

**PARTY, PEOPLE, OR POLICY?
UNCOVERING THE IMPACT OF ADVERTISEMENT ON VOTER BEHAVIOR
IN BALLOT INITIATIVE AND CANDIDATE-CENTERED CAMPAIGNS**

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ABSTRACT

We have acquired, over the last several decades, a fairly rich understanding of the impact on voter behavior of political communication in general and of political advertising specifically. Yet much of this knowledge pertains to “traditional,” candidate-centered elections; comparatively very little is known with regards to ballot initiative races. In principle, these contests pit not people, but proposed policies, against each other. In practice, however, they not only feature ads discussing policy, but also frequently comprise ads highlighting a measure’s supporters and opponents, be they individuals, non-profit groups, media outlets, industries, or political parties. This, in turn, leads to a basic query: what types of advertising message carry the greatest weight with voters in initiative contests – and how do they differ (if at all) from the effects they have in similar ads run in candidate-centered elections? Through an original experiment, the dissertation that follows aims to break new ground in the voter behavior, media effects, and direct democracy literature by tackling this question.

*For my parents,
my very first teachers*

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Unless my life dramatically veers off course at some point over the next 30 years and I end up enrolling as a new Parasitology major, Kevin (Vin) Arceneaux will have formally been my last professor. More than this, he will have in turns been my guide, my teacher, my supervisor, and ultimately my dissertation advisor. More than anything, he will have been my champion.

To this day, I would be hard-pressed to say whether he is a more impressive scholar or pedagogue; all I do know is that in both categories, he is the best that I have ever had a chance to work with. Yet that is only half the story, as it does not speak to his continuous giving – of his insight, his wisdom, his patience, his energy and, most of all, his time and his unwavering support.

Film screenwriter Aaron Sorkin once said of director David Fincher, “A man this talented has no business being the nicest guy in the room – but he is.” I could not say it here myself any better way. *Merci, mon ami.*

ETHICAL APPROVAL

All procedures performed in studies directly involving human participants were done so in accordance with the ethical standards of Temple University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and further to formal approval by the IRB.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Few concepts are so profoundly ingrained in the cultural, institutional, and psychological nature of American life as that of self-determination. The idea extends beyond a simple penchant for individualism, as it also profoundly shapes collective action in the United States. That people would and should be able, together, of deciding upon their common destiny is a natural implication of the sacred right at the heart of the American tradition to free and fair elections.

Of course, the act of voting, particularly in the early decades of the 21st century, is not – or, rather, is *no longer* – limited to America. What *does* make the United States different – if not quite entirely unique – is some of the institutional tools it has adopted and continues to use with the aim of fostering better popular representation and participation in the political process. Perhaps none illustrates this better than the public-initiative process – also commonly referred to as “direct democracy” – by which ordinary citizens can bypass their elected officials to get constitutional and legislative measures adopted or repealed. How people come to exercise their right to participate in such a process – that is, what approaches are used to influence their deciding on how to vote in these direct democracy campaigns, and which of these approaches are most successful at doing so – lies at the heart of this dissertation.

Before going further, however, let us first take a brief moment to acquire a basic understanding of the initiative process itself with an overview of why it came about, where it is used, and how it works to affect contemporary politics and public life.

A Primer on the Initiative – Its Origins, Purpose, and Reach

As is the case of many other social and political reforms in the U.S., the initiative process is more or less a child of California (Allswang 2000). At the time, a few select private interests – the Southern Pacific Railroad chief among them – had built political machines that put them and officeholders in a position of nearly unchecked power. This phenomenon, called “boodling,” contributed to the Progressive and Populist upheaval of the late 19th and early 20th century; the 1892 Populist Party platform marked a turning point by formally endorsing direct legislation. In reaction to rising pressure, the California code was the first in the nation to be amended, in 1893, to make the initiative process available in every city and county in the state¹.

Calls for enacting the initiative continued to grow. They were led in large part by Dr. John Randolph Haynes, a Philadelphia transplant who devoted a quarter of a century of his distinguished life to seeing through the adoption of the initiative, referendum, and recall process first into the Los Angeles city charter in 1903 and, subsequently with the help of Governor Hiram Johnson and like-minded members of the state legislature, into the California state constitution in 1911 (Tallian 1977). By then, a host of other, mostly Western states² had followed the Golden State’s lead³ and already inserted direct

¹ For more detailed accounts of the rise of the initiative process in the United States as part of the populist/progressive movement, see, among others, Goodwyn 1976, Cronin 1989, and Schmidt 1989.

² These include South Dakota – which became the first state to formally adopt the process – in 1898; Utah in 1900; Oregon in 1902; Montana in 1906; Oklahoma in 1907; and Maine and Michigan in 1908. This list of early adopters is eerily familiar to that of other major “Gilded Age” and “Progressive Era”-era reforms including direct election of U.S. Senators, repeal of poll taxes and, perhaps most notably, the women’s suffrage movement (Tallian 1977; McCammon et al. 2001). In fact, save for Maine, every single state just listed was part of the fifteen that granted women full voting rights before the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution made it mandatory nationwide in 1913 (National Constitution Center 2006). Indeed, Lawrence, Donovan and Bowler (2009) find success or failure to adopt the initiative in that period to be strongly

democracy into their own constitution. A decade later, 19 states, home to approximately a third of the U.S. population at the time, had followed suit (Matsusaka 2004). Today, a little over half (27) of the states, home to over two thirds of the nation’s residents, allow for some sort of public initiatives and/or referenda⁴ (Waters 2003).

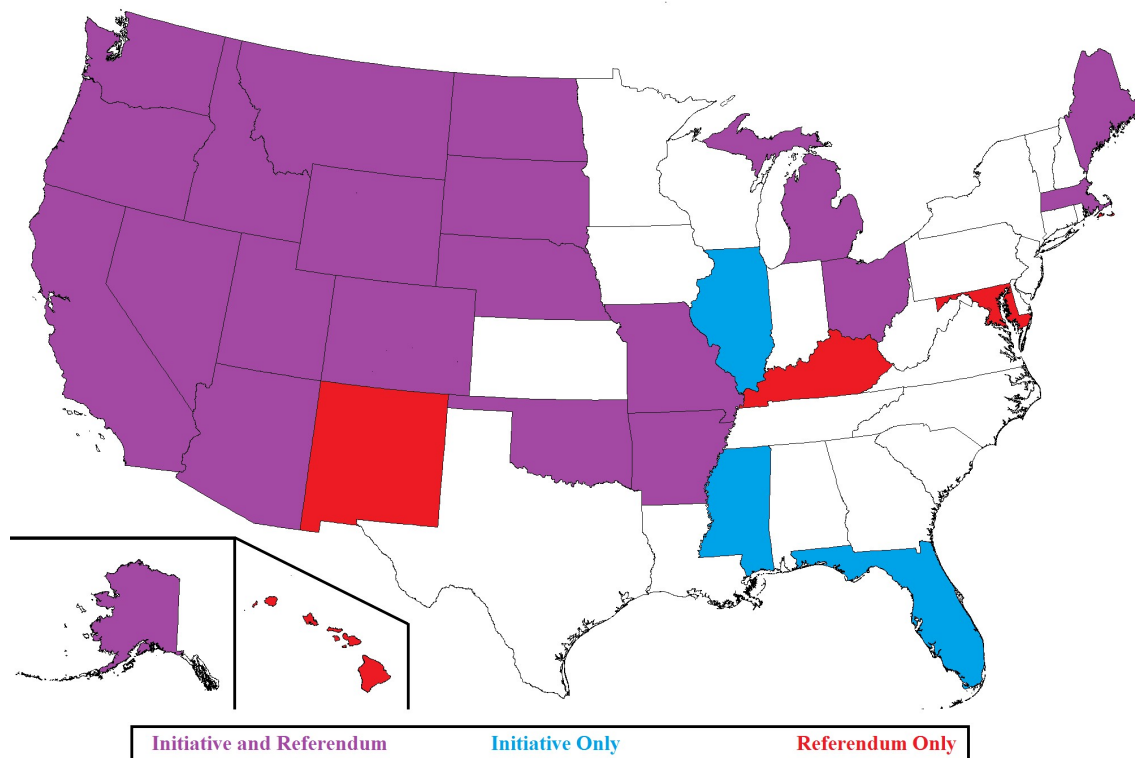


Figure 1.1. Map of U.S. States Allowing for (1) Both the Initiative and the Referendum, (2) the Initiative only, and (3) the Referendum Only.

associated with demography and with political support for Populists (namely for 1896, 1900 and 1908 Democratic presidential nominee and populist champion William Jennings Bryan) and Socialists, whose base of support was mostly concentrated in the Great Plains and the West. States that had homogeneous populations and showed greater support for these parties – and, by extension, for the labor movement – were more susceptible of adopting the initiative.

³ One should also be careful not to discount the additional influence Switzerland, which has provided for the initiative since the middle of the 19th century, had on states that adopted the initiative (Goebel 2002).

⁴ All fifty states actually allow for legislative referenda – a process by which the state legislature can put a given issue up for a vote on the ballot. In terms of citizen-driven ballot measures, 21 states permit both initiatives (putting an issue, be it legislative or constitutional, on the ballot) and referenda (approving or reversing a specific law passed by the state legislature); three states allow only for initiatives, and three others allow for referenda only. Twenty three states permit neither (Waters 2003). Our present research is all-encompassing – it does not limit itself to a single one of these types of direct democracy.

Reliance on direct democracy has been burgeoning at the state level since its inception. As Figure 1.2 below illustrates, other than for a few marked dips over the course of the last century, there has been fairly consistent use of the initiative since its inception. In fact, the last two decades preceding the 2010s – which has thus far seen a drop – displayed the greatest number of statewide initiatives to be voted on in U.S. history.

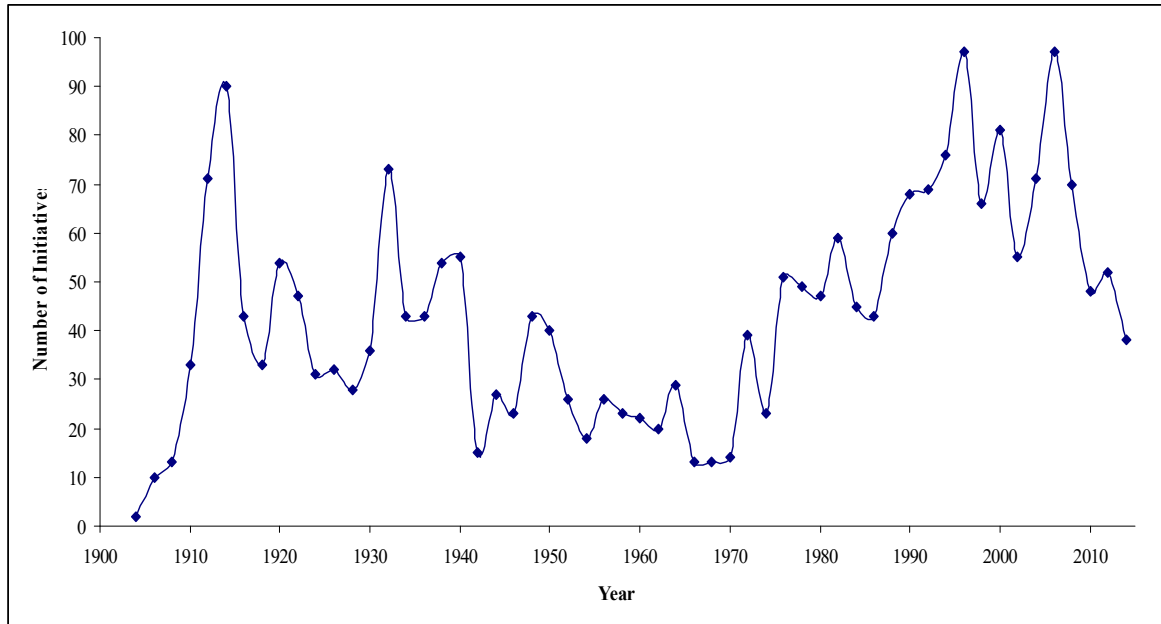


Figure 1.2. Evolution of the Annual Total of Statewide Initiatives in the United States, 1904-2015.
Note: For the sake of visual clarity, since “off-years” (i.e. odd-numbered years) typically produce either very few or no initiatives, they are coupled with the following, even-numbered year. Points illustrated on the graph thus represent an aggregation of the total number of initiatives having made it to a statewide ballot in the previous two years. Original data are from the Initiative & Referendum Institute.

Yet despite the extensive presence of this phenomenon, for a long time little academic work was conducted and published on it. However, the last few decades – and especially the last few years – have seen fresh attention paid by scholars to the role it played in American political life. And for good reason: ballot measures in the United States, as Wells et al. (2009) rightfully note, “often establish or repeal important fiscal, social, and environmental policies that affect millions of citizens and regulate the flow of billions of dollars in public funds, and they often pose complex policy questions that are unfamiliar

or challenging to the average voter” (p. 954). Statewide initiatives over the last few decades have affected public policy pertaining to everything from abortion, affirmative action, animal and environmental rights and criminal justice to euthanasia, taxation and spending, government reform, same-sex marriage, and alcohol, drug and tobacco control (Magleby 1984; Cronin 1989; Gerber 1996, 1999; Tolbert 1998, 2001; Pacelle 2001).

Simply put, “direct democracy” contests *matter*. And yet, as I will discuss in greater detail in the following chapter, we still know relatively little as to how campaigns affect their outcomes. The dearth of knowledge regarding voters’ decision-making process when it comes to initiatives and referenda is perplexing not merely because of the major social and economic policy repercussions just outlined, but because the evidence we *do* have actually suggests that public opinion is more susceptible of being influenced by campaign messages in initiative/referendum contests than in “traditional” candidate-centered elections (LeDuc 2002).

