

# Who's Winning the Presidential Ad War?

The impact of Romney and Obama campaign ads on weak partisan & pure independent voters.

## Overview

Ad spending this election year is pushing toward the \$1 Billion mark, and there's no sign of slowing. So who is winning the Presidential ad war? To discover whether Obama's or Romney's ads are more effective in shifting the vote, we partnered with Qualtrics and executed a **PocketTrial™** testing the individual and combined impacts of seven Romney and Obama campaign ads.

Our **PocketTrial™** quantifies the **true impact** of a message using a customized, double-blind, and fully controlled **experimental design**. It's like a small-scale *clinical drug trial*, but it's a *message* we're testing.

We exposed more than 2,300 registered, pure independents and weak partisans – no strong Republicans or Democrats – to one or more of seven political ads from the Obama and Romney camps (the Control group watched no ads). Respondents were randomly assigned to one of 11 conditions in a true experiment – 10 treatment groups and a control. Statistical analyses were performed to identify significant “treatment” impacts.

We tested the individual *and* combined impact of matched Obama and Romney ads from three “themes,” **1) Medicare ads, 2) Economic Attack ads, and 3) Comprehensive, economic-focused “Plan” ads.** In addition, we tested **4) the impact of the “Disappointed” ad from Americans for Prosperity**, which has been highly rated in focus groups and received heavy air time.

## Key Findings

So which side is winning the Presidential Ad War? It depends on how much enthusiasm matters compared to marginal vote shifts this year . . .

The Obama ads have a *significant impact* on *vote preference*, increasing Obama's vote and decreasing Romney's. The Romney ads *aren't* effective in shifting preferences.

- Obama's ads increase his vote by about 6 points on average - a 15% bump in Obama's vote
- They decrease Romney's vote by about 8 points - an 18% slide in Romney's vote.
- Round 1 to Obama: Obama ads increase the percentage of marginal *undecided* and *wavering* voters who *prefer* him.

The twist . . . both the Romney *and* Obama ads are *effective* at *increasing enthusiasm* among *likely Romney voters* (McCain voters from 2008). The Obama ads *don't significantly impact* the enthusiasm of '08 Obama voters.

- Romney and Obama ads *increase* the highest level of voter enthusiasm of '08 McCain voters by 13 points - a 42% surge in the number of McCain '08 voters who are extremely enthusiastic to vote this year.
- Enthusiasm for '08 Obama voters remains flat.
- Round 2 to Romney: Romney ads impact marginal, *decided* voters, increasing the likelihood that voters who *say* they prefer him *will actually turn out* to vote.

# Experiment, Survey Design & Analysis

## Experiment & Survey Design

Respondents were *randomly assigned* (within Party identification blocks) to one of eleven conditions in a true experiment – ten treatment groups and a control:

### 1. Control Condition

Respondents were not exposed to either ad before the policy and election questions were answered.

### 2. Medicare Ad Conditions

Respondents viewed either a Romney Medicare ad, an Obama Medicare ad, or both.

### 3. Economic Attack Ad Conditions

Respondents viewed either a Romney economic attack ad, an Obama economic attack ad, or both.

### 4. Comprehensive “Plan” Ad Conditions

Respondents viewed either a Romney ad laying out his plan for the country, an Obama “plan” ad that also defends his record, or *both* of these ads *as well as* Romney’s Economic Attack Ad.

### 5. AFP “Disappointed” Ad Condition

Respondents viewed an widely-aired ad produced by American for Prosperity, in which Obama voters express their disappointment with the President.

All respondents otherwise answered the same survey questions in an identical survey instrument. The order in which the ads were presented to respondents in the combined treatment conditions was randomized, as were other questions and responses where appropriate. The sample was drawn from an opt-in panel to approximate the 2008 electorate in the CCES 2008 validated dataset (non-strong partisans only) on education, age, gender, and race. All respondents were screened to be registered, pure independents and weak partisans. The survey was conducted from Sept. 28-Oct. 3.

## Analysis

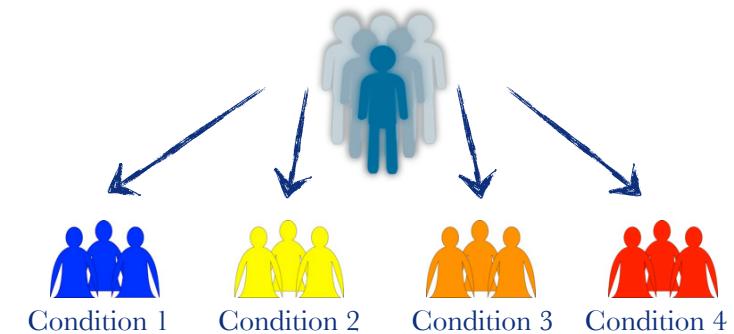
Impact analysis was conducted using multinomial logistic regression models, which included variables for treatment interactions, treatment/gender or '08 vote choice interactions as well as party identification, liberal/conservative self-identification, age group, attention to the news, and being “born-again.” Predicted probabilities are adjusted to match the '08 vote, by gender, in the CCES 2008 validated dataset. All percentages are predicted probabilities based on the marginal impact of each treatment. Significance was determined using a pairwise comparison of treatment impact to control for all respondents or by gender and/or '08 vote.

