.

Limitations

This study has several limitations, which must be discussed. The main limitation is the small, relatively homogenous sample. All participants were from the same geographic location, of the same race and of relatively similar education levels. This sample is obviously

not representative and generalized conclusions about voter responses should not be drawn from the responses detailed here.

Instead, this study should be used as a launch point for future quantitative research. The richness of the data presented here allows researchers a quick look into the minds of these eighteen voters. The nuanced, detailed responses give hints into why attitudes change and what role political advertising plays for these voters when making voting decisions. The main conclusion to be drawn is that future research in a variety of new avenues is needed in political advertising effects research.

Implications and Further Research

Overall, this study has outlined some future directions for research in the area of political advertising effects. First, it has outlined a future direction for experimental research, to confirm the frames and sub-frames found in this study. The level of detail provided here could serve as an excellent launch point into future research about audience frames elicited by political advertising. This is also necessary, as it will add to the relatively small amount of existing literature on independent audience frames.

Furthermore, more research needs to be done in comparing the audience frames elicited by political ads to the media frames put forth in the advertisement. It is unwise to assume that audiences will just passively accept the information that is given to them and reflect that back. As this study has shown, these participants took the information they received and attempted to fit it into their own preconceived ideas about political advertising. Despite the best efforts of market testing, voters may respond in unanticipated ways. This comparison would allow researchers to better understand how media frames affect audience frames elicited as well as how audience frames affect the reception of encoded media frames.

This study also highlights a potential new direction in political advertising effects research to be done at a more general level. While participants did not report any attitudinal changes toward the candidates from these particular ads, it appears there may be a build-up over time of negative feelings toward political advertising in general. One possible conclusion to be drawn is that political advertising effects build over time and create a more cumulative effect, instead of simply instantaneous effects based on one ad or even one campaign. Therefore, more research should be done in the area of long-term effects of political advertising on voters, rather than ad or campaign specific effects.

Furthermore, it is important to understand what causes attitudes toward candidates to change. There are many elements to ads as well as people and knowing that attitudes change may not be deep enough. Further experimental research should delve into the factors that affect attitude change in voters.

Overall, this study has shown the need for further research into the deeper cognitive and affective responses to political advertising as well as the need for further research into audience frames and how they affect the information that voters are presented with. This research is especially important to political advertising, if it wishes to continue and even grow as a useful source of campaign communication.

APPENDIX

Appendix A. Interview Questions

1. Have you seen any of these political advertisements before?
2. If so, how many times?
3. Do you usually pay attention to political advertisements? Why or why not?

Cognitive Response Questions

4. What do you think about these advertisements, in general?
5. What issues does each of these advertisements lead you to think about?
6. Do you think that each ad reflects the true policy or character of Claire McCaskill? Why or why not?
7. Do you think that each ad reflects the true policy or character of Jim Talent? Why or why not?
8. How do you think these advertisements enhance or harm the image of Claire McCaskill?
9. How do you think these advertisements enhance or harm the image of Jim Talent?
10. What did you learn about Claire McCaskill from these advertisements?
11. What did you learn about Jim Talent from these advertisements?
12. As a citizen, do you think people, in general, learn more about candidates through these ads? Why do you think that is the case?
13. What do you remember from these advertisements?
14. How would you summarize the main points that each advertisement was trying to make?

Affective Response Questions

15. To what extent do you trust these ads in terms of telling you something truthful? Why do you say so?
16. How do these advertisements impact your attitude toward Claire McCaskill?

17. How do these advertisements impact your attitude toward Jim Talent?
18. How do you feel about each candidate after seeing these ads? Why do you feel this way?
19. How do you feel about these ads? Why do you feel that way?
20. What aspects of these advertisements did you like? Why?
21. What aspects of these advertisements did you dislike? Why?
22. Is there anything else you would like to say about the advertisements in general?

Demographic Questions

23. How old are you?
24. What is your major/occupation?
25. Have you taken part in an election before?
26. What do you consider to be your political affiliation?
27. Do you vote regularly?

Appendix B. Participants' biographies

Ian: Ian is a 47-year old graduate student at Iowa State. He studies applied linguistics and technology and works as a teaching assistant in the English department. He lives in Ames. He described himself as communist or just “excessively far left.” He has worked for campaigns many elections and votes in all the presidential elections where he feels like there is a good candidate to vote for. He is very opinionated about politics and is not afraid of sharing those opinions.

Beth: Beth is a 47-year old accounting manager at Iowa State. She lives in Ames. She considers herself to be a liberal democrat and votes regularly. She is a very quiet person with a cynical view of politics and politicians. She is very interested and active in politics.