Furthermore, since advertisement is the single largest form of paid communication used in statewide political campaigns (West 2014), it follows that I focus on its content and, by extension, on its impact in mobilizing and persuading voters. This is particularly relevant in that fewer rallies and other “public events” – and no formal debates – are usually held in direct democracy campaigns, and that consequently a great share of campaign spending and activity is devoted to advertising (Johnson 2009).

Before I actually attempt to measure which types of advertising messages have the greatest impact on the electorate, however, it is vital to first gain an understanding of what ads in ballot initiative contests actually look like. What messages do these ads contain, and how do they differ from candidate-centered election ads? We have, from a considerable body of work already published on advertising in candidate-centered campaigns, an appreciable grasp of the various messages they contain. We have long known, for instance, that policy differences between parties and candidates occupy a central, even dominating place in televised political advertising in the U.S. (Patterson and McClure 1976; Joslyn 1980; Kern 1989; cf. Jamieson 1996).

This is not to say that candidate traits are not discussed and used; they are, especially in races for sub-national office (Humke, Schmitt and Grupp 1975; Latimer 1989). However, policy positions and contrasts hold a distinct – some even argue growing (Kaid 2002) – edge over candidate image considerations when it comes to televised spots. In addition, ads regularly use associations between a candidate and that candidate’s party and (perhaps especially) party leader(s) (Joslyn 1980; West 2014; Hohmann 2015). And, of course, some campaigns also run ads that blend both image and issue information (Johnston and Kaid 2002).

All these techniques can be used to produce ads that can fall in either of three global categories: *advocacy* (lauding one’s own candidate); *attack* (criticizing a rival candidate); or *contrast* (combining the first two categories by contrasting positives features of one’s own candidate with the negative features of his/her rival) (Johnston and Kaid 2002; Pfau

et al. 2002). For instance, a *policy-driven advocacy ad* could center on the sponsoring candidate's support of a popular piece of legislation, whereas a *candidate trait-driven attack ad* could stress allegations questioning the personal ethics of the sponsoring candidate's opponent.

This kind of research has not, however, been done nearly as extensively with regard to initiative ads. What kinds of messages are employed in these ads? Do they discuss proposed policies, or the people putting these policies forward? Are the same global categories of ads found in candidate-centered races also found in initiative contests? If so, which side uses which type of ad? To ultimately evaluate which initiative ad messages are most effective at moving voters – the central aim of this dissertation – one must first answer these questions⁵.

Dissertation Structure

The road used to tackle these issues is one seldom traveled in political science. I employ a multi-method approach by first looking in depth at actual recent ballot initiative campaigns to help build the theory and hypotheses to be tested, and by subsequently designing and producing entirely by myself a series of advertisements shown to multiple samples of actual registered voters across the United States, from whom I derive my central findings.

⁵ As outlined below, this is the focus of Chapter 3.

Overall, I uncover ostensible, but often limited advertising effects on voter attitudes. Of all heuristics used, partisan affiliation seems to hold particular sway. Several cues are purely ineffective, and some actually produce something of a “boomerang” effect.

Perhaps more than anything else, my experiment confirms the difficulty, alluded to by some scholars in the existing literature (e.g. Tolbert 2001) in “selling” an initiative to the electorate as opposed to tearing it down. If the public is not already on board with the proposal at the campaign’s onset, it may prove quite challenging to come up with a message that will win it new converts – while also managing to not drive supporters away. That said, in comparison with candidate-centered campaigns, voters appear more likely to be moved by messages in the context of an initiative campaign.

Of course, the next chapters allow for a more detailed outline and discussion of these and other takeaways. The remainder of the dissertation is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 offers, to borrow former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s famed lexicon, a rundown of “known knows” and “known unknowns” – taking an inventory of what we already know from the literature... and what we do not (and should). I concentrate the review of past and current scholarly research on three fields that are, in the context of this project, very much intertwined: direct democracy, voting behavior, and media effects. This effort, in turn, points to some of the gaps that our own research will try to fill.

- Chapter 3 presents a series of three carefully selected case studies – actual statewide ballot initiative campaigns having taken place over different election cycles in different regions of the country over different issues. The battles waged for and against a bill restricting public-sector union power in Ohio in 2011, a tobacco tax hike in California in 2012, and an anti-abortion measure in Tennessee in 2014 provide insight into the various types of messages actually contained in ballot-initiative ads, which informs the design of my own, as well as the hypotheses they will be testing.
- Chapter 4, relying on much of what has been surveyed in the preceding two chapters, details the theoretical and methodological reasoning and approach taken to construct and carry my formal experiment.
- Chapters 5 and 6 showcase results from my formal experiment – the former by focusing on persuasion effects, the latter on agenda-setting and framing effects – and discuss their implications.
- Chapter 7 concludes with a summary of the contributions to scholarly knowledge made by this research, as well as closing thoughts on some of the relevant, important avenues of research still available to future researchers.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Given that this research covers several over-arching fields in the scholarly literature – most significantly direct democracy, voting behavior, political communication, and media effects – it behooves us to start by having an appreciation for what these fields already have to offer.

Direct Democracy

What Do We Know about Ballot Initiative Campaigns?

Though it still remains relatively small, the array of work done on ballot initiatives in the United States is nonetheless a growing and interesting one. Much of it ranges from considering the initiative process' origins (Tallian 1977; Goebel 2002; Matsusaka 2004; Bridges and Kousser 2011) to exploring its impact on citizen engagement, political awareness and distrust of government officials (Tolbert 1998; Tolbert, Grummel and Smith 2001; Lacey 2005; Tolbert and Smith 2006; Schlozman and Yohai 2008; Donovan, Tolbert and Smith 2009; Dyck 2009, 2010; Dyck and Seabrook 2010; Boehmke and Bowen 2010; Binder and Childers 2012; Seabrook, Dyck and Lascher 2015). Additional research further evaluates the extent to which initiatives reflect voters' policy preferences (Gerber 1999; Arceneaux 2002; Matsusaka 2004) and enhance government responsiveness (Lascher, Hagen and Rochlin 1996; Hagen, Lascher and Camobreco 2001; Gerber et al. 2001; Gerber, Lupia and McCubbins 2004; Marschall and Ruhil 2005) and public representation (Magleby 1984; Broder 2001; Garrett and Gerber 2001; Ellis 2002; Matsusaka 2004).

These considerations are all vital in understanding the role played by direct democracy in American political life. However, they leave unresolved the matter of how initiative campaigns are contested – and won. This is striking given the breadth and depth of the scholarly literature on voter behavior in traditional, candidate-centered elections. To what extent can this literature be applied to the direct democracy context?

Campaign Message Effects and Voting Behavior

Do Voters Make Informed Decisions?

The voting behavior literature is marked by a few defining debates over the last half-century, perhaps chief among them whether voters are equipped to articulate sensible preferences when casting a vote, and what causes them to espouse one opinion over another – or no opinion at all. Several political scientists show voters to be lacking either knowledge or coherent and / or consistent preferences when it comes to politics (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Niemi and Weisberg 2001; Flanigan and Zingale 2009; Ellis and Stimson 2012). Converse (1964, p. 212) famously remarks that while elites (defined as those with an active interest in politics) tend to display ideologically consistent preferences, the same cannot be said of most people: the “differences in information held in a cross-section population are simply staggering,” he writes, since “very little information ‘trickles down’ very far” into the masses.

It is a view largely echoed by a fellow mid-20th century political scientist of renown, Valdimir Orlando “V.O.” Key, who surmises that “[m]ass opinion is not self-generating;

in the main, it is a response to cues, the proposal, and the visions propagated by the political activists” (1966, p. 557). Indeed, as another late esteemed political scientist less mercifully puts it, the general populace, in contrast with the “political minority” is made up of “inarticulates [...] submerged in an ideological battle of poorly informed and discordant opinions” (McClosky 1966, p. 180). This was reaffirmed by Levendusky (2009, p. 35), who assesses that there now exists “half a century of research demonstrating that elites are the driving force behind public opinion.” As politics constitute only “a peripheral concern for most voters [...] they need the guidance of elites to make sense of the political world.”

Research over the last several decades has consistently held up the finding that those paying more attention to politics and better understanding political issues tend to harness more ideologically coherent and stable attitudes regarding them (Berelson et al. 1954; Stimson 1975; Feldman 1989; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). This is because individuals expanding greater resources (in terms of time and effort) learning about politics come to develop a greater awareness that holding a certain position on a given issue (e.g. support for higher government spending on public education) comes with holding a certain position on another issue (e.g. support for higher taxes). Those with scant interest have not expanded the resources (e.g. time, effort) to make these cognitive associations and adopt frames of references, and thus tend to see issues (and electoral contests) on a “come-as-they-go” basis, more susceptible to fluctuation... and manipulation.

If differences exist with regards to who in the population possesses political knowledge, variance can also be observed in terms of what kind of political knowledge is most likely to be absorbed and acquired by citizens. Indeed, people tend to digest information related to the “horeserace” aspects of a campaign (i.e. which candidate / party is ahead in trial-heat polls) more easily than they do information pertaining to policy issues at stake in the same campaign (Bartels 1988; see also Prior 2005). Simply put, most ordinary people (i.e. non-political elites) do not show a great deal of knowledge about most public policy issues, and frequently fail to see the ideological links between them – which reinforces the potential for simple “cues” to affect their stands on political matters.

Do Voters Have Deeply-Held Preferences?

While one can unmistakably glean from the literature that most voters do not profess to have a keen understanding or even awareness of all political issues, this should not lead one to hastily conclude that they do not hold political preferences. In fact, they do – and every time they enter a polling booth to check a box (either on a piece of paper or, in this day and age, on a computer screen), they actively express these preferences. The question, then, is just how they come to adopt these attitudes – and how attached they are to them. If the attachment is strong, how can it be broken (or reinforced) through campaign messaging?

Some scholarly accounts present voters as being driven by “motivated reasoning” in that they will be predisposed to receive and / or hold information, conveyed in political messages regardless of its relationship with facts, consistent with already-existing

preferences (Kunda 1990; Ditto and Lopez 1992; Ditto et al. 1998; Kuklinski et al. 2000; Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006; Gaines et al. 2007; Jerit and Barabas 2012). In fact, in certain instances when presented with the very same set of facts, cross-partisan voters choose to interpret these facts in a way that ultimately strengthens their pre-existing partisan preferences (Gaines et al. 2007). A burgeoning body of literature additionally posits that to the extent that people have political predispositions, these may at least partly be explained by genetics (Alford, Funk and Hibbing 2005, 2008; Oxley et al. 2008; Mondak et al. 2010; Smith et al. 2011; Arceneaux, Johnson and Maes 2012; Fowler and Dawes 2013; Cesari, Johannesson and Oskarsson 2014).

How Can One Change Voters' Attitudes?

If voters display such little knowledge yet also hold preferences that are this deeply ingrained, is there any potential to change their mind? Room for shaping voter attitudes does exist – and it varies according to a host of factors. Assuming voters can be open to altering their preferences, what mechanism allows them to do so?

In a seminal study actually focusing on a referendum campaign in California, Lupia (1994) counters the generally pessimistic view of average citizen competence discussed above by contending that voters can – and in effect do – rely on the use of “heuristics” (i.e. cognitive cues) when time comes to cast a ballot (see also Popkin 1991; Bowler and Donovan 1994; Lupia 2001; Arceneaux and Kolodny 2009; Bullock 2011). Looking at a series of statewide public referenda regarding automobile insurance reform, Lupia argues

that through campaign messaging⁶, the various groups involved were able, through what the author calls a “signaling game,” to influence the outcome by letting voters know who stood for each measure. In the end, those measures supported by the insurance industry saw their support decline by a statistically significant margin. This leads Lupia to claim that voters may not actually *need* to be that well informed to make sensible decisions, as not possessing political or policy expertise can be (largely) compensated through the sending and receiving of cognitive shortcuts, such as the fact that a given industry is supporting a certain ballot measure in this case.

There are nuances to this citizen ability, however. For one, it is far from uniform. As shown by Zaller (1992), politically informed voters will be more likely to heed cues from partisan or ideologically-friendly sources (e.g. a liberal voter receiving a message from a liberal source) while also recognizing and resisting cues from opposite sources (e.g. a liberal voter receiving a message from a conservative source). Lau and Redlawsk (2001) further qualify Lupia’s findings, observing that “political experts” – i.e. more sophisticated voters – are not only more likely than less informed citizens to use heuristics, but to do so appropriately (see also Kuklinski, Metlay and Kay 1982). That said, Lau and Redlawsk (2006) also note in a subsequent piece that the overwhelming majority (upwards of 70%) of voters vote “correctly” – i.e. they cast their ballot for the candidate / party more aligned with their preferences⁷. Voters are similarly called by

⁶ Close to \$100 million was spent over the course of the campaign, which took place in 1988, allowing for ample opportunity for campaign messages to be disseminated among the electorate.

⁷ Extending these sorts of findings to voting on ballot measures is somewhat complicated by the issue of initiative complexity (Karp 1998). Indeed, through a set of original experiments, Reilly (2010) shows that when faced with lengthy and complex wording, a substantial portion of voters do in fact vote against their own previously stated policy preferences (or, in some cases, “roll off” and refrain from casting a vote on the matter) – a phenomenon for all intents and purposes absent when the wording is simple.

other political scientists “rational” (Page and Shapiro 1992), “responsible” (Key 1966) – and, in what is arguably even more telling for my purposes, “capable of responding thoughtfully to referenda questions” (Bowler and Donovan 1998) even without necessarily possessing all available information regarding the issues put on the ballot, much in accordance with Lupia. “Public opinion,” writes Page (1996, p. 2), “is usually stable [...] except that it reacts in reasonable ways to world events and to new information that is presented to it.”

Insofar as voters *are* responsive to information provided to them over the course of a campaign, what is most likely to affect their views? In their classic *The American Voter*, later dubbed the “Michigan School” approach, Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960) illustrate voters’ decision-making process with a concept called the “funnel of causality,” in which a series of factors in a person’s life carry different weights in helping to determine how that person will vote. Towering over all other factors is partisan affiliation, which sits at the very end of the Campbell et al. funnel. Voting behavior is thus cast as being to a large extent a function of which political party a voter identifies with (see also Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954) – a finding supported nearly 50 years later by Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) in *The American Voter Revisited*.

