

What drives the public’s perception of political in advertising?

Two experiments exploring feature importance of political ads

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Which ad is more political?



An increase in election related digital advertising

- In the 2019-2020 U.S. election cycle, approximately **18% of all spending went to digital ads** (\$1.6 billion), a dramatic increase from the 2-3% in the 2015-2016 cycle
- Facebook, Google/YouTube, and Twitter have all created policies to introduce **disclosure and transparency of political advertising**
- **Definitions** of which ads are considered ‘**political**’ differ widely between different platforms
- Platforms use *content-based* definition of the ‘political’ defining it as anything **related to public legislation, administration of the law, elections, or other controversial issues** with the potential for government action
- Social media platforms already rely in part on the **public to flag for removal political content that does not conform to platform policies**

Source, message, or orientation: What feature drives perceptions of the political?

Hypothesis 1: Sources viewed as being **overtly political** (i.e. presidential candidates) will be **rated as more political** than other sources (i.e. corporations and advocacy groups)

Hypothesis 2: Stronger political messages will be rated as **political**, regardless of source

Hypothesis 3: Participants will **perceive ads** with messages that **do not conform to their beliefs to be more political than those that do**

Research Question 1: Do the **effects measured** in the conjoint analysis **replicate** when respondents evaluate **real social media ads**?

Study 1: Conjoint experiment

Design details

- Components resulted in **180 profiles** (resulting in unlikely combinations)
- *Sources and messages* (related to the environment or oil sector/environmental protection) from **Facebook Ad Library**
- *Orientation* determined using two questions concerning the cause of **global warming** and the ability of **business regulation to protect the environment**
- Experiment conducted twice due to programming error
 - Original survey distributed July 2020 N = 1,006
 - Reproduction fielded April 2021 N = 1,013

Components of randomly constructed ads

Source

Joe Biden
Sponsored • Paid for by BIDEN FOR PRESIDENT
ID: 292090191784581

Sierra Club
Sponsored • Paid for by SIERRA CLUB
ID: 233220784779105

Patagonia
Sponsored • Paid for by Patagonia
ID: 1543770395764275

Donald J. Trump
Sponsored • Paid for by TRUMP MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN COMMITTEE
ID: 276052360225974

Power The Future
Sponsored • Paid for by Power The Future Inc
ID: 1892229134250781

ExxonMobil
Sponsored • Paid for by Exxon Mobil Corporation
ID: 526594501323243

Message

Pro-conservation

Pro-development

Strong

URGENT: Politicians are trying to gut the National Environmental Policy Act, paving the way for disastrous pipelines like Keystone XL to be built. We need 824 more people to submit a public comment before the end of the month to stop this. Take action NOW: <https://sc.org/3a6avu2>

Moderate

New Mexico is leading the charge to tackle the climate crisis. Its commitment to nation-leading policies will #CutMethane pollution and set an example for other states to follow.

Weak

Let's work together to preserve America's natural beauty for future generations to enjoy.

Strong

NATIONAL POLL: Pipelines are an essential part of American infrastructure. Without them, we are dangerously dependent on foreign oil. Luckily, politicians are working tirelessly to ensure that we all have affordable energy. Let Congress know that you support this industry!

Moderate

Texas oil and natural gas production is making America more energy secure. This industry is helping to create jobs for hard-working Americans and keep our economy strong.

Weak

It's time for America to start training the next generation's energy sector workforce.