## The basic structure of a PocketTrial™ . . .

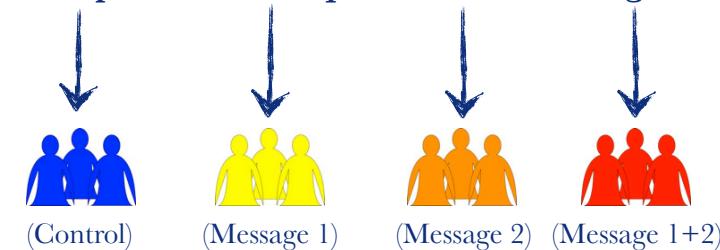
1. Respondents *enter* the PocketTrial . . .

2. Respondents answer *screening and control* questions . . .

3. Respondents *randomly assigned* to a treatment or control group condition . . .



4. Respondents are *exposed* to their message . . .



5. All respondents answer the same *questions* that the message is supposed to *impact* . . .

6. Statistical analysis identifies the *impact* of each message or combination on opinion compared to the Control.

### *How do you turn a vote preference into an action?*

Your vote is a strange thing. It is valuable, but you can't spend it on yourself; you can only give it away. Sometimes people give their vote to a candidate because they *like* and want to *help* him. And a lot of the time, people give their vote to a candidate because they *dislike* the other candidate and want to *hurt* him.

A vote is a *real* action, something of value that voters use to help or harm candidates. But *asking* a respondent who they would vote for if the election was held today is a *very abstract* thing . . . there is little, if anything, of value attached to their answer.

So how can we make an early “vote” *real* for survey respondents? How can we put respondents in a decision framework where their response will really help or harm one of the candidates?

Taking inspiration from experiments in *behavioral economics*, we developed a *game* that is analogous to a real-life vote decision.

We gave each respondent \$100 to *give* to Barrack Obama or Mitt Romney candidate. But that's not all; they could also choose to *take away* \$100 from one of the candidates. And if they were really uncertain, they could choose to let the money go to the default winner of the survey.

This makes an abstract early “vote” *concrete* by attaching real *value* to their answer in the survey. It allows us to better capture who someone will vote for, or against, and what motivates their vote.

### The Money Vote® Measure of Vote Intention

**An organization has offered to donate money to one of the Presidential candidates for the 2012 general election on behalf of each respondent. Each respondent gets to control what happens to \$100 dollars.**

**You can choose to:**

*Give \$100 to one candidate.*

**OR**

*Take away \$100 from one candidate. (The organization will subtract \$100 from that candidate's total donations from other respondents.)*

**OR**

*Let your \$100 go to whichever candidate receives the most money from other respondents. (In other words, your share would go by default to the winner chosen by everyone else.)*



Give \$100 to the Republican, Mitt Romney



Give \$100 to the Democrat, Barack Obama



Take Away \$100 from the Republican, Mitt Romney



Let \$100 go to the Winner Others Have Chosen



Take Away \$100 from the Democrat, Barack Obama

# Presidential Vote - Measured by the *Money Vote*®

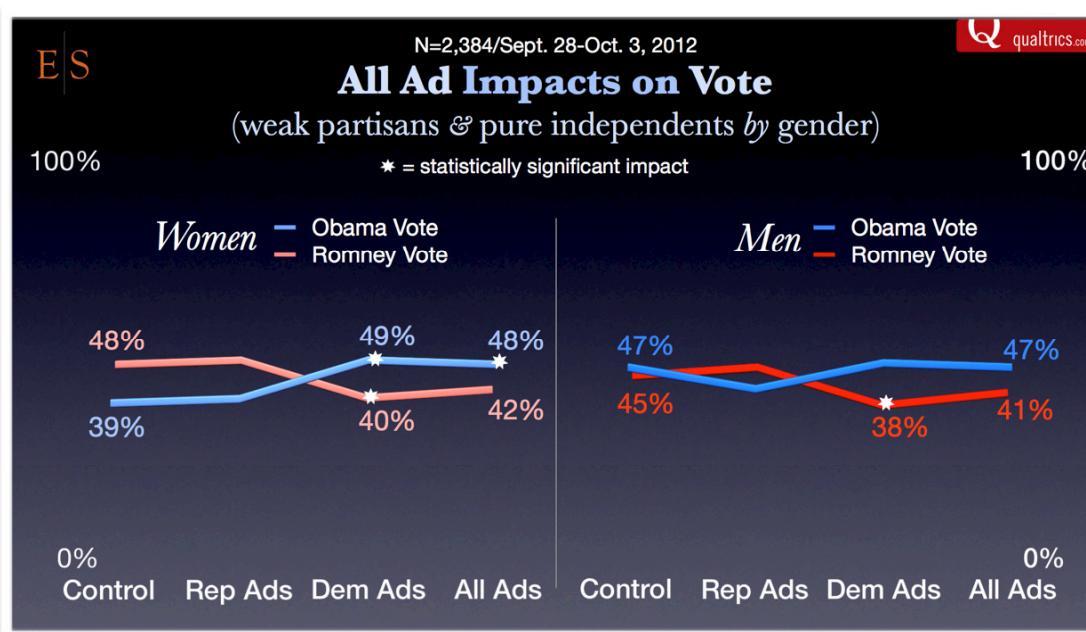
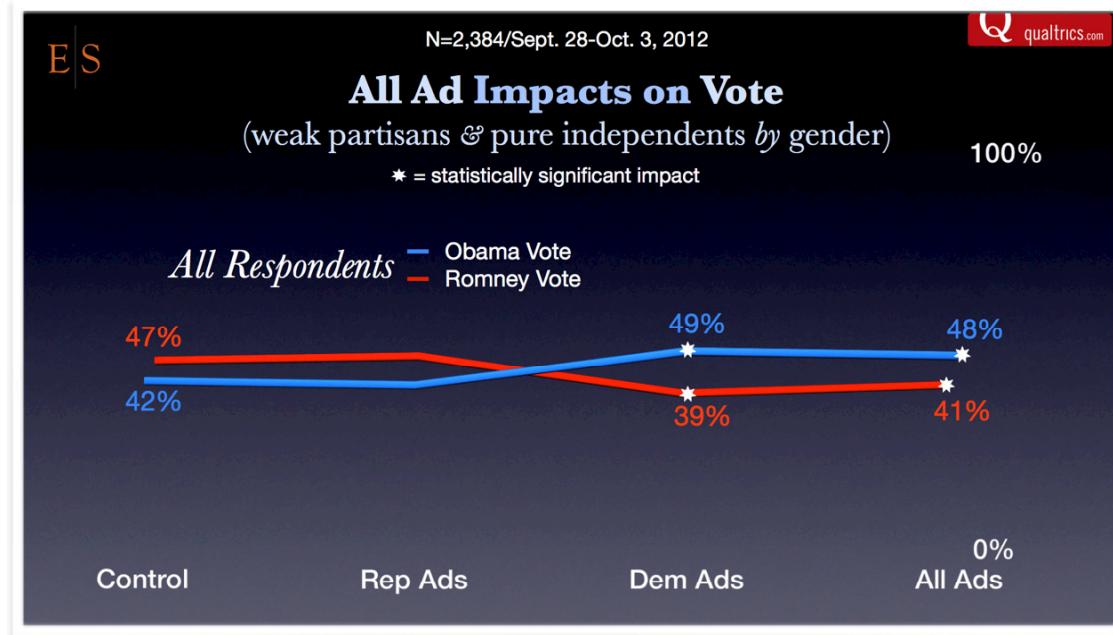
## Impact on the *Money Vote*® - All Respondents