This stands somewhat in contrast with Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet’s (1968) “Columbia School” approach, in that it posits that voters essentially “shop” for a candidate like they would any other commodity – i.e. one they can identify with and that they will tend to stay loyal to. The way they come to picking a candidate / party has a

much larger social component than is let on under the Michigan school view, as belonging to a group (be it economic, ethnic, geographical or religious) is presented as holding important sway for forming political preferences (see also Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954).

That said, both the Michigan and Columbia schools share a basic vision of voting as being fairly consistent. Once an individual has sided with a given party – regardless of how / why he has come to support it in the first place – he is likely to throw his lot with that party in the years and decades that follow, with changes possible but relatively rare. This can have repercussions going beyond the mere choice of candidates at the ballot box. Indeed, as Jacobson (2007) points out, how voters evaluate an incumbent politician is largely a function of party affiliation. In fact, when faced with choosing between policy considerations and party cues, voters will often largely ignore the former and instead go with the latter (Rahn 1993; Cohen 2003; cf. Page and Jones 1979; Bullock 2011).

Party identification “explains more than simply how people are likely to vote. It often shapes what policy attitudes they have, how they interpret new political information, and how they evaluate their political leaders. In short, parties influence in major ways how ordinary people interact with the political world” (Hetherington and Keefe 2007, p. 185). In fact, from issues ranging from abortion (Adams 1997) to Social Security reform (Levendusky 2009), party “cues” lead to mass sorting – voters adopting policy preferences in lockstep with their political party’s. As Green, Palmquist and Shickler

(2002, p. 1) succinctly put it, “party is once again the driving factor behind political behavior.”

This takeaway logically translates into a view of the potential for voter persuasion through campaign effects as being limited overall, since enduring partisan loyalty constitutes an enormously important driver of attitude adoption and, ultimately, of vote allocation⁸. In fact, one message – one “cue” – of singular value in a campaign would be precisely to stress a candidate’s party affiliation.

This vision differs from Downs (1957)’s view of voters, whom he contends will gravitate in a rational manner toward the party positioning itself closest to them on issues. The Downsian model, then, potentially allows for considerable campaign effects, as voters are open to changing their allegiance over time, depending on their evaluation of political parties’ policy stands. The observation of significant campaign effects is also highlighted in Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson’s (2004) path-breaking work on the 2000 U.S. presidential election. Some even more recent work further challenges the thesis that voters attached to a political party are necessarily rigidly so – showing that a substantial portion (often over a quarter) of partisans are cross-pressured⁹ on issues they care about and are open to being persuaded to pull the lever for the opposite party (Hillygus and Shields 2008, p. 66). These authors also crucially remind us that in an electoral

⁸ See also Klapper 1960; Finkel 1993; Arceneaux 2008; Lowi et al. 2012, in addition to several scholars highlighting the limited potential for campaign effects outside of a race’s “fundamental” factors (e.g. Fiorina 1981; Erikson and Wlezien 2012, 2014; Sides and Vavreck 2013; Dickinson 2014).

⁹ Hillygus and Shields define cross-pressure as espousing a policy position differing from that of the national political party one identifies with (e.g. a pro-life Democrat; an anti-Iraq War Republican).

environment as competitive as the one we have today, “even a [small] set of persuadable voters can be decisive” (p. 8).

A more general concept – closely related with party identification – outlined by scholars is that of “source cues”: the idea that the nature and / or the identity of political actors putting forth a message influences how this message is received and processed by voters (Mondak 1993; Kam 2005; Arceneaux 2008; Arceneaux and Kolodny 2009; Boudreau 2009). Persuasion is notably made more likely if the recipient perceives the person disseminating the political information as being both knowledgeable and in sync with his or her own interests¹⁰ – which does *not* always necessarily mean belonging to the same political party or espousing the same political ideology (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). If a politician is the one delivering the message, the impact will be correlated with his or her popularity – e.g. a president with a high approval rating speaking in favor of a given issue will be more apt to drive up favorable opinions among the public with respect to that issue (Page, Shapiro and Dempsey 1987; Mondak 1993; Borges and Clarke 2008).

To be clear, “political actors” serving as source cues voters are not limited to politicians – media commentators, for instance, can also wield influence on the general public’s policy attitudes (Page 1996), as can interest groups. Indeed, experimental research suggests that criticism of a candidate coming from either news accounts or from independent or

¹⁰ This line of research in some respects tracks fairly closely with some of seminal social psychology work pertaining to persuasion mechanisms, most notably the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Cacioppo and Petty 1982). In this sense, one could argue that this part of the political communication literature at least partly rests on the shoulders of classic attitude formation scholars. While the links to be made are real (and relevant enough for some of Cacioppo and Petty’s designs to be incorporated into my own, as discussed in subsequent chapters), in an effort to streamline the dissertation (and the literature review most specifically), I limit the additional space devoted to the matter here.

outside groups is more persuasive than campaign-sponsored and campaign-directed attacks (Johnson, Dunaway, and Weber 2011), and can further help prevent “boomerang effects” against the candidate who would otherwise himself launch the attack against his opponent (Shen and Wu 2002). Recent work has even uncovered evidence that a political actor’s facial features can interact with partisan predispositions and affect a political message’s success (Lausten and Petersen 2016). In sum, who is behind – or who is perceived to be behind – a message can thus help raise or blunt the effect that this message would have if standing strictly on its own.

A limited body of research also focuses on certain additional cue types. For instance, Valentino, Hutchings and White (2002) conclude from an experimental study that racial cues, even if they are only implicit, in political ads can influence voters by “priming” them – a concept reviewed over the next several pages (see also Valentino, Traugott and Hutchings 2002 for racial cues, as well as Weber and Thornton 2012 for religious cues, who come to similar findings).

Who Are Most Influenced by the Media – and How Are They Influenced?

The general paradigm currently guiding the field of political communication is that media effects in general (i.e. not necessarily in the context of an electoral campaign) have a strong *potential* effect, which can nonetheless be blunted (or strengthened) by things like

audience predispositions and the nature of the message being communicated (McQuail 2010)¹¹. Media effects, after all, are not universal (Joslyn 1984).

It is first paramount to note that for any persuasive effect to hold, the recipient must of course be in a position to both accept and receive the message. That is far from a given, considering that those more politically knowledgeable are both more likely to receive political information *and* less likely to have it change their preferences (Converse 1962; Zaller 1992; McGraw and Hubbard 1996; Druckman and Lupia 2000; Arceneaux and Johnson 2013).

Zaller (1992), explaining his landmark “Receive-Accept-Sample” (RAS) model, writes that voters can readily change their preferences over time if different predispositions are brought to the forefront by elite discussion. He surmises that preferences will be largely determined by whatever consideration comes to the surface of voters’ minds. This stands in contrast with so-called “on-line” models, in which voters keep a “running tally” on their preferences by adding new information encountered about an issue, individual or party to their stored memory (McGraw, Lodge, and Stroh 1989; Lodge 2013).

¹¹ A series of paradigms characterized the study of media effects on public opinion over the last several decades. The first half of the 20th century was marked by a “hypodermic needle” view of media effects, in that they were considered to have an extremely potent, powerful, and direct impact on the public. This was dramatically challenged in the 1960s, notably by scholars belonging to the “Columbia School”, who cast media effects as severely more limited. The pendulum swung back again towards more pronounced media effects in the 1970s, only to reach what could be argued is something of an equilibrium point nowadays. In addition to McQuail’s excellent presentation of those paradigms, see also Arceneaux and Johnson’s (2013) account.

What Are the Types of Media Effects?

Of the broad ways that media content may exert influence on public sentiment and attitudes, in addition to persuasion, two major ones singled out by Price and Tewksbury (1997) are of particular interest for this study¹². The first includes two closely linked concepts: agenda-setting – defined as the idea that there is a strong relation between media emphasis on an issue and the importance given to that issue by the public (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007) – and priming – defined as the idea that media content suggests to the public what issue(s) they should consider when making political evaluations (Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

A considerable body of communication and political science work has been conducted on the topic of agenda-setting and priming. The general conclusion emerging from this research is that voters do tend to assign more importance to certain issues if they are exposed to them in the media. More frequent exposure can thus increase certain issues' salience, which can also subsequently lead voters to change their support level for elected officials or candidates for office on the basis of their stands on these issues (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Schleuder, McCombs and Wanta 1991; Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Iyengar and Simon 1993; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Mendelberg 1997; Pan and Kosicki 1997; Valentino 1999; cf. Miller and Krosnick 2000).

¹² Other campaign effect-induced persuasion theoretical approaches have been introduced by political psychology researchers, including dual-process theory (for a summary, see, among others, Bullock 2011). While of scholarly interest and value, these theories were ultimately more peripheral to my study which, in the spirit of cohesion and concision, opted to use a limited number of theoretical approaches.

A second general way media content can impact public opinion is through framing – the idea that “how an issue is characterized in the media can have an influence on how it is understood” (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007, p. 11) and interpreted (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009) by audiences. A particularly useful way of thinking about frames is provided by Gamson and Modigliani (1987, p. 143), who describe them as “packages” used by the media to present an issue. These “packages” have at their core “a central organizing idea [...] that provides meaning” and information about an issue. Frames allow the media to relay an issue to an audience by selecting one or a limited number of aspects pertaining to that issue that reflect overarching cultural themes and narratives (Gamson 1992). This, in turn, can lead the audience to adopt “a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and / or treatment recommendation” regarding that issue (Entman 1993, p. 52).

The effect of framing on public opinion can be quite powerful. As part of an experimental study designed by Simon and Jerit (2007), subjects are presented with the exact same text to read regarding a certain abortion procedure, albeit for one difference: the word “fetus,” which is replaced for some subjects by “baby.” The results speak for themselves: respondents assigned the latter text are statistically more supportive of regulating the abortion procedure discussed in the article than those assigned the former. This largely echoes a myriad other studies in which the emphasis given to competing frames is reflected in participants’ policy and / or political evaluations – typically reference to as “emphasis frames” (Nelson, Clawson and Oxley 1997; Jacoby 2000; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Tewksbury et al. 2000; Price, Nir and Cappella 2005).

That said, an important caveat is in order: some issues are more “framable” than others (Entman and Rojecki 1993, p. 187). That is to say, the impact of changing the angle given to a particular news story or public affairs topic will vary according to the topic in question. For instance, in conducting an experiment in which they give respondents a text identical save for its title, Entman and Rojecki (1993) find a significantly larger framing effect when the title emphasizes a controversial issue like drugs than when it focuses on a political candidate’s past professional experience.

Now, despite being bundled together, there are important nuances to draw between agenda-setting / priming and framing – not merely at the conceptual or definitional level, but also with regards to what they entail in terms of changes in public opinion. As Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) note, priming effects are likely to take hold more easily, since an audience needs to pay more acute, in-depth attention to a message if it is to adopt the frame that the message is presenting. Simple exposure to the message may suffice for priming or agenda-setting, but exposure *and* attention are generally both required for framing.

Futhermore, just as some issues are more primable than others, some frames may be more powerful than others as well. In a landmark article on framing, Chong and Druckman (2007) argue that voters can be compelled to change their minds provided that they are presented issues framed by elites in a strong, compelling way (see also Iyengar 1991) – but that using a “weak” frame can also actually backfire with an audience. A frame’s

quality, perhaps as much as its very existence, thus appears to play a vital role in determining the eventual effect on the public.

Despite the considerable size of the existing literature on framing, it has mostly been studied along fairly specific (and therefore limited) dimensions – i.e. testing audience reaction to a distinct issue based on opposite frames. The major downside of this approach is a dearth of attention paid to identifying “sets of frames that could potentially be applicable across issues” (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009, p. 28) – what Snow and Benford (1992) call “master frames.” As a consequence, scholars to this day still have an arguably narrow, if relatively deep, understanding of framing.

It is important to underline, then, the key nuance brought to bear in the literature by those between framing and persuasion. The two processes differ, and are not necessarily concurrent (Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009). The way an issue is framed *may* lead one to adopt or modify a preference regarding that issue, but it does not automatically, inherently do so. While different frames given to a news story can evoke different thought patterns, subjects also go in with their own views and thoughts that go beyond the information contained in or the angle given to the story (Powers, Price, and Tewksbury 1997), and may therefore not be persuaded to alter their opinion on a given issue solely on the basis of the frame used to present it. In other words, framing makes attitude persuasion possible – but by no means guaranteed.

All that said, while political scientists and communication scholars have in recent decades incorporated agenda-setting, priming and framing into their fields – as just reviewed – these concepts actually possess deeper roots in social psychology. In much of this literature, the mention of a particular issue or topic is viewed as potentially “activating” the human brain into processing it (e.g. Quillian 1967, 1969; Collins and Quillian 1972; Collins and Loftus 1975). More recent social psychology work presents the concept of “social priming” as the process by which activation of a given social event or situation subsequently leads to a reevaluation of this event or situation (e.g. Eitam and Higgins 2010; Molden 2014).

In this view, “priming” arguably runs closer to that of framing than agenda-setting, as the first two both involve people potentially modifying or adjusting their attitude toward a given topic, as opposed to merely being compelled to think about it. One classic political science piece presenting priming under this lens is Krosnick and Kinder’s (1990) examination of presidential approval changes in the electorate fostered by media focus on certain issues. Overall, the general picture across all fields is a rather muddled one – with agenda-setting, priming, and framing often carrying different definitions and different ways of thinking about them. To avoid as much confusion as possible, I henceforth use the concepts of “agenda-setting” and “framing” – particularly as it pertains to Chapter 6 – in much the same light as most political science and communication researchers cited above, most notably Tewksbury and Scheufele, thus leaving aside the debate over how “priming” is and / or should be conceptualized.

What is the Impact of Advertising?

