PLAP 3140: Mass Media and American Politics

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Ms. Leah Malkovich: Wednesday 7:00-7:50pm

"On my honor as a student I have neither given nor received aid on this assignment."

Attack ads and positive ads are two types of ads used in political advertising, but which type is more effective? Attack ads are those that portray the opposing candidate in a negative light, while positive ads are those that focus on the positive traits and/or policies of the candidate endorsing it.[1] Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump both used attack ads and positive ads during their presidential campaigns in 2016. I will be comparing an attack ad Clinton used on Trump to a positive ad Trump used about himself. Both ads deal with womanhood and carry drastically different messages about Trump's view of women. I will analyze them based on both their explicit message such as text and implicit message such as music, sound, images, and non-verbal cues.[2] After analyzing these ads, I will use them in a hypothetical experiment that would evaluate how viewing attack ads vs. positive ads does or does not drive viewers to vote for the candidate running the ad.

Clinton's attack ad stars a military veteran with three daughters. The veteran has his sleeves rolled up, showing he is a man who "gets the job done," highlighting his image as a working class, average American.[3] The vast majority of the ad has a family-style background of a middle-class home. Clearly, this was another symbolic choice that illuminates his status as an average American. At the same time, however, his history as a veteran makes him appeal as more than the average American. He also notes he had "been a Republican all his life." The combination of his veteran status and Republican voting history serves to appeal to Republicans watching the ad. This ad was designed to help Clinton reach Republican voters (in the military especially), towards the center, and/or with daughters. His three daughters are portrayed throughout the ad, and they always seem happy and playful. Furthermore, sunshine is in the

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[1] Paul Freedman, "Mass Media and American Politics" (lecture, University of Virginia, April 15, 2019).

[2] Paul Freedman, "Mass Media and American Politics" (lecture, University of Virginia, April 24, 2019).

[3] Freedman, "Mass Media."

room when the veteran and his daughters are playing. He notes that he cannot stand Trump calling women "pigs, dogs, and bimbos." Using Trump's words against him, the veteran is clearly underlining his disgust with Trump's statements. He then claims he wants his daughters to "grow up proud and strong, in a nation where they are valued and respected," suggesting that this would not be possible if Trump became president. At the same time, the music switches from a more somber, slower pace to a happier, faster pace. This musical choice aligns with his transition towards his main point; he is voting for Clinton. The somber tone sets to work with the negative words used to attack Trump, while the happier music serves to symbolize how hope is still there for his daughters through electing Clinton. The veteran's final statement is quite powerful; he states, "Donald Trump's America is not what I fought for." This quote works to emphasize his stance against Trump and effectively downplays Trump's pro-military/veteran stances through a veteran directly opposing him. The ad ends with Clinton hugging a young girl at one of her speeches. In summary, this ad serves to suggest that Trump is not respectful towards women and that the nation's women would not be respected if he became president. This is represented literally by the ad's title being "Respected." Additionally, the ad serves to attempt to sway veterans and Republicans towards Clinton.

Trump's positive ad is narrated by his daughter, Ivanka Trump. Titled "Motherhood," the ad seeks to underline how Trump cares about women, but particularly mothers. Ivanka notes right off the bat that she is a "mother, wife, and an entrepreneur." Thus, the ad starts with Ivanka trying to appeal to women from a variety of backgrounds. Furthermore, the choice to have Ivanka speak as opposed to someone else illuminates how the ad is meant primarily for women. Perhaps viewers would consider her opinions more reliable because she is Trump's daughter and has known him her whole life. Sunshine is prominent throughout the ad, reinforcing its positive

mood and Ivanka's positive tone when she speaks. The ad portrays women in the workforce throughout, with candidate Trump sitting next to them and shaking their hands in various scenes. This suggests Trump would work well with women if elected because he already works with them in this depiction. The ad is very policy driven. Ivanka states that Trump would rewrite outdated labor laws and implement childcare tax credits, paid maternity leave, and dependent care savings accounts. The target audience for this ad is women, particularly mothers. The ad plays upon mothers' emotions by depicting babies laughing and smiling throughout. In one scene, a family with kids is playing as the sun sets, and they are ethnic, attempting to appeal to demographics beyond white mothers. In the beginning, a mother and her child are wearing red, white, and blue, lending the ad a patriotic mood. The ad repeats this theme towards the end when Trump is holding a child in a white and blue shirt with another child in a red shirt close by. All in all, this ad completely opposes Clinton's attack ad by portraying Trump as supportive of women to the point that he will take action to implement a number of policies to benefit mothers.