The Obama ads have a *significant impact* on vote preference, increasing Obama's vote and decreasing Romney's. The Romney ads *aren't* effective in shifting preferences.

- Obama's ads *increase* his vote by about 6 points on average from 42% to 48% - a 15% bump in Obama's vote.
- They *decrease* Romney's vote by about 8 points from 47% to 39% - an 18% slide in Romney's vote.

Obama ads increase the percentage of marginal *undecided* and *wavering* voters who *prefer* him. And this impact seems to hold when respondents watch both Romney and Obama ads together.

- Even when respondents watch ads from *both* sides, Obama maintains his gains with 48% of the vote to Romney's 41%.



## Impact on the *Money Vote*® - by Gender

The ads have a fairly consistent impact on men and women, although there is some indication in the individual ads that men might respond more to appeals from Romney.

- The Romney vote shifts to a net advantage, 47% to 42%, when men watch a Romney ad, but the movement isn't statistically significant.
- The Obama ads appear to impact the *male* Romney vote but not the male Obama vote.
- The Obama ads appear to impact the *female* Obama vote *more* than the male Obama vote.

The overall picture here is one of relative consistency overall, with men and women exposed to ads from both sides going for Obama by a 6 point margin.

# Voter Enthusiasm

## Impact on *Enthusiasm* - All Respondents

While the Obama ads win hands down in shifting voter preferences, both the Romney and Obama ads are *effective* at *increasing enthusiasm* among *likely Romney voters* (McCain voters from 2008). The Obama ads *don't significantly impact* the enthusiasm of '08 Obama voters.