Of all possible “media effects,” advertising is among the most prevalent in political campaigns (Jamieson 1996) – and arguably among the most powerful¹³ (McCaffrey 1962; McClure and Patterson 1974; Perloff and Kinsey 1992; Lau and Sigelman 2000; Valentino, Hutchings and Williams 2004; Franz and Ridout 2007; cf. Lau and Rovner Brown 2009). In an observational study of the 2000 U.S. presidential contest, Huber and Arceneaux (2007) remark that while television advertisements do not show signs of increasing voters’ propensity to turn out, they can change their evaluation and opinion of candidates.

This is largely consistent with Kenski, Hardy and Jamieson (2010) who, looking at the 2008 presidential race, assert that a candidate’s advertisement directly affects voters’ “embrace of some of the central campaign messages” (287). It also supports to some extent Simon’s (2002) finding that advertising has priming properties (i.e. in making voters assign more importance to issues they see discussed in ads) – although Simon fails to uncover a statistically significant persuasion effect. In this regard, ads can and perhaps should be seen as vehicles for potentially changing not only how people vote on a candidate (or an issue), but how that candidate (or issue) is framed or how important he (or it) is judged to be by voters.

¹³ A caveat may be in order here, in that this claim is not recognized by all political communication scholars to be universally true – and, in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, in which the winning candidate was vastly outspent on the airwaves, is likely bound to face fresh scrutiny.

In addition, ads can do something that media coverage of elections typically does not: they can serve to actually *inform* people¹⁴. While journalists overwhelmingly focus on the horserace aspect of campaigns, advertising provides factual information pertaining to specific public policies that news stories often do not (Patterson and McClure 1976; Kern 1989; West 1994-1995, 2014; Brians and Wattenberg 1996; Iyengar, Norpoth and Hahn 2004).

In fact, seeing political ads does not only provide more information to viewers – it actually makes people actively then seek more political information by themselves (Cho 2008). Indeed, in the words of Franz et al. (2008, p. 138), “exposure to campaign advertising in general [...] produces citizens who are more interested in the election, have more to say about the candidates, are more familiar with who’s running, and ultimately are more likely to vote. [...] And importantly, at least some of these beneficial effects are concentrated among those who need them most: the least informed and least engaged members of the electorate.”

How Do Different Features of Political Advertising Impact Voters?

Now, political advertisement is not a monolithic entity: televised spots can notably vary on the basis of the type of issue they discuss, the people they feature, and the tone they employ. This reality is often regrettably neglected in works that essentially limit their evaluation of the impact of ads to the number of times they were aired and / or seen (e.g.

¹⁴ Conversely, one could argue that political ads in the U.S. are also uniquely positioned, in being exempt from commercial speech defamation laws, to actually *misinform* people – in that an ad’s sponsor is legally afforded the right to stretch the truth to an extent not granted in other spheres of public discourse.

Sides and Vavreck 2013). When it comes to political ads, quality, not only quantity, warrants scholarly attention (Atkin et al. 1973).

Much of the attention that has been given to qualitative differences observed in ads has been devoted, particularly in recent years, to their alleged increasingly negative tone (Haynes, Flowers and Harman 2006; Lau and Brown Rovner 2009; West 2014). The verdict on this front is, to say the least, mixed. Some claim that negativity has skyrocketed over the last half-century (Geer 2006) – others that it has not (Buell and Sigelman 2008). Some state that negative ads and messages are effective in swaying voters (Cobb and Kuklinski 1997; Kamber 1997; Swint 1998) – others that they are not (Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy 1991; Lau and Rovner Brown 2009). Some argue that negative ads cause voters (particularly those less informed and interested) to be less likely to turn out (Ansolabehere et al. 1994) – others that they do not (Goldstein and Freedman 2002; Franz et al. 2008). Brader (2006) finds that while both positive and negative ads polarize the electorate by reducing the number of undecided voters, positive ads may be better at winning converts among the initially undecided. Other scholars further draw a distinction between types of ads, and postulate that “issue” ads tend be both more numerous (Joslyn 1980), more often negative (Johnston and Kaid 2002) and more likely to “prime” voters (Groenendyk and Valentino 2002) than “image” ads.

That said, at least a few important caveats should be considered and kept in mind when one discusses the role of political advertising in shaping voter attitudes. First, the impact of advertising can be constricted by its decaying property. Indeed, work in recent years

shows both how political ads can have a powerful impact on voters *and* how that impact tends to be short-lived, essentially dissipating within a few days of having been seen (Gerber et al. 2011; Hill et al. 2013; cf. Bartels 2014). Second, as documented in an innovative article by Klar (2014, p. 700), the way people digest political information presented to them can, at least in part, be a function of their social settings. If these settings are ideologically homogenous, then voters will tend to rely on partisan-motivated reasoning; if, on the other hand, these settings are ideologically diverse, voters will “pursue more accuracy-based evaluations.” How, when, and how often voters are exposed to political advertising can thus also affect its impact on them.

Not all political scientists even go as far as Klar in arguing that voters, given the appropriate environment, will engage in accuracy-based reasoning. In fact, several explicitly posit that voters actually do *not* generally vote on the basis of issues – an assessment going at least as far back as Lippmann’s (1922) classic treatise on public opinion, and bolstered by more recent observations that actual issue-voting typically takes place only when candidates make more explicit issue appeals (Gopoian 1982; see also Carsey and Layman 2006) or when the issues are simple enough for voters to process (Petty and Cacioppo 1986).

Under this view, advertising trying to persuade voters on the basis of issues (as opposed to, say, candidates’ background or personality) should be expected to have quite limited effects on voters. This is of course particularly intriguing when thinking of ads in ballot initiative campaigns, in which issues would at least *appear* to occupy a uniquely central

role. Just how this and other voting behavior literature findings reviewed in this chapter apply – or not – to a direct democracy context remains an area of great uncertainty. This uncertainty, in turns, is what this project ultimately attempts to bring some light to.

How Do Voters Behave in Ballot Initiative Campaigns?

How does all this literature just reviewed apply – or not apply – to the context of ballot initiative races? This, ultimately, is to a large extent what this research project is attempting to uncover.

To be clear, some existing research *has* looked at campaign effects and voter behavior in initiative contests, evaluating the weight given by voters to various considerations when deciding where they stand on a ballot proposition. In one of the pioneer works on the subject, Malgley (1984) finds limited effects for endorsements in initiative campaigns (cf. Lupia 1994; Karp 1998). It is, however, a conclusion that intuitively invites challenges on the basis of its age alone, given the dramatic extent to which polarization both at the elite and mass level has since gone up (Hetherington 2001; Poole and Rosenthal 2007; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuuss 2013; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; cf. Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2010), and the implication that it would logically flow for a partisan attachment to (or an attack of) an initiative to carry more importance with voters than it might have thirty years ago. As Nicholson and Hansford (2014, p. 623) note, “[t]he importance of party elites in shaping public opinion has only increased likely due to party polarization.”

Indeed, some political scientists find voters using their partisan affiliation to shape their vote decision on ballot propositions (Butler and Ranney 1994; Berman and Yawn 2001; Branton 2003; also see Christin, Hug and Sciarini 2002 for similar results pertaining to referenda held in Switzerland)¹⁵. More generally, Nicholson (2013) finds partisan politician endorsement of a policy measure to succeed in moving public sentiment pertaining to it. The effect is especially powerful among out-group partisans, who find themselves polarized by the endorsement. However, in a previous article, Nicholson (2011) also finds that in cases where the policy at hand is sufficiently straightforward and simple and carries distinct group beneficiaries, voters may give more credence to policy than to “source” cues, such as partisan endorsements. In addition, since no partisan affiliation information is provided on the ballot with regards to initiatives – as it is with regards to candidates running for elected office – voters need to have been exposed to campaign messages relating this information in order to use this cue (Shaffner, Streb and Wright 2001).

Campaign activity in initiative races in general is more likely to inform and / or sway voters since they tend at the onset to possess less knowledge than they do with regards to candidate-centered contests (Magleby 1984; Cronin 1989; Dubois and Feeney 1998; LeDuc 2002; see also Wettstein 2012 for the potential of media coverage to increase the

¹⁵ What of the reverse effect, though? That is to say, what impact do ballot propositions have on partisan politics and elections involvement? This query is in some ways at the core of Nicholson’s (2005) highly compelling book showing that direct democracy has a statistically significant impact on what issues become dominant in other campaigns for candidate-based offices simultaneously held at the state level. Nicholson highlights how partisan politicians can use certain initiatives put on the ballot to bolster their own electoral fortunes – especially if their party is seen as “owning” the issue (a concept borrowed from Petrocik 1991, 1996) – as Republicans Pete Wilson and Michael Huffington did with the anti-illegal immigration Proposition 187 in the 1994 California gubernatorial and U.S. senatorial contests.

saliency of citizen initiatives in Switzerland). The effect is particularly concentrated among less educated voters, as it makes them behave like their more educated counterparts – in that they use ideological and partisan cues provided by the campaign when deciding how to vote on a proposed initiative (Bowler and Donovan 1998).

Whatever forces are at work in initiative campaigns, their outcome overwhelmingly tends to come down on one side: most initiative drives never make it to the ballot, and among those that do, the vast majority are voted down (Tolbert 2001). Even measures initially enjoying citizen support at a campaign's onset often see this support wither away by the time votes are cast (Magleby 1984; see also Garrett and Gerber's [2001] finding that campaign spending disproportionately helps the "no" side defeat initiatives). Initiative campaigns attempting to sell the public on saying "yes" typically appears to be walking an uphill climb.

All that said, these pieces on campaign and media effects in initiative campaigns – along with a few notable others, including Borges and Clarke (2008) and Wells et al. (2009) – are few and far in between, leaving much room for further scrutiny. The question of how voters actually come to decide how they will vote on a given initiative put before them remains under-examined. The more specific question of how political advertising impacts voters' evaluations of and decisions on said initiative, for its part, remains virtually *unexamined*. How much information are voters operating with when making their decision on public policy matters? Are all voters equally susceptible to persuasion attempts through campaign messages and advertising? If not, which ones are more / less

likely than others to be persuaded? Are voters persuaded purely by public policy implications, by a politician or a political party's support or rejection of a proposition, or by some other consideration? Which messages are more potent – and among whom? All these are queries to which the existing literature has few or no answers – and they constitute most of the gaps that this dissertation will attempt fill.

One More Step

For all the work having been published and reviewed above from which to draw theoretical expectations, there remains a crucial step for me to undertake before articulating a theoretical framework and formulating the hypotheses that the formal experiment at the heart of this project will ultimately seek to test: figuring out what advertising in actual initiative campaigns actually looks like. This glimpse into initiative ad content, which will intimately help shape the experimental design, forms the core of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3 – ANATOMY OF INITIATIVE CAMPAIGN ADVERTISING

If this study's central object of query is the impact of advertising in ballot initiative campaigns, it seems well advised to first ensure possessing sufficient knowledge of the initiative process and of the content actually found in the advertisement it spawns. At its heart, this is what this chapter aims to accomplish. Through a series of carefully selected case studies, it presents an in-depth exploration of the types of messages found in actual initiative campaigns, and in turn helps build my theoretical framework and outline the various cues that I am to evaluate in my experiment.

Case Studies

To answer these questions, the chapter delves into three initiative campaigns having taken place since the dawn of the decade. Using a small-*n* approach is ideal for these purposes: it is best suited to help make inductions and construct theories with greater internal validity (Collier 2002; Gaal 2015), which can then contribute to building the theoretical framework for my subsequent experimental design.

In accord with Gerring and Seawright's (2008) principle of purposefully choosing cases to study – since randomized case selection in small-*n* studies risks yielding a sample unrepresentative of the population – the remainder of this chapter explores the campaigns around Issue 2 in Ohio, Proposition 29 in California, and Amendment One in Tennessee. By so doing, it uses what Gerring and Seawright call the method of “diverse cases” – a strategy “understood to be exploratory (hypothesis testing)” and whose “primary

objective [is] the achievement of maximum variance along relevant dimensions” (p. 300) so that “one can generalize to all other cases in the population that are included in the selected diverse cases” (Rohlfing 2012, p. 201). Selecting these three campaigns as case studies does indeed provide considerable variance:

- They took place in three different states, all belonging to three different regions and political cultures (Elazar 1972¹⁶) boasting different partisan preferences – a deeply “blue” (Democratic) state, a deeply “red” (Republican) state, and a “purple” (swing) state;
- They were held in three distinct electoral cycles and were voted on in different electoral contexts: during an “off-year” general election in 2011, a presidential primary in 2012, and a “midterm” general election in 2014;
- They dealt with widely different economic and social issues – abortion, collective bargaining, and taxes;
- Two were initiatives, while the other was a referendum;
- Two measures passed, while the other failed;
- Two races were highly competitive, while the other was not;
- In two contests, the side having spent the most won, while in the other it lost.

In the pages that follow, I break down each campaign and outline the “ad wars” that characterized them. I then conclude with an overview of the various types of message content observed.

¹⁶ Elazar’s famous typology breaks down states along three dominant political cultures: moral (which includes California), individual (Ohio), and traditional (Tennessee).

Issue 2 – Ohio, 2011

Republican John Kasich, a former Congressman and U.S. House Budget Committee chairman (and future presidential candidate), was swept into the Ohio governor's mansion as part of the 2010 GOP national tidal wave, defeating Democratic incumbent Ted Strickland. One of his very first and – most controversial – acts less than three months after being sworn into office was signing Senate Bill (SB) 5. The law promised to severely constrict the power and influence of public-sector unions, most notably by curbing collective bargaining rights and banning mandatory fees imposed on public employees by the unions representing them.

Labor groups and advocates quickly organized a petition drive to put SB 5 to a new vote – not by the state legislature, which had narrowly approved it, but by the people. Some seven months and over one million signatures later, Issue 2 was placed before Ohio voters on the November 8, 2011 ballot. Issue 2 was an up-or-down referendum on SB 5 – a Yes vote meant keeping the law; a No vote meant abolishing it. This being an electoral “off-year,” Issue 2 was one of only three statewide contests, all of them being policy questions¹⁷. While Issue 2 could technically be described as a referendum, “retrospective” voting was not really possible since the measure had not yet gone into effect, as enforcement was pending based on the referendum's outcome.