For my experiment, I plan to see how Clinton's attack ad and Trump's positive ad affect voter turnout. I will use a controlled experiment to test this correlation. This is a play off of Ansolabehere and Iyengar's experiments and Freedman and Goldstein's experiments, which served to question whether attack ads increase or decrease voter turnout. Generally speaking, Ansolabehere and Iyengar agreed with the demobilization hypothesis that suggests attack ads decrease voter turnout.[4] Freedman and Goldstein on the other hand agreed with the stimulation hypothesis that suggests attack ads increase voter turnout, although they indicated the need for more research to be conducted.[5] For my experiment, my hypothesis will be that attack ads

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[4] Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative: How Political Ads Shrink and Polarize the Electorate* (n.p., 1995)
[5] Paul Freedman and Ken Goldstein, "Measuring Media Exposure and the Effects of Negative Campaign Ads," *American Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 4 (October 1999)

increase voter turnout, i.e. I will agree with the stimulation hypothesis. I will be agreeing with this hypothesis based on the fact Clinton ran more attack ads than Trump did during her campaign and won the popular vote.[6]

I plan to randomly select parents of voting age who have or are having children to be the subjects. These subjects will view either the Clinton ad or the Trump ad, and the control in the experiment will be a group that is not exposed to these ads and their likelihood of voting. This is the one-ad design as described by Ansolabehere and Iyengar, which I am choosing because they argue this design "isolates the effects of a single attribute of campaign advertisements."[7] For this experiment, this single attribute will be the attack nature of the Clinton ad and the positive nature of the Trump ad. These ads, however, will be perfectly replicated using different, fake candidates in order to eliminate preconceived biases. This process will increase internal validity by eliminating the possibility of the subjects' emotions being affected by the fact that the ad was pro-Clinton or pro-Trump. For the sake of this experiment, Trump will be "Nicola Nones," and Clinton will be "Leah Malkovich." The subjects will view the ads in a living-room type of area that Iyengar and Kinder used to increase external validity.[8] The subjects will be provided a cup of coffee, a newspaper, and a blanket to further increase external validity by giving the environment a homey vibe; people are far more likely to view ads in the comfort of their home than in a research lab, for example. The living room, coffee, newspaper, blanket, and additional ads will be experimental constants. There will be an ad for toothpaste before the political ad they view and an ad for deodorant after it. These other commercials will also serve to increase

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[6] Erika Franklin Fowler, Travis N. Ridout, and Michael M. Franz, "Political Advertising in 2016: The Presidential Election as Outlier?," *The Forum* 14, no. 4 (2016): 458.

[7] Ansolabehere and Iyengar, *Going Negative*, 23.

[8] Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters*, updated ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987/2010).

external validity and give each subject a moment to digest the material in the political ad. The independent variables will be the fake Clinton ad and the fake Trump ad, while the dependent variables will be percent of people who voted and the number of votes each candidate received.

After watching the ad, the subjects will be given a short questionnaire. This questionnaire will have a variety of questions to gauge how the subjects perceived the ads. It will have a variety of required questions. First, it will have basic demographic questions, such as age, gender, hometown, and number of children. Another important question will be what gender the children are; this will highlight if people who had a daughter were or were not strongly affected by the ad, considering the ads' focus on women. One question will be "Did this ad have a strong impression on you?" This will be used to see how effective each ad was in reaching the subject. It will be followed with a question asking why the ad gave them a strong impression or why not. All of the questions above will be listed as required questions. The most important question in regard to testing the stimulation hypothesis will not be required. The required questions will increase internal validity because these questions will throw participants off the scent for what the experiment is searching for.