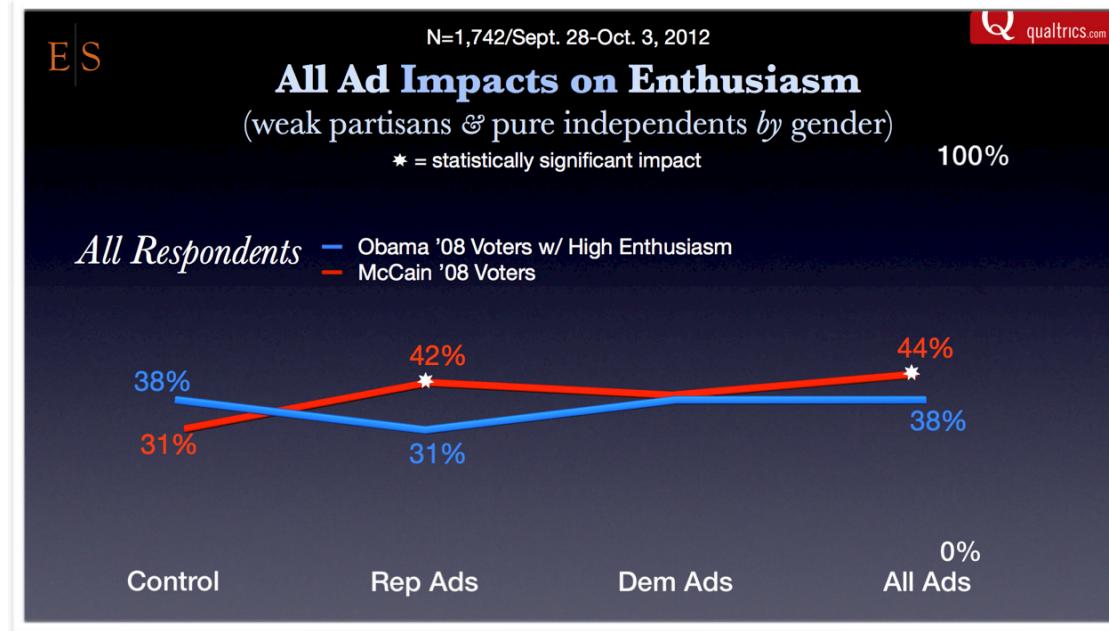
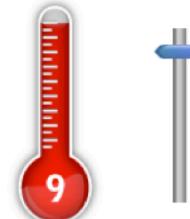
- Romney and Obama ads *increase* the highest level of voter enthusiasm of '08 McCain voters by 13 points - a 42% surge in the number of McCain '08 voters who are extremely enthusiastic to vote this year.
- Enthusiasm for '08 Obama voters remains flat.
- Romney ads impact marginal, *decided* voters, increasing the likelihood that voters who *say* they prefer him *will actually turn out* to vote.
- The enthusiasm impact of the ads overall are very similar for men and women. *Specific* ads, however, impact men and women *very* differently.

## Voter Enthusiasm Thermometer

Now we'd like to know how *enthusiastic* you are *about voting in the election* this fall on a scale of 0 to 10.

Zero means you *aren't enthusiastic at all* to vote, and 10 means that you are *extremely enthusiastic* to vote. A 5 means you're somewhere in the middle.

Don't think too much about it . . . just go with your *gut feeling* and move the thermometer to the level that feels right to you.



## Enthusiasm, "Likely Voters," Polls & Turnout

Most polls are now using "likely voter" screens for their results. What does that mean? It means that which candidate registered voters in general prefer doesn't matter . . . you have to prefer a candidate, and say that you are very likely to vote and/or are enthusiastic to vote this fall.

These "likely voter" polls, in other words, are capturing shifts in voter enthusiasm in addition to any shifts in actual vote preference. For instance, if people who prefer Romney are much more enthusiastic about voting and people who prefer Obama are *less* enthusiastic, that means more Romney "voters" will get counted because they are now "likely voters" and fewer Obama "voters" will be counted.

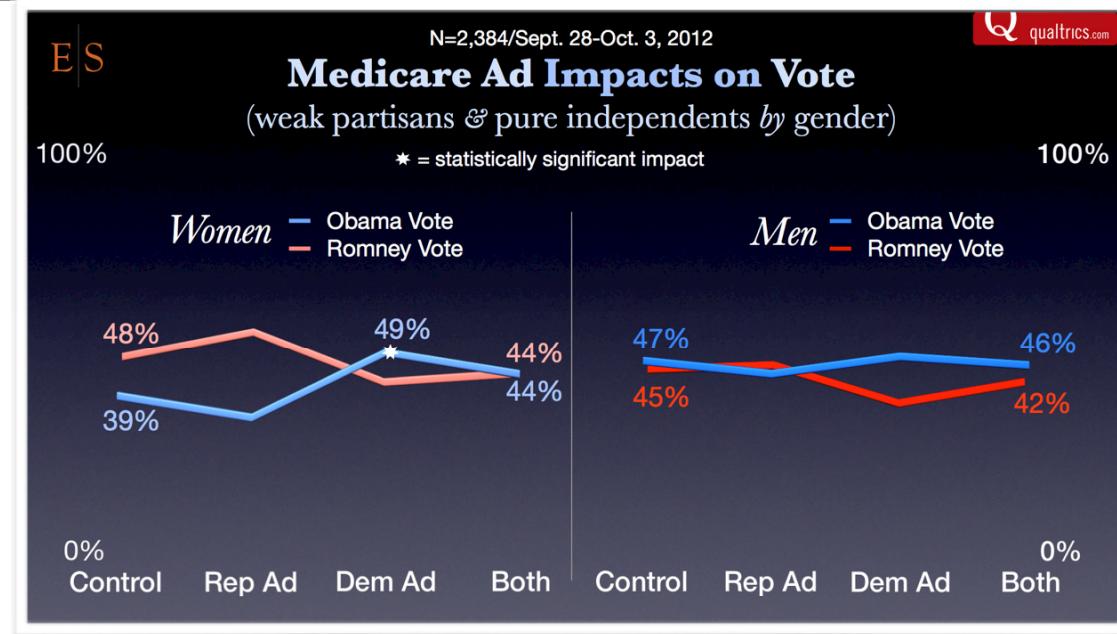
In other words, you can have a significant shift in the polls with very little shift in underlying voter preference for the candidates. And you can have a shift in the underlying voter preference without a change in the likely outcome if those citizens are unlikely to turn out.