¹⁷ The other two statewide measures dealt with raising the maximum age for candidates running for judicial offices and making it illegal to compel Ohio residents to purchase health insurance (a referendum on one of the Obama Administration's Affordable Care Act core provisions, the so-called “individual mandate”). The former failed, while the latter passed – although it was for all intents and purposes only symbolic, as federal law supersedes state law. Voter were also asked to decide local contests ranging from school district boards to city halls.

Opponents of Issue 2 – and therefore of SB 5 – launched the first ads of the race. Coalesced around a group called “We Are Ohio,” they released a series of ads that aimed at portraying the human face of the workers who stood to be most directly impacted by the new law. Chief among them were firefighters and nurses – perhaps unsurprisingly, given that they consistently place atop rankings of the most admired professions by the general public (Jones 2010; Riffkin 2014). Using firefighters in their advertising was a political and messaging tool unavailable to labor relation reform opponents in nearby Wisconsin, which at the time was in the process of shepherding legislation that was similar with the notable exception of specifically exempting police and firefighting personnel (Freeman and Hahn 2012). The very first 30-second ad launched by We Are Ohio had a male voice-over reading the following script:

Voice-over: We've heard it before: 'Do as I say, not as I do.' The Columbus politicians say that everyone must sacrifice to get our state budget under control. But those same politicians exploited a loophole exempting themselves from Senate Bill 5¹⁸. While firefighters, police, and nurses make sacrifices, the insiders and people at the top get big raises and bonuses. You can stop the politicians from hurting middle class families and helping themselves. Vote No on Issue 2.

Now, it behooves me to mention that the opening lines lambasting “politicians” were not simply accompanied by images of random elected officials – they came with shots of Governor Kasich specifically. The negative connotation the ad aimed to create with Issue 2 therefore had a very precise personal face – Kasich’s, whose job approval at the time

¹⁸ The statement that politicians are “exempting themselves” from SB 5 drew some puzzlement and prompted the fact-checking outfit PolitiFact to verify what the ad’s sponsors meant. We Are Ohio said it related to a provision claiming that the bill’s payment provisions (which included replacing seniority-based pay with merit-based pay) did not apply to politicians. PolitiFact eventually called the claim “mostly false,” as elected officials had already been exempt from the state’s existing collective bargaining law passed in 1983 – and that SB 5 thereby did not affect them in this regard (Guillen 2011).

dwindled around 40% (Quinnipiac University 2011) – as well as a partisan one – since Kasich was a longstanding, well-known Republican figure in the state.

A subsequent ad released by We Are Ohio two weeks later hit the Kasich angle even harder. This time, a female voice-over read this text over images of workers:

Voice-over: John Kasich promised to make Ohio great again. But he gave over 100 million of our tax dollars to big corporations while Ohio continues to lose jobs. Now Kasich is using Senate Bill 5 to destroy collective bargaining rights for Ohio workers. Kasich and other politicians took over three million dollars in campaign contributions from corporate special interests who could profit from Senate Bill 5. It doesn't have to be this way. We can stop Senate Bill 5 by voting No on Issue 2.

Going after Kasich and his allies was not the only strategy used by Issue 2 foes. Another was to use individuals speaking to the camera to decry what they argued would be SB 5's consequences – either in their own workplace or on the state in general. One such ad had a police officer, in “interview” format, saying the following:

Police officer: I took an oath to protect and serve. But Issue 2 makes it harder for law enforcement officers to do our jobs. Issue 2 makes it illegal for police to negotiate for enough officers to do the job safely – so I may not have a partner to back me up. Issue 2 puts our police and our communities at risk. That's why I am voting No on Issue 2.

Another, produced in a similar format, featured former NASA astronaut and U.S. Senator John Glenn (D – Ohio), making the case against the measure:

Former Sen. John Glenn: Here in Ohio, we rely on everyday heroes to teach our children, care for the sick, and keep our communities safe. But Issue 2 will make it harder for teachers, nurses, firefighters and other public employees to protect and serve us. Here in Ohio, we don't turn our back on those who watch ours. That's why I am joining millions of Ohioans who are voting No on Issue 2.

Proponents of Issue 2 – and therefore of SB 5 – were mainly represented by the group “Building a Better Ohio.” Tellingly, the very first ad it released featured at its center the mayor of Toledo, Mike Bell – who also happened to be a firefighter. Bell addressed the camera directly, stating:

Mayor Mike Bell: Years ago, I lost my job as a firefighter because my city ran out of money. So as mayor, I'm working to fix my city without laying off good people or raising taxes. That's why I support Issue 2.

Supporting the new law, defenders argued, was actually the pro-firefighter (and pro-public employee) position (Siegel 2011).

Interestingly, the race's biggest point of contention arguably erupted around a late-campaign ad. We Are Ohio had run a commercial entitled “Zoey,” in which an elderly Cincinnati resident, Marlene Quinn, talked about a fire that had hit the home where she and her family – including her great-granddaughter Zoey – lived:

Marlene Quinn: When the fire broke out, there was not a moment to spare.

If not for the firefighters, we wouldn't have our Zoey today.

After making many of the same points against Issue 2 as several of the previous We Are Ohio ads had, the ad closed with an image of young Zoey and her great-grandmother hugging.

The ad's strong appeal prompted the opposite coalition, Building a Better Ohio, to appropriate a portion of the “Zoey” spot for its own purposes. It ran an ad of its own that

started with the opening clip of Marlene Quinn stressing the importance of firefighters described above, only to have another person's voiceover then respond:

Voice-over: She's right. By voting 'no' on Issue 2, our safety will be threatened. Without Issue 2, communities will need to lay off hardworking firefighters to pay for the excessive benefits of other employees. Issue 2 protects our communities from losing those who protect us. [...] Vote Yes on Issue 2.

The media uproar was immediate, as pro-Issue 2 forces felt that Quinn's words had been twisted to give them a meaning that she never intended. Several television stations around the state responded by declining to air the controversial ad (Fields 2011), which was seen as a desperate tactic used by the losing side of a long campaign (McNay 2013)¹⁹. And lose it did: Issue 2 ultimately failed by a more than 20-point margin, 61% to 39%, which nullified Senate Bill 5 before it ever had a chance to come into effect.

Proposition 29 – California, 2012

Arguably no state in the union is more renowned for its use of the initiative process than California. This is not without reason: not only, as discussed earlier in this chapter, did the Golden State lead the way in adopting the process a century ago, but to this day it uses it more than about any other. This use is both deep and frequent: Californians often get to vote on a long list of initiatives on a given election day, and initiatives are placed

¹⁹ Indeed, none of the “Yes” ads appeared to bear much fruit: publicly released polls ran over the year, from March to November, consistently pegged support for Issue 2 between 30 and 40 percent (Public Policy Polling 2011; Troy 2011). At no point in the campaign was the eventual outcome put in any real doubt. As Hopkins (2011) has highlighted, citing polling as a source of where public opinion stands on a ballot initiative can be a tricky endeavor, as it has been notably less reliable in predicting final vote outcomes than for candidate-centered elections. Be that as it may, polling proved to be both relatively steady and reliable in this case.

not only on the general midterm and presidential election ballots, but also on “off-year” and on primary election ballots.

This was the case for Proposition 29 (commonly referred to as “Prop 29”), which was voted upon on June 5, 2012 – the day of the last California presidential primaries (both Democratic and Republican, which were essentially uncontested). Prop 29 asked voters to approve increasing the statewide cigarette tax by \$1 per pack, from \$0.87 to \$1.87. For the most part, the additional revenue – projected at approximately \$735 million in the first few years following adoption – would have been used to fund additional cancer research and anti-tobacco efforts (California Legislative Analyst’s Office 2012).

Despite starting the campaign with a massive, nearly 40-point lead in polls conducted late in the winter²⁰, Proposition 29 ultimately failed at the ballot box. In an extremely close call, voters rejected it by a little more than half a percentage point (50.3% to 49.7%). This was not without echoes to 2006’s Proposition 86 – calling for an even steeper cigarette tax increase of \$2.60 per pack – which had also collapsed by a somewhat larger, albeit still slim 52%-48% margin after having initially boasted support from two thirds of voters in surveys (DiCamillo and Field 2006; Institute of Governmental Studies 2006). It goes without saying that the 2012 campaign, much as the one from six years prior, appears to have played a major – indeed determinant – role in shaping voters’ final choice. How? That is what we turn to next.

²⁰ A poll for the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) showed a 67%-30% lead for Yes on 29 in early March 2012 (Baldassare et al. 2012), while another for the University of Southern California (USC) and the Los Angeles Times pegged the Yes camp’s edge at 68%-29% a few days later (Mishak 2012).

Apart from a few public events and conference calls with journalists, mostly held by the Yes coalition (Van Oot 2012; York 2012), the battle over Prop 29 was largely fought over the airwaves. North of 80 percent of Yes on 29's campaign expenditures reported for 2012 went directly towards either advertising production or broadcast; in No on 29's case, the figure hovered around 60 percent (California Secretary of State 2012)²¹.

The first major round of ads came from the No on 29 camp. The approach was a simple one, if perhaps counterintuitive one to some at first. Rather than shy away from the health, medical, and research angles, it did just the opposite – showcasing a physician dressed in a white coat. And rather than attack the initiative for what it did – i.e. imposing an additional tax on tobacco products and investing new monies in cancer research and anti-tobacco programs – it largely went after it for what it did not do. The entirety of the ad featured a female African-American family physician standing in what appears to be a medical lab, directly addressing the camera:

Physician: I'm against smoking, so I thought Prop 29 was a good idea. Then I read it. It raises 735 million in tobacco taxes, but not one penny goes to new funding for cancer treatment. Instead, it creates a huge new research bureaucracy with no accountability, run by political appointees who can spend our tax dollars in other states.

A voice over then concludes:

Voice-over: That's why doctors, taxpayers, and small business say "No on 29."

In no small measure, this initial ad set the terms of the debate for the rest of the campaign.

In fact, the No side put out a second ad that shared much of the same approach as the first.

²¹ These should be viewed as minimal, rather than maximal, figures. Only payments made to media firms were included in calculating advertising spending as a share of total campaign spending. Other firms (providing market research and strategic communication advice, for instance) contracted by the two coalitions may also have assisted in ad design and content, albeit in a more indirect fashion.

In it, a Caucasian male doctor, also standing in a white coat in the middle of a research lab, addresses the camera.

Physician: *It [Proposition 29] imposes nearly a billion dollars in new taxes on Californians, but doesn't require that it be spent here in California, creating jobs.*

He turns and points to the lab which, save for a single person far in the background, is entirely empty. The ad then proceeds to close as the first one did. In both ads, two central themes were clearly established: first, one could be both pro-health and anti-Prop 29; second, Prop 29 would not spend the additional revenue it promised to raise in an optimal way (i.e. that would directly benefit California job creation and cancer treatment).

These ads prompted a vigorous response from the Yes on 29 coalition, which ran a series of ads virtually all built around the same basic format²². The first opens with former racing cyclist and Tour-de-France champion Lance Armstrong, whose foundation helped spearhead the initiative, posing a question to the camera: “Who do you trust to save lives?” Several individuals representing various health and medical groups then took turns to answering, one after the other, all also looking into the camera:

Man: *The American Cancer Society?*
Man: *The American Heart Association?*
Woman: *The American Lung Association?*
Man: *Or Big Tobacco?*
Doctor 1: *Prop 29 will save lives.*
Doctor 2: *Keep kids from smoking.*
Doctor 3: *And support cancer research.*
Cancer survivor: *Yes on 29.*

²² In addition to their ad campaign, anti-tobacco groups also went personally after one of the doctors prominently featured in the “No on 29” advertisements, Dr. La Donna Parter. They raised questions in the media regarding her personal life – including the fact that she had declared bankruptcy more than a decade earlier – and challenged her ethics – suggesting that she was being paid by tobacco companies to attack Prop 29, which she denied (Harmon 2012).

A follow-up ad by the Yes side ran along similar lines, albeit by using a slightly different approach and adding a few twists. It consisted of a female voice speaking over much of the same images seen in the previous ad (i.e. faces of doctors and anti-smoking advocates):

Voice-over: Warning! Big Tobacco companies are spending millions to deceive voters about Proposition 29. The California Medical Association, 35,000-doctors strong, urges, "Don't be fooled." Leading newspapers agree. The San Francisco Chronicle calls Tobacco's ads against 29 "laughable." The San Diego Union-Tribune: "Revenue is to be used inside California." Who do you trust? Tobacco companies, who want to keep taking profits out of California every year, or California cancer doctors and researchers? Taxing cigarettes will keep over 200,000 children from smoking and support live-saving research, right here in California. Beat cancer. Vote Yes on 29.

An unmistakable indication that the No camp's attacks were proving effective can be seen in the "Yes" ad spending virtually all of its time both answering the charges leveled against the initiative and fighting over arguments put forth by its opponents. Even when it focuses on lauding the benefits of Prop 29, the ad makes a point of underscoring that the benefits will be felt "right here in California" – an obvious reference to one of the chief criticisms leveled against it.