Image

Desert

Oil

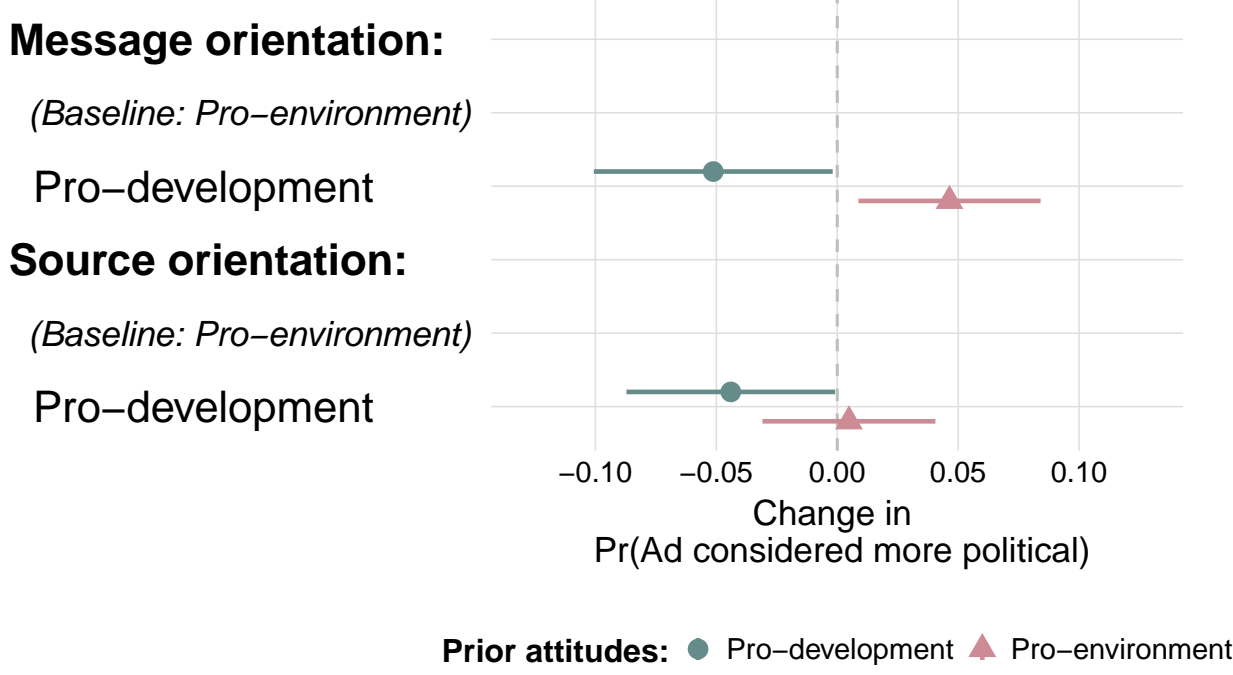
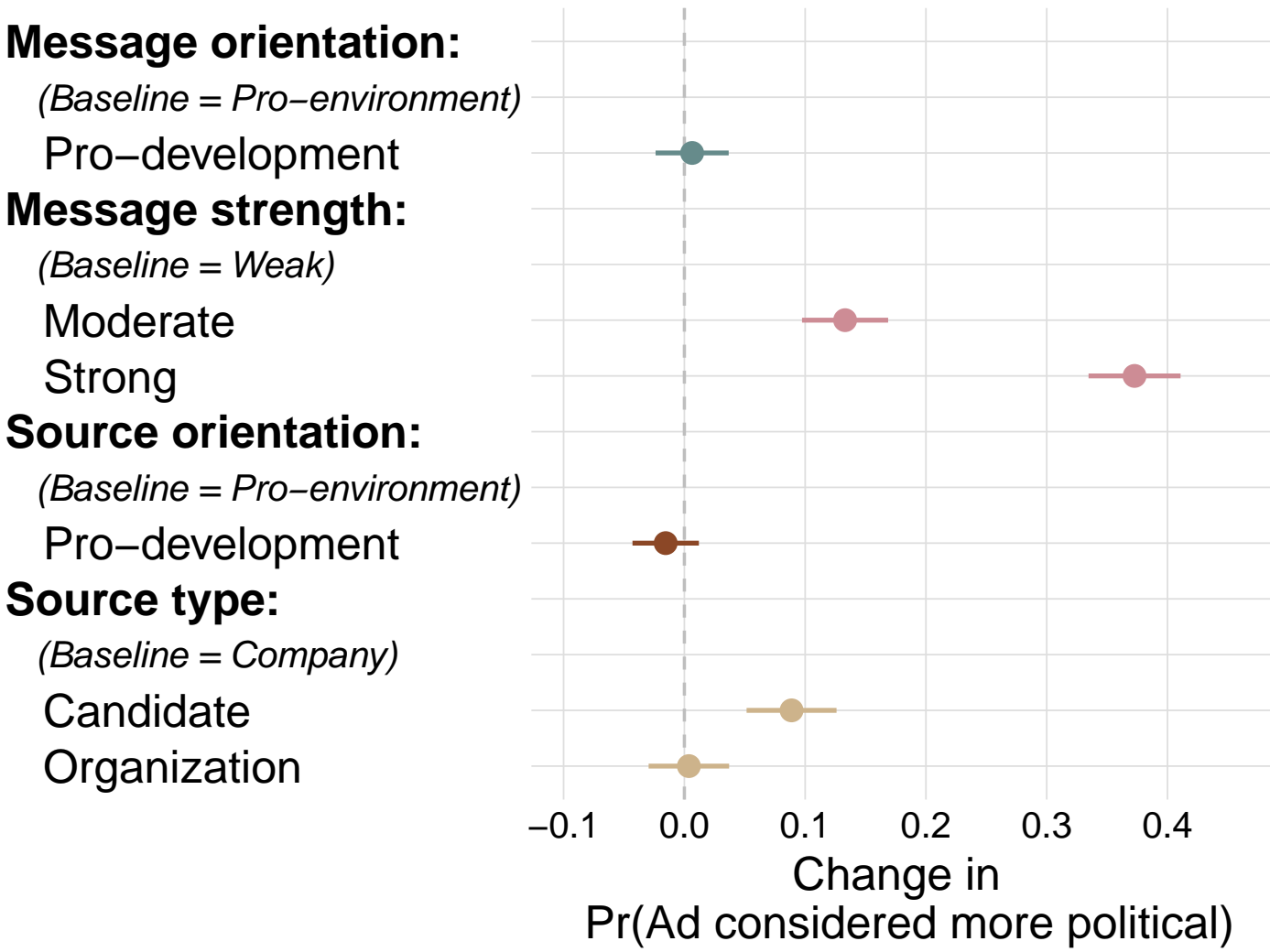
Pipeline