# Medicare Ad Impacts

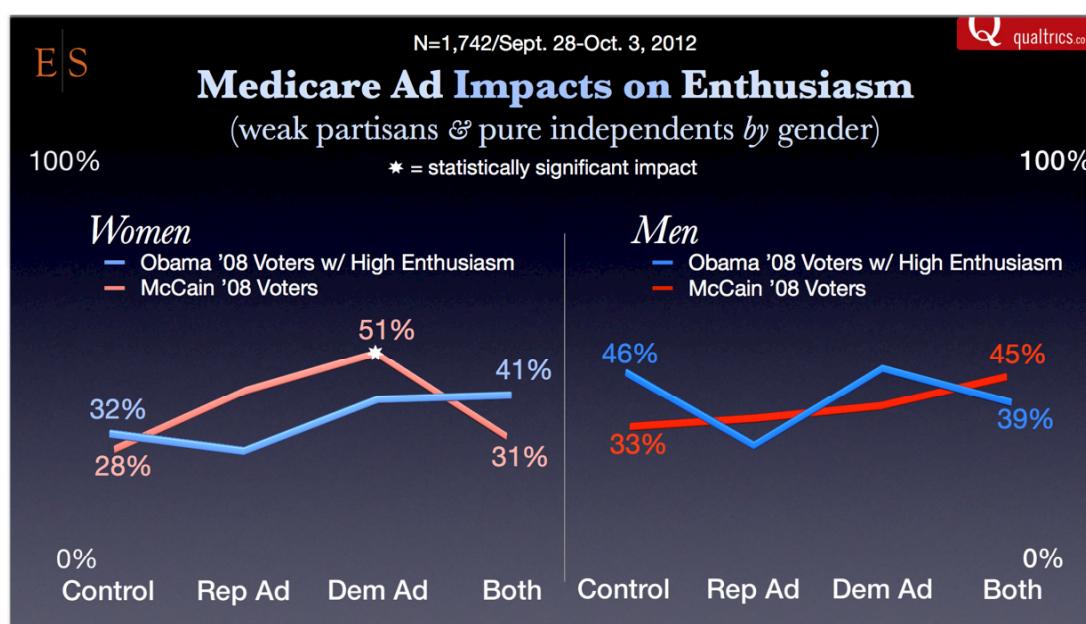
## Medicare Theme - *Money Vote® Impact*

While exposure to the Obama ad alone significantly boosts Obama's vote, the effect on Romney's share is muted and the combined Romney plus Obama ad condition brings the vote to parity. Romney's vote sags about for men who watch the Obama ad, but the drop is not statistically significant.

- Obama's ad *increases* his vote by about 10 points on average from 39% to 49%. The impact on Romney's vote is less dramatic and not significant.
- Although not statistically significant, the Romney Medicare ad does seem to shift female voters away from Obama and toward Romney.
- In general, women seem to move more than men in response to both candidate's Medicare ads.



## Medicare Theme - *Enthusiasm Impact*



The Medicare ads have a fairly strong and variable impact on enthusiasm to vote for both men and women and Obama/McCain '08 voters. Both the Romney and Obama ads appear to boost enthusiasm among *female* Obama '08 voters, but have variable effects on *male* Obama voters. Among McCain '08 voters, *men* seem to be motivated by exposure to both Obama and Romney ads. Female McCain '08 voters appear to get a boost from both the Obama and Romney ads, but the combined effect of watching both is a wash.