Realizing that they were continuing to lose significant ground²³, the Yes campaign launched one last attempt to stop the bleeding one week before the vote. In a short, concise 15-second ad, several speakers took turn briefly addressing the camera. With each transition to a new person, the name of a newspaper – i.e. *The Sacramento Bee*, *The Bakersfield Californian*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The (San Jose) Mercury News* –

²³ Two polls conducted in mid-to-late May 2012 showed support for Proposition 29 plummeting from the high 60s to 53%, then to 50% – which is what it ended up earning on election day (PPIC 2012; Field 2012).

having endorsed the initiative appeared on the screen. The name and logo of organizations – i.e. the Livestrong (Lance Armstrong) Foundation, the Cancer Action Network, the American Cancer Society, the Heart and Stroke foundation, and the American Lung Association – backing the initiative also appeared on screen at the very end. The script read as follows:

Man: *Prop 29 will cut smoking and keep the money here in California.*

Woman: *With important taxpayer safeguards.*

Man: *Strict financial accountability.*

Man: *Remember: if you don't smoke, you don't pay the tax. Stop Big Tobacco.*

Cancer survivor: *Beat Cancer.*

Proposition 29 ultimately failed – and it did so after a campaign its proponents mostly spent on the defensive. Even if they spent considerable efforts attacking the initiative's critics, they mostly did so on the terms these critics had already set. In the end, the two coalitions put forward strikingly different approaches. Whereas the “Yes” campaign consistently sought to highlight bold, dramatic contrasts between “us” (the health-concerned) and “them” (“Big Tobacco”), the “No” campaign worked to blur that line by presenting the initiative as one opposed by a wide array of groups and individuals from a variety of backgrounds including, first and foremost, physicians themselves.

Another, closely linked difference lies in how much focus was given (or not) to the initiative's actual content. While they may have been slammed by Prop 29 supporters as misleading, the fact remains that the “No on 29” ads carried a much more substantive message in terms of what the policy implications of voting for the measure entailed. In fact, likely because Prop 29 foes realized from the onset the uphill climb they would face if the debate revolved around who the main backers of both coalitions were, the near-

totality of “No on 29” advertising content centered squarely on policy, detailing the initiative’s alleged negative impact. Much of the rhetoric and arguments used in “Yes on 29” ads, on the other hand were anchored in who was supporting (health / anti-smoking organizations, newspapers) and opposing (tobacco companies) the measure²⁴.

Amendment 1 – Tennessee, 2014

The story of Tennessee’s Amendment One is a long and contentious one. It can be traced back to 1992, when a coalition of pro-choice and like-minded groups, led by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA), challenged the state’s existing restrictions on abortion in court. After years of judicial wrangling, the case eventually reached the Tennessee Supreme Court which, in the fall of 2000, struck down some of the restrictions on the books – including an obligation to undergo a two-day waiting period before obtaining an abortion and a ban on second-trimester abortions performed outside of hospitals, as well as an informed consent statute. In *Planned Parenthood of Middle Tennessee et al. v. Sundquist*²⁵, the court ruled that the restrictions were in violation of the state constitution, which it argued contained even greater privacy protections than the U.S. Constitution (Nash 2000; New 2014) – an argument echoed by at least nine other state supreme courts in similar cases (Gardbaum 2007).

²⁴ One other important difference between the two sides was the financial advantage enjoyed by Prop 29 opponents. While both campaigns were well funded and had sufficient means to carry out their message to voters, the “No” camp was able to count on a roughly three-to-one edge with regards to campaign expenditures (California Secretary of State 2012) – an especially important advantage given the fact that ballot initiatives are typically easier to defeat than to get passed (Tolbert 2001).

²⁵ Sundquist refers here to the then-Governor, Republican Don Sundquist, who served from 1995 to 2003.

In reaction to the Tennessee Supreme Court’s decision, a lengthy effort at putting the matter directly before voters began. It finally culminated with the placement on the November 2014 general election ballot of Amendment One. The initiative’s aim was not to reinstate the abortion regulations that had been invalidated by the court or even to instate new ones per se. The goal, rather, was to modify the Tennessee Constitution so that it would explicitly stipulate that legislators have a right to impose, modify, or repeal restrictions on abortion. This, in turn, would both give the green light to pro-life members of the state legislature to adopt anti-abortion measures and prevent any state judicial body from stopping or overruling their actions²⁶.

The two opposing coalitions squaring off over this initiative stood out for their consistent attempt to reach out to voters beyond their core base of support. Indeed, the air war over Amendment One was remarkable in the numerous types of arguments made and spokespeople used that one would intuitively expect to see in ads made by the opposing camp of the one they were featured in.

In this sense, both coalitions very much emulated some of the basic tactics employed by the No on 29 committee in California. Just as that group had used physicians to make health and revenue-based arguments to oppose a tobacco tax increase, the “Yes on One Tennessee” coalition predominantly relied on women to pitch the initiative as a pro-

²⁶ Publicly-released polling data on Amendment One were extremely sparse, but if one relies on a poll conducted by Vanderbilt University six months before the vote, there is suggestive evidence that, as in the case of Proposition 29 in California, the campaign around Amendment One seemed to have a certain impact on the outcome. Only the campaign here appears to have pushed people in the opposite direction: whereas the Vanderbilt poll pegged support for Amendment One at a meager 23% (against 71% in opposition, a nearly 50-point gap) in late May, the measure ended up passing, 53% to 47%, on November 4 (Sisk 2014). This rather dramatic evolution occurred despite the “No” side outspending the “Yes” side by a two-to-one margin, \$2M to \$1M.

woman measure first and foremost. In much the same vein, its counterparts from “Vote No on One Tennessee” reverted to members of the clergy to discredit the measure as undue government interference.

The first major ad ran by Yes on One is indicative. An extremely soft female voice narrates as we see several women, each behind the wheel of her car driving on the highway into Tennessee. The ad repeatedly cuts to a (presumably altered) image of the state sign on the side of the road that reads “Tennessee Welcomes You. Your Abortion Destination.”

Voice-over: People come to Tennessee to bring life to their dreams. But in 2000, the Tennessee Supreme Court removed the people’s power to enact reasonable regulation of abortion here. As a result, Tennessee is an abortion destination. Out-of-state women now account for one out of every four abortions. Amendment One will restore the people’s right to enact protections for women and the unborn. Vote Yes for Amendment One.

Follow-up ads by the initiative’s proponents were increasingly explicit in their appeal. A second ad, using the same female voice narrating, showed ordinary people – overwhelmingly women – walking outside around the state Supreme Court with duct tape plastered over their mouth.

Voice-over: In 2000, the Tennessee Supreme Court silenced the right of the people to enforce reasonable regulation of abortion in our state. We can’t require that abortion facilities be licensed or inspected, and so half are not. And there is nothing to prevent courts from imposing mandatory taxpayer funding of abortion. Amendment One will restore the voice of Tennesseans to protect women and the unborn. Vote Yes on Amendment One.

The group's final ad was also its most direct – and arguably its most provocative. It opened with the tape recording of a real-life 911 distress call, interlaced with a female voice-over. All voices heard in the ad – both from the live call and from the narration – were those of women.

911 Operator: *911?*

Woman on Phone: *This is the Women's Center. We need an ambulance ASAP!*

Voice-over: *You're listening to an actual 911 call.*

911 Operator: *Alright, is her breathing completely normal?*

Woman on Phone: *No!*

911 Operator: *And is she changing colors?*

Woman on Phone: *Yes!*

Voice-over: *Tennessee has compromised the health and safety of certain women.*

911 Operator: *Does she have any abdominal pain?*

Woman on Phone: *I'm sure she does. She's in the middle of getting an abortion.*

Voice-over: *Some Tennessee abortion facilities are not regulated like other surgical centers. This has to change, and you can help. Vote Yes on Amendment One.*

If the ad's aim was to elicit reactions, reactions it elicited. Amendment One foes came out in force with an ad expressly responding to the 911 spot. Featuring a female voice-over of its own, it showed the back of a woman on a hospital bed in the background with superimposed images in the foreground – first from the original Yes on One ad, then of the logo of several Tennessee newspapers having condemned the original Yes on One ad.

Voice-over: *We all deserve medical privacy. But Amendment One puts that privacy at risk. You can see it yourself right now. Amendment One's backers are violating a patient's privacy, sharing her personal medical details without permission. No wonder doctors and newspapers across Tennessee are appalled at the deception. They all agree you should protecting your privacy by voting No on Amendment One, and agree that Amendment One goes too far. Vote No on Amendment One.*

Other advertising for the No on One camp kept the privacy angle, but also went beyond it by using people and arguments typically associated with conservative causes. One such ad was particularly evocative in this regard – it presented a slew of various religious figures, all addressing the camera one at a time.

Pastor: *In Tennessee, we try to live lives of faith. Particularly in the most difficult times.*

Reverend One: *But Amendment One would put government in the midst of our most personal and private decisions.*

Reverend Two: *Like what to do when a woman has been raped.*

Reverend Three: *Or a pregnant woman has been diagnosed with cancer.*

Reverend Two: *In truth, only families can make these decisions*

Pastor: *And they do it in alignment with their own faith.*

Reverend Three: *And it is not for the rest of us to judge.*

Reverend One: *Please vote No on Amendment One. It goes too far.*

The ad closed with a caption appearing on screen that read “Vote NO on 1 – Stop Government Interference.”

A final spot warranting attention that ran in opposition to the measure basically consisted of something of an amalgam of the other two just discussed. In it, a female physician addressed the camera, saying the following:

Doctor: *On Amendment One, newspapers across Tennessee say vote No. The Tennessean says voters should be appalled at the deception and should vote no. Commercial Appeal says vote No to protect privacy. Amendment One is poorly worded, and makes no exception for rape or tragic things that can happen during pregnancy, like cancer. As a person of faith, I know these difficult decisions are best left to a woman, her family, and her own faith. That’s why doctors, religious leaders, and legal experts say vote No.*

A strategic choice made by both sides shines through all these ads. Rather than clearly try to galvanize their likely core of supporters, those working to get Amendment One adopted purposefully used content designed to appeal to people who may not be naturally

inclined to take a pro-choice stance, just as those hoping to defeat the initiative sought to draw people who might be reluctant to defend abortion. They did so through very varied types of messages, ranging from mentioning endorsements to sharing personal life accounts. Particular effort was obviously made by both sides to putting human faces on the initiative.

Interestingly, most of the ads (particularly on the “No” side) largely steered clear of specific policy discussions. For instance, an argument squarely against granting citizens the right to adopt regulations of abortion procedures and facilities – the concrete policy implication at play in this contest – was never offered. Instead, an attempt was made to re-cast the issue as being not about abortion per se, and to argue instead about broader themes and values, namely the need for medical and personal privacy. This, of course, may be attributable to the particularly controversial and deeply sensitive nature of the issue here at hand. Nevertheless, it suggests that advertising in initiative contests will at least sometimes seek not merely to present arguments in favor of and in opposition to an issue on the ballot, but to alter the frame around it.

Conclusion: Types of Messages Used

Looking back at the three initiative contests outlined in this chapter, one gets a sense of the types of messages used. They can be broken down as follows:

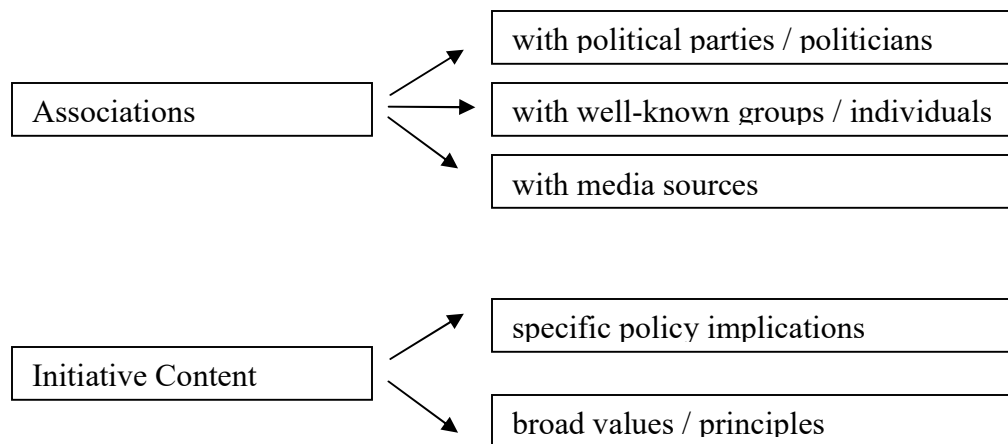


Figure 3.1. Breakdown of the Types of Messages Observed in Initiative Campaign Ads.

Note: Personal testimonies and life stories are not included in this typology, as they do not constitute message types per se – that is, they are not used in initiative ads on their own, as they are insufficient in themselves to provide a sensible cue to voters as to how they should vote on an initiative, or why. When they are featured in an ad, it is invariably in conjunction with a message type included in the typology (e.g. a firefighter telling the story of how he lost his job *and* explaining why the ballot measure he supports would prevent other layoffs in the future – in which case the “message type” used in “specific policy implications”). In other terms, personal testimonies and life stories are a *way* of presenting a type of message – not a type of message in itself.

Two precisions are in order: first, all these types of messages can be – and in fact are – used either positively or negatively in ads. For instance, one pro-initiative ad may mention the endorsement the measure received from a popular group, just as an anti-initiative ad may attack it for being bankrolled by an unpopular group. Second, while my aim is to isolate each message type to measure its individual power of persuasion, some initiatives can – and again in fact do – combine two or more of them (e.g. mentioning both an initiative’s association with a political party *and* some its policy implications). Measuring such combinations, which could prove a nearly endless task, falls outside the scope of this research project.

That said, one should remark, if nothing else, on the considerable breadth of messages employed. Indeed, many – if not all nearly all – of the main features found in candidate-centered election advertising can also be found in one form or another in initiative advertising.

One might at first glance have expected positive ads / campaigns to be limited to the “yes” side in initiative races, while negative ads / campaigns would be reserved to the “no” side. After all, in pitting one side solely attempting to convince people to support a proposal and against the other side uniquely dedicated to seeing the same proposal fail, ballot campaigns differ in principle from candidate-centered campaigns, in which two camps offer two dueling products – to use marketing terms – about which positive *and* negative arguments can be made. In other words – again using marketing terms – the former is about one side trying to make a sell and the other side trying to stop it, whereas the latter is about two sides each trying to make a sell. One could thus have reasonably expected the “yes” camp in initiative contests to showcase consistently positive ads. However, that is in fact far from necessarily being the case – as California’s Yes on Prop 29 strategy perfectly illustrates.