There will be three non-required questions, all of which will have a "yes" or "no" answer. The first one will ask if the subjects would purchase the toothpaste shown in the toothpaste ad. This question is simply there as a cushion to disguise the importance of the next question, which is also just an optional component. It will say "Would you vote for the candidate running this ad?" and will reinforce the name of the candidate who ran it ("Malkovich" for subjects who saw the Clinton-based ad and "Nones" for those who saw the Trump-based ad). Including this question will increase external validity because it is not required as part of the experiment, just as voting is not required legally in the United States. Furthermore, through comparing the number

of people who cast a vote for the candidate who ran the ad they watched versus the number of people who do not, I can test how the attack ad and positive ad impacted viewers' desire to vote. The last required question will be whether the subjects would purchase the deodorant depicted in the final ad they view. Beyond disguising the importance behind the voting question, the toothpaste and deodorant ads will serve to add more content to the questionnaire. Through adding more non-required questions, the subjects will see more than just the option to vote, decreasing the likelihood that they will want to fill out the non-required questions based on being thorough for the sake of completing the questionnaire.

Besides importance behind asking certain questions, there is also importance behind not asking certain questions. For example, I will not ask the subjects' political affiliation during this experiment. The reason is I do not want the subjects to be guessing which party is behind which ad because doing so could affect their decision to vote and thus decrease the internal validity. The subjects must vote or not vote based entirely on the ad they watched. Although it might increase external validity considering voters often vote along party lines, I am not concerned with voter preference based on bias by affiliation. I also will not ask how likely it is that they would vote for the opposing candidate to the ad, as I am only concerned with voter turnout, not voter preference. Additionally, having too many questions could decrease internal validity because subjects might grow tired of answering them, possibly leading the subjects to rush through the questions and not answer truthfully.[9]

The experiment, however, is not perfect. First, giving the subjects the option to vote shortly after they view the ad carries little external validity for two reasons. One reason is that it

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[9] Leah Malkovich, "Mass Media and American Politics (Discussion)" (lecture, University of Virginia, April 10, 2019).

is highly unlikely that voters would view an ad and immediately go to the polls to vote. The second reason is that in this experiment viewing this singular ad would be the only factor determining how these voters feel about a particular candidate and therefore the only factor determining if they vote. In real life, there are a myriad of other factors that determine whether or not candidates vote (cite). Through only using parents with children, I will not be able to see how these ads affect other demographics' voter turnout, which is a major limit of this experiment. An additional limitation is that I will not be able to see whether or not subjects viewing one ad would have been more or less likely to vote if they were to view the other ad as well, which would be possible with a two-ad design.

In conclusion, this experiment would be able to show how likely parents would be to vote when viewing an attack ad versus viewing a positive ad about treatment of women. If more people viewing the positive ad elected to vote for the candidate running the positive ad ("Motherhood") than the attack ad ("Respected"), this would support the demobilization hypothesis because people who viewed the negative ad had lower voter turnout. If people are driven to the polls by this positive ad, this could mean that people are more motivated by positive messages, and the heartwarming feeling produced from the ad could cause people to vote for the candidate. Additionally, candidates running the positive ad could be viewed in a better light for choosing to be positive about themselves rather than being negative about their opponent, which could also be a reason causing people to want to vote. Considering these results indicate that people who viewed the attack ad casted fewer votes, this would mean that people were turned off by the idea that the candidate running the ad went to such measures to attack their opponent. Moreover, they may have thought the negative ad undermined political goals. If, however, more people who viewed the attack ad chose to vote than people who viewed the positive ad, this

would support the stimulation hypothesis. If more people are driven to the polls by the attack ad to vote for the candidate running it, then they may feel compelled to vote for the candidate running the ad to ensure the candidate being attacked does not take office. Additionally, this result would mean that less people who viewed the positive ad felt inclined to cast a vote. This could be due to apathy in the sense that people who viewed the positive ad assumed that the message was so good that enough people would vote for the candidate that they would not need to vote to ensure this candidate got elected. The results of this and studies like it would be extremely important; if substantial evidence came forth showing that either positive or attack ads were more powerful than the other, this revelation could completely alter the types of ads society views on media platforms in the future.

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