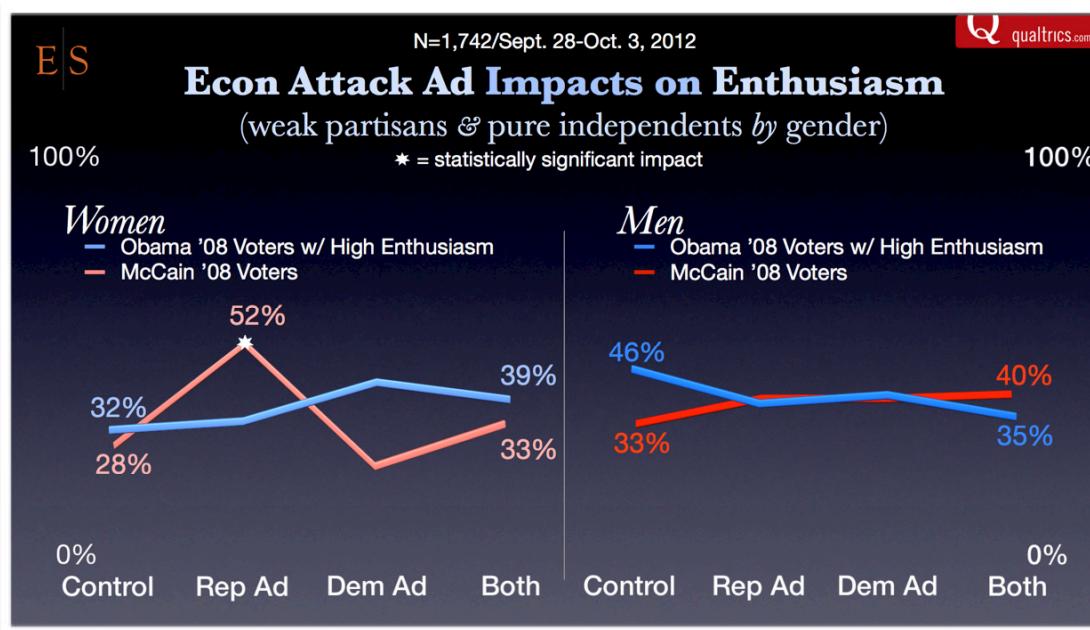
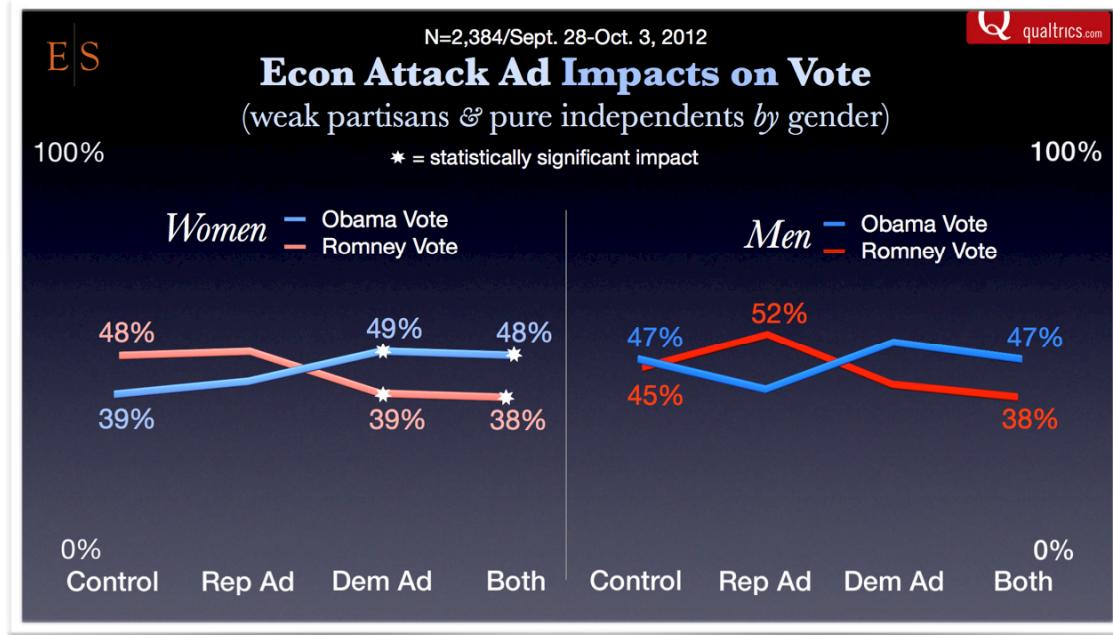
- The Obama Medicare ad increases high enthusiasm among female McCain '08 voters by 24 points - an 85% increase in the highest level of enthusiasm.
- Although not statistically significant, exposure to both ads seems to increase enthusiasm among female Obama '08 voters and male McCain '08 voters.

# Economic Attack Ad Impacts

## Economic Attack Theme - *Money Vote® Impact*

Exposure to the Obama Economic attack ad alone significantly boosts Obama's vote and softens Romney's. And this effect is maintained when voters are exposed to both candidates ads at the same time. Men seem relatively responsive to both ads alone.

- Obama's ad increases his female vote and decreases Romney's by about 10 points.
- The Romney Economic attack ad appears ineffective with women.
- Although not statistically significant, the Romney Economic attack ad does seem to shift male voters away from Obama and toward Romney by about 7 or 8 points.
- In general, men seem more responsive to the Romney ad, and women to the Obama ad.



## Economic Attack Theme - *Enthusiasm Impact*

The Economic attack ads in general appear to decrease enthusiasm among male Obama '08 voters and increase enthusiasm for McCain '08 voters. Female McCain '08 voters seem quite responsive to the ads, with increasing enthusiasm in response to the Romney ad and a slight, but insignificant sag after exposure to the Obama ad.