Now, to be clear, the campaigns in Ohio, California and Tennessee studied here are not the end-all and be-all of messages encountered by voters in initiative ads. Strategies similar to those described in one or more of the campaigns outlined above can be and have been employed somewhat differently by various coalitions in favor of or in opposition to other ballot measures. For instance, also in California, long-standing Senator Barbara Boxer was featured in an ad advocating for the passage of Proposition 46

in 2014 (which would have raised the cap on medical negligence lawsuits, but failed). A decade earlier, then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger appeared in several ads touting a series of initiatives in 2005, Propositions 74, 75, 76 and 77 (which would have limited the power of unions and legislators, but all failed). Other ads supporting these initiatives showed praise from citizens who specifically identified as Democrats at the ad's onset – presumably to portray the ads' bipartisan appeal, as they were also backed by a Republican governor²⁷.

Despite such variation in the application and use of the types of messages included in my typology, the three case studies examined in this chapter have equipped us with a fairly thorough overview the basic messaging strategies espoused by ad makers in initiative races. What they do *not* quite tell us is which specific message types were most successful with voters, and to what extent. Because a host of other intervening variables came into play in each case, it would be a fool's errand to try to determine the success of different message types ad hoc. That is precisely what a controlled experiment can aspire to achieve. The next chapter outlines in greater detail my theoretical and methodological approach in conducting such an experiment.

²⁷ All these ads would ultimately be encapsulated in the “association with political parties / politicians” cell of our typology.

CHAPTER 4 – THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The insight acquired in the opening chapters has provided a solid theoretical foundation for this research. From the literature review, we know that voters possess deeply-held preferences, but that some of these voters are also open to persuasion attempts – those less informed being more prone to having their mind changed, yet also being less likely to be subjected to campaign effects in the first place. We also know that the public at large generally tends to be limited in its political knowledge, particularly in comparison with political elites.

However, even less than optimally informed voters can often use shortcuts to make rational decisions in accordance with their underlying values and preferences. Of the various shortcuts used by voters, party affiliation appears to carry particular weight, given how stable and enduring it is through time, especially in contrast with other considerations like specific policy preferences (see, again, Converse 1964, pp. 240-241). And of all campaign / media effects susceptible of presenting voters with appeals (or “cues”), advertising – particularly televised advertising – counts among the most prevalent and the most potent.

That said, these takeaways typically relate to candidate-based elections, not ballot initiative contests. How do behaviors prevalent in the former play out in the latter? While we have a reasonably good grasp of initiative races’ impact on politics and public life, we still have relatively little understanding of what shapes the outcome of initiative races.

Now, we do know (notably per LeDuc 2002) that voters tend to go into an initiative contest with less information about the initiative at play than they possess about candidates going into a candidate-based race. As such, campaign activity – including media (and more specifically advertising) effects – is more susceptible of having an impact on voters in initiative races. We also suspect that since, to borrow Bowler and Donovan’s (2004) expression, “not all initiatives are created equal” – some being more complex or more important to voters than others, for instance – the potential for campaign messages to sway voters will vary across different initiatives.

In addition, I know from my own empirical examination of initiative campaign advertising messages in the preceding chapter that they can vary greatly both in tone and substance. Positive and negative ads originate from initiative proponents and opponents alike.

Furthermore, while in principle ballot measure contests pit ideas, not people, against each other, they are often characterized by ads highlighting a measure’s backers and foes, be they individuals, non-profit groups, media outlets, industries, private corporations or political parties. Initiative campaigns, then, regularly seek to have voters decide on policy through consideration of people. But is this approach effective – and, if so, to what extent? How does the impact of these messages compare to that of messages in candidate campaign advertising?

Dependent Variable

The phenomenon this dissertation at its core attempts to measure – the dependent / explained variable – is voters’ attitudes regarding a given ballot initiative after having been subjected to advertising pertaining to that initiative. In other words, what I am ultimately assessing is the impact of that advertising on voters. Conceptualization and measurement of this impact are two-fold:

- (1) the extent to which advertising makes voters more (or less) supportive of the proposed initiative – the *persuasion effect*; and
- (2) the extent to which advertising makes an issue more (or less) important in voters’ mind, and (in select cases discussed below) makes voters view the issue under a certain frame – the *agenda-setting* and *framing effects*.

The former is measured by asking voters, before and after viewing an ad, whether they support the initiative discussed in the ad, and how supportive they are of the same initiative on a 0-10 scale (0 being not at all supportive, 10 being fully supportive). The latter is measured by asking voters, before and after viewing an ad, how important the initiative, as well as the issues that it pertains to, is to them on a Likert-like 0-10 scale (0 being not at all important, 10 being supremely important). This second set of evaluations is designed to allow us to get an understanding, currently lacking in the literature, of which advertising characteristics are more likely to set or change the electoral “agenda,” to use Nicholson’s term.

Independent Variables

The independent / explanatory variables include:

- (1) whether the ad highlights the proposed initiative's association with a political party (Democrat or Republican);
- (2) whether the ad highlights the proposed initiative's positive association with a group other than a political party (i.e. a group that is known and viewed positively by voters);
- (3) whether the ad highlights the proposed initiative opponents' negative association with a group (i.e. a group that is known and viewed negatively by voters); (4) whether the ad highlights positive policy aspects of the proposed initiative; and (5) whether the ad highlights negative policy aspects of opposing the proposed initiative.

Hypotheses

Hypotheses are informed both by the existing literature discussed in Chapter 2 and by my own findings regarding initiative advertising content outlined in Chapter 3. They are broken down into two broad camps – both of which are comprised of several distinct hypotheses. These two general categories can be boiled down as follows:

- (1) Persuasion – the impact of various ads and ad content on voter support; and
- (2) Agenda-setting and framing – the impact of various ads and ad content on voter giving importance to an issue and conceiving of that issue in a certain way.

1. Persuasion

H₁: One can expect, given what is known regarding the enduring strength of party identification as a singular vote driving force, voters to be strongly pushed by the partisan affiliation “cue” to determine their vote choice, not only when deciding on a candidate-centered election, but also on a ballot initiative. Indeed, being associated with one of the two major parties should be a singularly powerful driver of voter preference, pushing “in-party” identifiers to support the initiative and “out-party” identifiers to oppose it.

H₂: One can expect, following from *H₁*, a partisan affiliation cue in an initiative ad to have greater impact than a policy consideration cue in a candidate ad.

H₃: One can expect, notably given the fact that most initiative campaigns lead to ballot measures being defeated, initiative ads highlighting either associations with groups (positive or negative) or policy considerations (positive or negative) to have limited impact on initiative support, and for the impact to be lesser than that of a partisan affiliation cue.

H₄: One can expect, given what we know about the strength of party identification and the fact that candidates’ partisan information will be provided to voters in all “candidate ad” samples, initiative ads to generally have more persuasive power than candidate ads, regardless of the cue used.

H₅: One can expect, given the literature on the differing strength of opinions held by voters on the basis of their political awareness, lower-information voters to show more movement in their attitudes after treatment. In other words, one can generally expect advertising cues to exert more powerful persuasion effects among them than among higher-information voters.

2. *Agenda-setting and framing*

H₆: One can expect, given political messages' potential for agenda-setting effects, initiative ads and candidate ads discussing the issue pertaining to the initiative²⁸ to push voters into assigning more importance to this issue.

H₇: One can expect, given political messages' potential for agenda-setting effects, initiative ads to push voters into assigning more importance to the initiative itself.

H₈: One can expect, given the strength of partisan affiliation as a consideration for voters, for party "cues" in initiative ads to have a particularly strong "agenda-setting" property in making voters consider the issue and the initiative to be important.

H₉: One can expect, given political messages' potential for framing effects, voters exposed to an ad casting an initiative with a certain frame to see it as pertaining to concerns and values different from those exposed to an ad casting the initiative with a different frame. More specifically, voters exposed to an ad stressing the safety component will view the initiative as being mainly about safety, while those exposed to an ad stressing the financial component will view the initiative as being mainly about financial matters. Consistent with emphasis frame theory, cross-sample voters will view the issues at the heart of the initiative as being qualitatively different.

²⁸ Two groups (8 and 9) were shown "candidate policy consideration" ads in which the candidate discusses the same issues at the heart of Proposition A in much the same terms.

Now, the general impact of the various experimental stimuli applied is expected to be in the same direction for both components of the dependent variable. That is to say, since we know from the literature that advertising can impact both issue importance and vote choice, it is reasonable to assume that certain stimuli driving up the positive (or negative) perception of an initiative may also drive up its importance to voters. What I am being careful of steering clear of here, then, is the question of *degree*: while a given stimulus can have a significant impact both on the perceived importance of an issue and vote choice, no prediction is made as to which attracts the *greater* impact.

Methods

This is an experimental study. As compellingly demonstrated by Arceneaux (2010), experimental methods are unparalleled in measuring political campaign effects since they are best positioned to isolate other possible, unaccounted effects on the dependent variable and thus to highlight causal mechanisms (see also Nickerson 2005). Now, that is not to say that laboratory work is without its potential pitfalls. In contrast with observational studies, for instance, it has been criticized for perhaps not being inherently as well-equipped to claim having a high level of external validity – i.e. its findings may not always be fully applicable in the “real” world (McDermott 2002; Nicholson 2005). Even if / when they are – especially when it comes to something like the impact of advertising on viewers – the effects found in a laboratory setting may be larger than what would be found on the outside, where other forces could mute or at least tone down these effects (see, for instance, Klar 2014).

However, even while acknowledging these caveats, one should also bear in mind that some experimental results on voting behavior (e.g. Gerber and Green 2000; Gerber, Green and Larimer 2008) have not only held in “real life” – they have actually served to inform major recent (and successful) campaign strategies (Issenberg 2012). With these considerations in mind, this research project will be designed to measure the maximal possible impact of advertising by completely isolating it. Follow-up research could eventually be conducted to get a better understanding of its more likely impact in a setting recreating as close to a “natural” environment for subjects as possible – which, while certainly a worthy endeavor, goes beyond this project’s reach.

Pre-Study Evaluations

Initiative Importance

Given the challenge of being able to test only a limited number of ads – combined, of course, with the goal of isolating characteristics that are to be tested in ads that are otherwise identical in content – all initiative ads I show to respondents pertain to the same initiative. Again to use Bowler and Donovan’s (2004) observation to the fact that “not all initiatives are created equal,” I do so in recognition that some initiatives in real life will inevitably prove more controversial and / or feel more important to voters than others.

I thus pre-tested the initiative to be tested in the formal experiment to ensure that it is considered by voters to be at most moderately important. Picking a lower-importance

initiative is deliberate – the basic rationale being that if lower-importance initiatives, about which voters can be expected to have much looser attitudes than high-importance initiatives (Lavine et al. 1996; see also, to a lesser extent, Baldassarri and Gelman 2010), are the subject of little or no attitude volatility (i.e. ads pertaining to them do not manage to persuade voters more than candidate ads do), then one can reasonably assume that the difference would be even smaller or non-existent between high-importance initiative ads (if I were to test them) and candidate ads. Put differently, testing a lower-importance initiative promises to give us in this regard something of a *maximal effect* result. If I am to find effects, it is with initiatives like the one I am testing. Failure to find effects would strongly imply a failure to find effects with a higher-importance initiative if it were to be tested²⁹.

In order to assess the importance level of different initiatives, a list of various fictional ballot initiatives (along with a brief description of each) pertaining to different issues are presented to a sample of voters prior to the formal experiment being carried out. They are asked to indicate, on a 1-4 Likert-like scale³⁰, how important they consider each initiative to be, to ensure that the initiative ultimately tested are considered important by voters. To be clear, the sample of voters used for this evaluation is different from those included in the formal lab study.

²⁹ This is largely tantamount to Eckstein’s (1975) logic of the “most-likely case”. As described by George and Bennett’s (2005, p. 121), “[I]n a most-likely case, the independent variables posited by a theory are at values that strongly posit an outcome or posit an extreme outcome. [...] Most likely cases [...] are tailored to cast strong doubt on theories if the theories do not fit.”

³⁰ Respondents will be asked if they care about the issue in question a great deal, a fair amount, just some, or very little, where 1 = care about the issue very little, 2 = care about the issue just some, 3 = care about the issue a fair amount, and 4 = care about the issue a great deal. Wording is similar to that used, among others, by Arceneaux and Johnson (2013).

Group Popularity

To determine the popularity or unpopularity of groups that certain initiatives and candidates will be associated with in ads shown in the formal study, the same sample of voters used to measure initiatives' importance level were asked to place their evaluation of various groups presented before them on a scale of 0-10 (0 meaning they have a completely negative view of a group, 10 meaning they have a completely positive view of a group). To avoid muddying up my experimental results, only groups receiving either widespread praise (to be used to test a positive association with an initiative) or widespread condemnation (to be used to test a negative association with an initiative) were selected.

Because of the inherent difficulty in identifying an existing group that is widely known to voters *and* that has a credible stake in the initiative at stake *and* that is subject to near-universal agreement among voters (i.e. that is the subject of near-universal praise or near-universal condemnation) *and* whose support for the initiative would plausibly carry weight in voters' level of support for it, I opt instead for the method employed by Huber and Palinski (2006), which consists of using a fictitious but credible-sounding group name³¹. In fact, subsequent research has actually found voters to land greater credibility in some cases to advertising sponsored by fictitious, "independent" / third-party organizations than that sponsored by traditional candidate or political parties (Johnston, Dunaway and Weber 2011).

³¹ In Huber and Palinski's case – whose study was centered on evaluating attitudes regarding the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 – the group in question was called "The Coalition for Real Welfare Reform."