Solar Wind

Yellow Flowers

Conjoint key findings

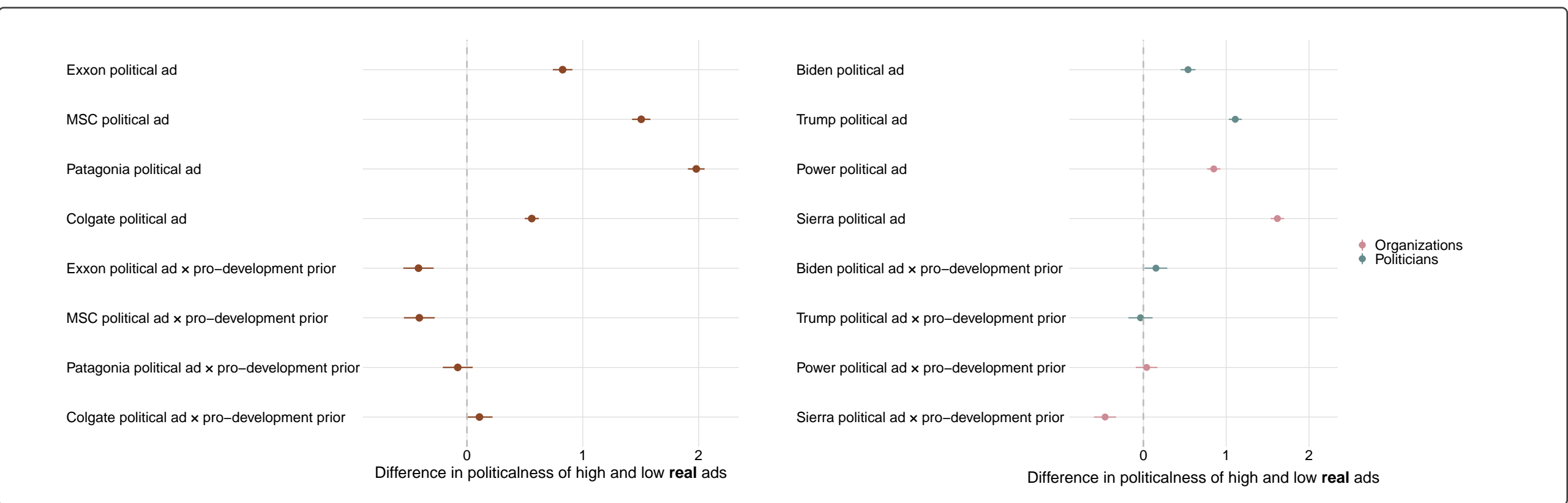
- Real ad study suggests **politicians > advocacy groups > companies**
- Both the **message and the messenger matter** in determining whether an ad is more political
- **Content** of the ad message has the **largest average marginal component effect (AMCE)**
- Orientation effects are smaller relative to those we see for ad message or ad source.



Study 2: Real ads experiment

Design details

- **Within-between experiments** asking respondents to **evaluate 8 real ads** drawn from the Facebook Ad Library
- Sources included **candidates, non-profit groups, and private companies**
- **One pro-development and one pro-environmental source** in each category
- **Messages selected from real ads in the Ad Library based on the strength of political message** (pre-tested using MTurkers)



Takeaways

- Real ad study suggests **politicians > advocacy groups > companies** in influencing perception that ad is political
- **Real ads experiment** (and conjoint) show **content and strength of message critical in evaluations**
- **Respondents somewhat biased in labeling content runs counter to their prior beliefs** as more political when it.
- Additional analysis of the Facebook Ad Library illustrates that **46% of ads** that seem to **meet the public’s definition** would **not be captured by source-based policies**

References

- [1] Jennifer Fitzgerald. What does “political” mean to you? *Political Behavior*, 35(3):453–479, 2013.
- [2] Jens Hainmueller, Daniel J Hopkins, and Teppei Yamamoto. Causal inference in conjoint analysis: Understanding multidimensional choices via stated preference experiments. *Political analysis*, 22(1):1–30, 2014.
- [3] Jaime E Settle. *Frenemies: How social media polarizes America*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