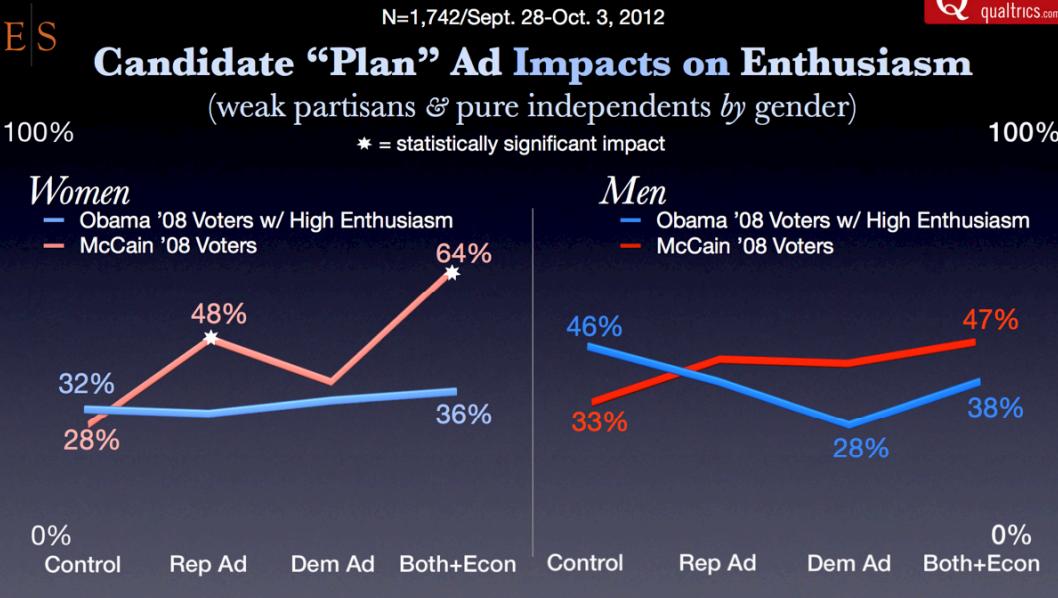
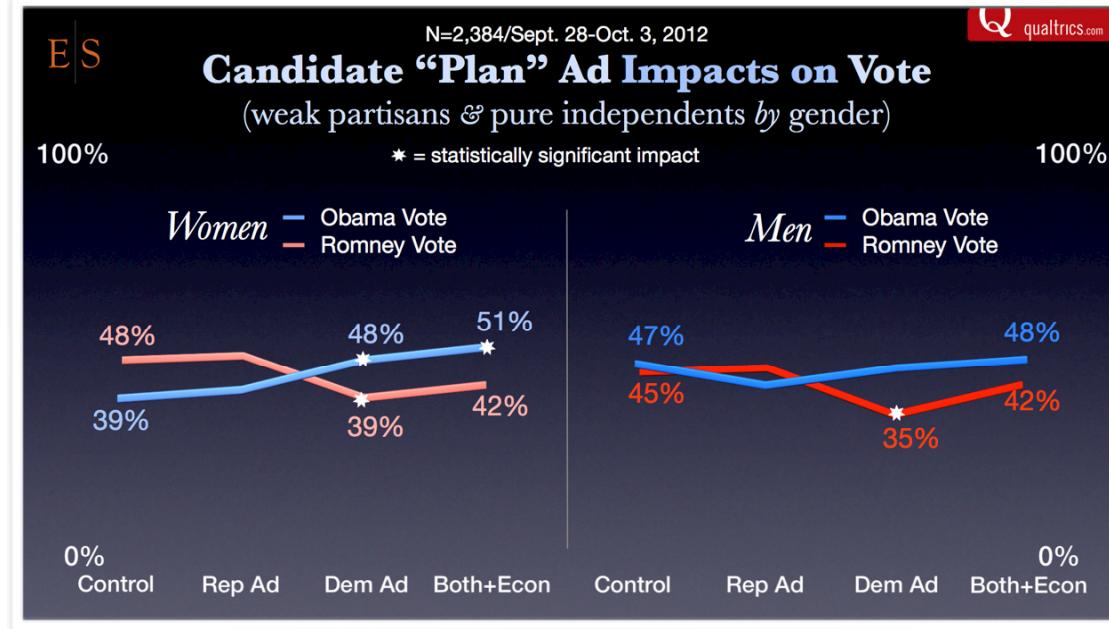
- The Romney Economic attack ad increases high enthusiasm among female McCain '08 voters by 25 points - almost a 90% increase in the highest level of enthusiasm.
- Although not statistically significant, exposure to both ads seems to shift the male McCain '08 voter enthusiasm gap with Obama voters from an 11-point deficit to a 5-point advantage.

# Candidate “Plan” Ad Impacts

## Candidate “Plan” Theme - *Money Vote® Impact*

Obama’s minute-long “Plan” ad seems quite effective at shifting the vote his way when seen alone. Men again shift more on their Romney vote than their Obama vote. Watching both “Plan” ads in addition to Romney’s Economic attack ad causes a substantial increase in Obama’s female vote and drop in the female Romney vote, but results in a wash with men.

- Obama’s ad *increases* his female vote and decreases Romney’s by about 10 points. Obama’s ad also decreases the male Romney vote about 10 points.
- The “Plan” ads in combination with Romney’s Economic attack ad boosts the female Obama vote 12 points and turns a 9-point deficit with women into a 9-point advantage.
- The “Plan” ads in combination with Romney’s Economic attack ad appears ineffective with men.



## Candidate “Plan” Theme - *Enthusiasm Impact*

The Romney “Plan” ad and the combined “Plan” ads plus the Romney Economic attack ad have a huge, positive impact on female McCain ’08 voter enthusiasm. While the impact of the ads on men doesn’t reach statistical significance, the “Plan” ad conditions do seem to boost male McCain ’08 voter enthusiasm and sap male Obama ’08 voter enthusiasm.