Walter: Walter is a 33-year old communications director for a local church in Ames. He studied marketing and communication in college, and took a lot of delight in trying to “figure out the ads” from a marketing and business point of view. He is a liberal democrat and takes part in most elections. He gets most of his political news online from candidate websites and blogs. He is a very positive, upbeat type of person and very talkative.

Caitlin: Caitlin is a 26-year old medical student from Des Moines. She is a very quiet, soft-spoken person and described herself as not super interested in politics. She is a liberal democrat, and she regularly takes part in presidential elections. She is very cynical toward politicians and political advertising.

James: James is a 28-year old post-doctoral researcher/scientist at Iowa State. He lives in Ames. He is a very talkative person. He is much more concerned with facts than emotions when it comes to voting and mentions that because he is a scientist, he likes tables. James identified himself as Republican. He regularly votes in presidential elections, but is not positive that he has voted in all the two-year elections.

Don: Don is a 51-year old scientist at Iowa State. He lives in Ames. It was very difficult to elicit detailed responses from Don. He is somewhat reserved. He considers himself to be a more liberal Republican and votes regularly. He also mentioned that being a scientist, he is partial to facts and tables rather than emotions.

Todd: Todd is a 39-year old scientist at Iowa State. He lives in Ankeny. He is a very talkative person with a very sarcastic but quick sense of humor. He considers himself to be a conservative independent. He votes regularly in national elections but not local elections because he is not as interested in local politics. He is very interested in national politics and listens to conservative political talk radio during the day at work.

Lydia: Lydia is a 51-year old secretary who works for Story County Conservation. She does not consider herself to be very interested in politics. She is an Independent and she votes regularly. She is somewhat quiet and reserved. It was difficult to elicit detailed responses from her. She lives in Ames.

Derek: Derek is a 27-year old graduate student in curriculum and instruction education. He lives in Ames. He is a positive, upbeat person who actively tried not to say anything negative about either of the candidates. He is an independent and he votes regularly in the presidential elections but he doesn't usually vote in the two-year elections.

Martin: Martin is a 25-year old college graduate in liberal arts and sciences. He just graduated and is in the process of trying to find a job. He lives in Ames. He is a very talkative person but very neutral. He does not have strong opinions or feelings about political advertising or politics in general. He considers himself to be a moderate conservative and he votes regularly.

Kyle: Kyle is a 33-year old medical student who lives in Des Moines. He was very reserved when talking to me but further acquaintance proved him to be less reserved when discussing other subjects. He is a very cynical, sarcastic person. He lived in Europe when he was younger and would like to see the US emulate European ideals. He is a Democrat and votes regularly.

Mary: Mary is a 37-year old middle school teacher in Des Moines. She is a Republican and votes regularly in presidential elections, but not always in local elections. She is an upbeat, talkative person with an obvious interest in politics. She is especially passionate about education reform.

Missy: Missy is a 49-year old project manager for her husband's construction business. She used to be a medical lab technician. She lives in Ames. She is a talkative person with a very deep distrust for the media in general. She describes herself as religious and says that she gets most of her political affiliation from religious sources like Christian Alliance or Family on Focus. She also describes herself as conservative and says that she votes regularly.

Mike: Mike is a 29-year old medical student who lives in Des Moines. He was the only participant who had heard of these candidates before, as he is originally from Missouri. He is friendly but difficult to elicit detailed responses from. He considers himself to be moderate and says that he votes regularly.

Elise: Elise is a 40-year old senior lecturer at Iowa State. She lives near Ames. She is very neutral toward political advertising and politics in general. She did not express any strong opinions toward anything during the interview. She has had some experience with the advertising industry and therefore inherently distrusts the ads put out by that industry. She describes herself as conservative and says that she votes regularly.

Neva: Neva is a 27-year old administrative assistant at Iowa State. She lives in Ames. She is a very positive person but also very neutral. She has no strong feelings either way toward political advertising. She is a Democrat and votes regularly.

Grace: Grace is a 41-year old who works in sales. She lives in Ames. She went to school for advertising, so she knows well how the industry works. This led to a lot of distrust of advertising because she worked in the industry. She is a very lively talkative person and is not afraid to express her opinions on the subject at hand. She considers herself to be a true Independent and votes regularly.

Jill: Jill is a 51-year old business manager who works for a church in Ames. She lives in Ames. She is very cynical toward politicians and political advertising. She is talkative as well. Jill considers herself to be an Independent and she votes regularly.

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