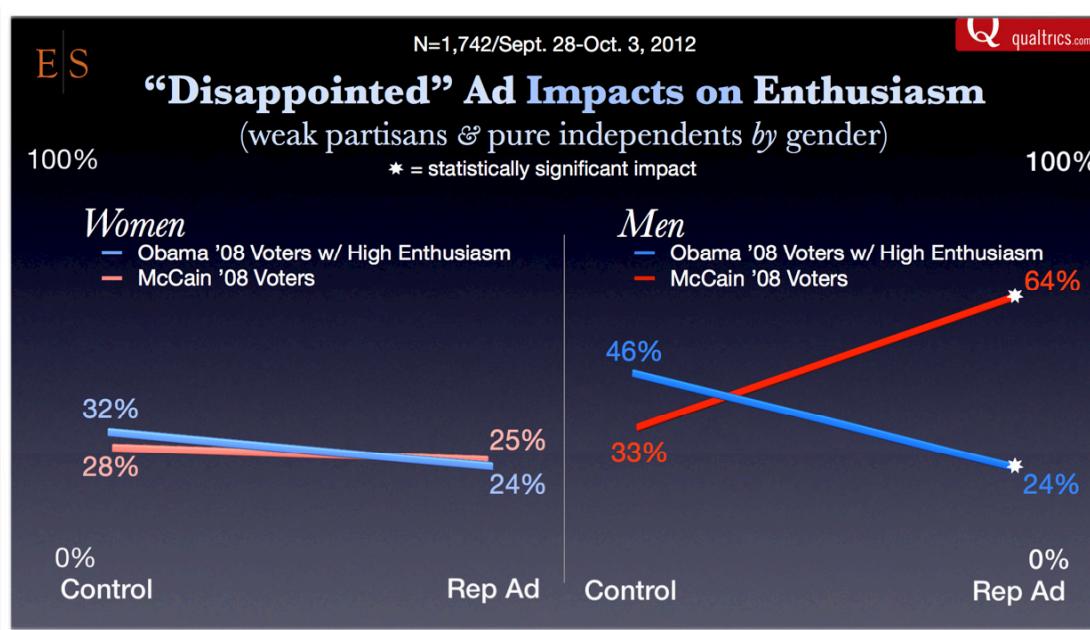
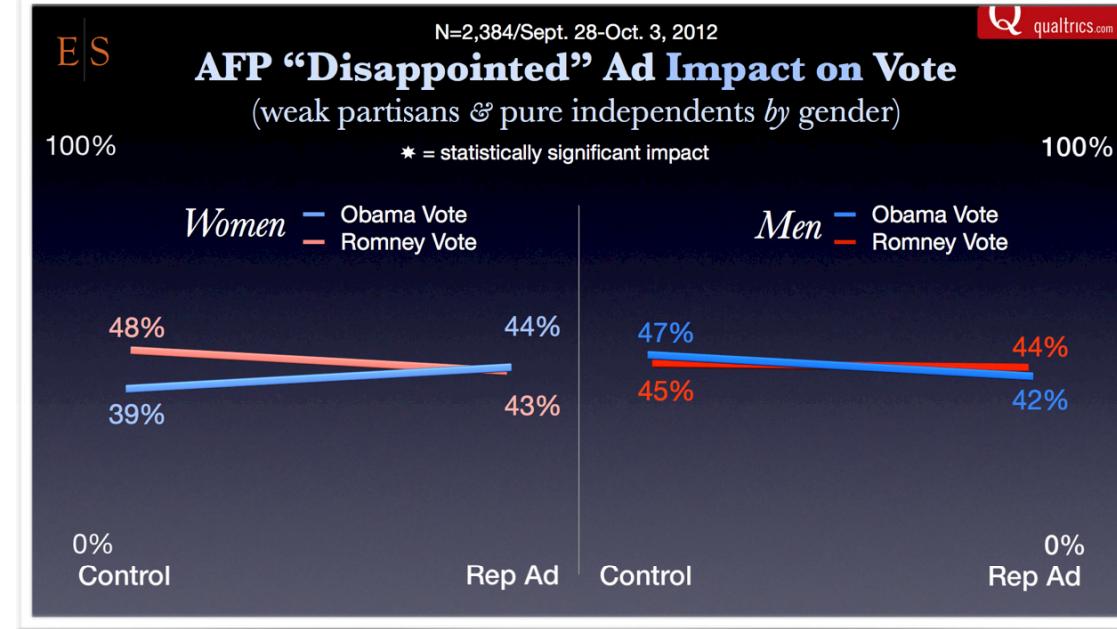
- The Romney “Plan” ad increases high enthusiasm among female McCain ’08 voters by 20 points - an over 70% increase in the highest level of enthusiasm.
- The “Plan” ads in combination with Romney’s Economic attack ad boosts t high enthusiasm among female McCain ’08 voters by 36 points - an almost 130% increase in the highest level of enthusiasm.

# AFP “Disappointed” Ad Impacts

## AFP “Disappointed” Theme - *Money Vote*® Impact

Although none of the Romney ads appear to have a significant positive impact on Romney’s share of the vote or a significant negative impact on Obama’s, the AFP “Disappointed” ad appears to have a possibly negative impact on Romney’s relative standing with women. This widely-aired ad, in which Obama voters express their disappointment with the President, consistently won focus-groups as an ad that would shift swing voters and appeal to women. The ad, however, doesn’t seem to move votes at all.

- Although the impacts are not statistically significant, Obama’s 9-point deficit in the Control condition becomes a 1-point advantage when women watch the AFP “Disappointed” ad.
- Overall, this ad appears to be, at the least, ineffective for Romney and, at worst, a net negative with the female vote.



## AFP “Disappointed” Theme - *Enthusiasm* Impact

While the “Disappointed” ad fails to shift voters, it hugely increases enthusiasm among men who voted for McCain in ‘08. Surprisingly, the “Disappointed” ad is terrible as a soft-edged appeal to swing voters, but seems to be very effective red-meat for male voters in Romney’s base.

- The “Disappointed” ad increases high enthusiasm among male McCain ‘08 voters by 31 points - a nearly 95% increase in the highest level of enthusiasm.
- The “Disappointed” ad decreases high enthusiasm among male Obama ‘08 voters by 21 points - a decline of more than 45% in the highest level of enthusiasm.