Formal Experiment

The formal experiment was carried out with a total of 10 samples of eligible voters nationwide recruited by the firm Qualtrics (which also sees through respondents' participation). The first five samples of voters (groups 1-5) were each asked to watch a 30-second television advertisement pertaining to a given hypothetical ballot initiative, and to then fill a post-experiment questionnaire. The variance in ads' content is outlined in Table 4.1. The questionnaire required participants to provide three general areas of information – (1) their basic personal, demographic and socioeconomic characteristics; (2) their levels of political attachment, interest and knowledge (including with regards to the specific policy issue to be discussed in the advertisement subsequently shown to them); and (3) their attitudes regarding the proposed initiative put before them, including how important they consider it to be and how supportive they would be of it.

The next four samples of voters (groups 6-9) were asked to watch a 30-second television advertisement pertaining to a candidate running for the State Senate³², and to then fill a post-experiment questionnaire. The variance in ads' content is also outlined in Table 4.1.

The questionnaire required them to provide three general areas of information – (1) their basic personal, demographic and socioeconomic characteristics; (2) their levels of

³² Because, as is discussed further in this dissertation, all ads will be fictitious and created “in house” – as opposed to being lifted from actual campaigns – there is an impetus to ensure that the subjects at least *believe* the ads they are watching are real. Having subjects aware that they are shown something fake partly destroys the basic premise of an experimental study. Presenting them with a made-up presidential, congressional or gubernatorial ad runs the very real risk of having voters (despite their arguably low level of knowledge of their own elected officials are [Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996]) recognize the ad is not real, which could in turn affect results. State Senate contests are low-profile enough for this problem to be largely avoided, and are additionally low-budget enough for the ads created for this experiment to look like they could very well be made for an actual State Senate contest. Ads for State Senate seats are rare in comparison to those for Congress or the White House, but can nonetheless be seen across the country during most electoral cycles.

political attachment, interest and knowledge; and (3) their attitudes regarding the State Senate election, including how important they consider it to be and how supportive they would be of the candidate featured in the ad. As outlined later in this chapter, the messages in the “candidate” ads closely mirror those found in the “initiative” ads (groups 1-5). This allows one to not merely view results on the impact of initiative ad messages in vacuum, but to place them in a broader context by comparing them to those found in traditional, candidate-centered messages.

The final sample of voters (group 10) received a “control” treatment. They were first asked to watch a 30-second television advertisement pertaining to an apolitical issue. They were then given a brief description of the same ballot initiative, as well as of the same candidate for State Senate³³ that voters in the political stimulus groups are tested on, and finally asked to fill a post-experiment questionnaire. The questionnaire required them to provide three general areas of information – (1) their basic personal, demographic and socioeconomic characteristics; (2) their levels of political attachment, interest and knowledge (including with regard to the specific policy issues discussed in the initiative advertisements shown to the corresponding samples); and (3) their attitudes regarding both the initiative and the State Senate contests placed before them. This sample, of course, allows one to draw inferences pertaining to the impact of ads shown to the other, stimulus treatment groups if meaningful differences with them in terms of survey results are found.

³³ Description of this fictional candidate will contain extremely broad, non-controversial, non-ideological and non-partisan information, e.g. being in favor of “creating jobs” and “promoting opportunity.”

All respondents across all samples were given a shared baseline of information when they filled out the questionnaire, including the State Senate candidate’s partisan affiliation (for participants in the “candidate ad” and “control” groups), as well as a brief description of the ballot initiative (for participants in the “initiative ad” and “control” groups).

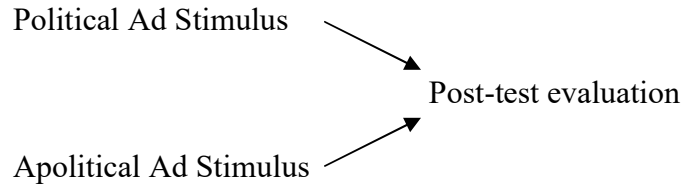


Figure 4.1. Basic Experimental Design.

Randomly drawing the control group sample from Qualtrics’s pool of participants allows me to assume that it displays the same attitudes as any group of voters in the larger pool who is *not* exposed to the treatment would. As such, the control group is used as the baseline against which to evaluate the various treatment effects. The ads’ content differentiation is comprehensively broken down in Table 4.1 below.

Political Stimulus	<i>Group 1</i> Initiative ad highlighting political party association	<i>Group 2</i> Initiative ad highlighting positive group association	<i>Group 3</i> Initiative ad highlighting negative group association	<i>Group 4</i> Initiative ad highlighting policy positives	<i>Group 5</i> Initiative ad highlighting policy negatives
	<i>Group 6</i> Candidate ad highlighting positive group association	<i>Group 7</i> Candidate ad highlighting positive group association	<i>Group 8</i> Candidate ad highlighting positives of policy stand	<i>Group 9</i> Candidate ad highlighting negatives of policy stand	
Control Treatment	<i>Group 10</i> Apolitical ad				

Table 4.1. 5 x 3 Factorial Experimental Design Table Outlining All Types of Ads Shown to Participants.

Each ad features one specific characteristic whose impact I am aiming to assess, while keeping the rest of the content as constant as possible³⁴. This is to ensure, for instance, that images and sounds do not provoke spurious relationships between ad content and subjects' responses. This is especially key given how the use of certain images and sounds can trigger different emotions, and how several path-breaking studies, especially over the last decade or so, have demonstrated the impact emotional cues can have on voter behavior in politics generally (Lerner et al. 2003; Small, Lerner and Fischhoff 2006; Westen 2007) and in political ads specifically (Brader 2005, 2006; Weber 2012).

Furthermore, all political stimuli aim to push voters in the same direction – that is, to make them more likely to support the initiative or the State Senate candidate, depending on the group. Even ads containing “negative” messages aim to foster greater initiative (or candidate) support by attacking opponents.

An additional way to ensure ads' similarity is using the same “actor” playing the senatorial candidate as the one making the case for (or against) the various ballot propositions in the initiative ads. Indeed, there appear to be few downsides to such a strategy, since no voter will see more than one ad. Whether they are exposed to an initiative ad or a candidate ad, all voters are presented with the same human subject in the same setting. Aside from the stimulus employed, all ads were designed to look and sound as identical as humanly possible. They were all of the same length (30 seconds), and all featured the same basic design: the same actor, in front of a dark, uniform background,

³⁴ The detailed script for all ads is available in the appendices.

directly addressing the camera in a mid-shot for the first twenty-five seconds and in a close-up for the last five.

In an effort to ensure that ads work well both with respondents who are more visual and with those who are more auditory, text encapsulating the core of the stimulus tested in each ad was shown for a few seconds on screen. Mindful of the very real potential for elements like music to imbue the ads with other, emotional effects on subjects (Brader 2005, 2006), a deliberate decision was made not to feature any sound of any nature but my narrator's voice. While professional political ads frequently utilize music to dramatic ends, I am confident that my opting not to do so in no way made the ad less realistic³⁵.

As one can readily from the table, initiative ads and candidate ads largely serve as mirror images of each other, in part so as to give us another benchmark (in addition to the control group) with which to evaluate the impact of the various initiative ads tested.

There is an exception to this, however – partisan affiliation, which will only be tested as a feature of an initiative ad but not of any candidate ad. Recall that the baseline information provided to participants includes partisan affiliation for the State Senate election, but not for the ballot initiative. The reason for this is two-fold. First and foremost, as illustrated by Figure 4.2 below, it reflects reality.

³⁵ In fact, arguably one of the singularly most powerful ads to have been used in any political campaign over the last several years was that of Representative Joe Sestak in the 2010 U.S. Senate Democratic primary in Pennsylvania. Other than a couple of short news clips inserted, the only sound the 30-second spot employed was a narrator's voice describing Sestak's opponent's recent change of parties. The ad's effectiveness was such that it was widely credited as being pivotal Sestak's upset victory (Gullan 2012).




November 4, 2014 Official General and Special Election Ballot King County, Washington		SEA 34-1245 BALLOT CODE: 46 LEG DISTRICT: 34 SEQ: 8
Instructions Making selections  Use a black ink pen to completely fill in the oval next to your choice. How to correct a mistake  To make a correction, draw a line through the entire measure response or candidate's name. You then have the option of making another choice by completely filling in another oval. Optional write-in  Write-in	State Initiatives to the People Initiative Measure No. 1351 Initiative Measure No. 1351 concerns K-12 education. This measure would direct the legislature to allocate funds to reduce class sizes and increase staffing support for students in all K-12 grades, with additional class-size reductions and staffing increases in high-poverty schools. Should this measure be enacted into law? <input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	State Legislative District No. 34 State Senator partisan office vote for one <input type="radio"/> Sharon K. Nelson <small>(Prefers Democratic Party)</small> <input type="radio"/> Write-in Legislative District No. 34 Representative Position No. 1 partisan office vote for one <input type="radio"/> Eileen L. Cody <small>(Prefers Democratic Party)</small> <input type="radio"/> Write-in Legislative District No. 34 Representative Position No. 2 partisan office vote for one <input type="radio"/> Joe Fitzgibbon <small>(Prefers Democratic Party)</small> <input type="radio"/> Brendan B. Kolding <small>(Prefers Democratic Party)</small> <input type="radio"/> Write-in County Prosecuting Attorney partisan office vote for one <input type="radio"/> Dan Satterberg <small>(Prefers Republican Party)</small> <input type="radio"/> Write-in State Supreme Court
	Initiatives to the Legislature Initiative Measure No. 591 Initiative Measure No. 591 concerns firearms. This measure would prohibit government agencies from confiscating guns or other firearms from citizens without due process, or from requiring background checks on firearm recipients unless a uniform national standard is required. Should this measure be enacted into law? <input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	

Figure 4.2. Example of an actual ballot used for the statewide elections held in Washington State in 2014. When voters go to the polls in the U.S., the ballot they are given contains, in the case of partisan office, information about which party each candidate is affiliated with. This is true regardless of the U.S. state in which the election is held. In fact, the only explicit information, other than the candidate's name and the office he/she seeks to hold, contained on the ballot. That is to say, it is the only information that a voter who would have no exposure whatsoever to any campaign messages has to make a decision. The only information given to voters with regards to initiatives is a brief description of what the measure proposes to do. Here also, it is the only information that a voter who would have no exposure whatsoever to any campaign messages has to make a decision. In other

words, the virtual “ballot” presented to study participants is what comes closest in this regard to an actual ballot. In a context in which experimental work is particularly – if not uniquely – sensitive to concerns of external validity, it is not a choice devoid of methodological importance.

The second part of the justification for providing partisan affiliation information in State Senate elections but not ballot initiatives is theoretical. Returning to Converse (1964), he demonstrates how party identification is, very clearly, the most stable political attitude espoused by voters. Indeed, not only is it more stable than people’s attitudes toward rather mundane issues (which is admittedly not all that surprising), but it also displays much greater stability than attitudes regarding even highly-important (or highly-salient³⁶) issues. Simply put, when it comes to voter considerations, “party ID” tends to loom larger than virtually any policy.

Implications for this, of course, are at the root of three of our hypotheses: H_1 , H_4 , and H_8 . Indeed, if one goes by Converse’s theoretical contributions, one should expect the “party affiliation” cue (Group 1 in Table 4.1) to be the strongest (H_1). Given partisan affiliation’s greater pull among voters, one should also generally expect initiative ads, regardless of the stimulus employed, to have greater effect than candidate ads, both in terms of persuading and agenda-setting, since much of the voter pool seeing the latter is bound to be crystallized the moment it learns about the candidate’s partisan affiliation (H_4 and H_8).

³⁶ In recognition of the varying use of the term “salience” in the discipline and the confusion this variance may cause (Wlezien 2005), I opt for the more straightforward “importance” throughout the text.

To measure the persuasive effects of the various stimuli outlined in Table 4.2, respondents were each assigned to a single group in which they were exposed to one specific political stimulus only. This, of course, does not include the control treatment group, whose participants were exposed to an apolitical control treatment.

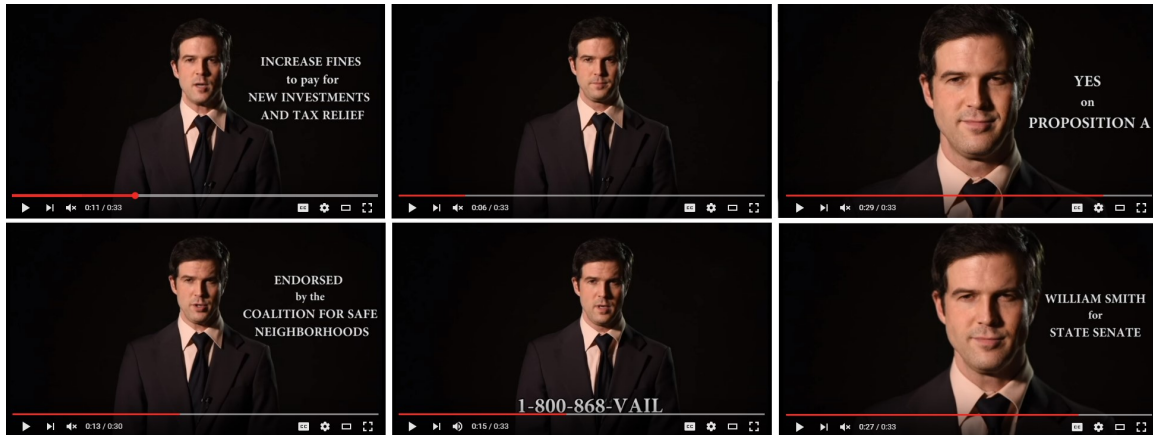


Figure 4.3: Overview of Various Ads Shown to voters

After watching the ad assigned to them, respondents were asked to answer the same questions pertaining to the same ballot initiative and State Senate. As part of the questionnaire voters were asked, as they would be when casting an actual ballot in real life, to choose between the candidates running for State Senate – William Smith (D) or Michael Roberts (R) – and to decide on whether Proposition A should or should not be enacted. In addition, they were prompted to indicate on a scale ranging from 0 to 10 how supportive they were of candidate William Smith and of Proposition A. Below in Table 4.2 is more detail breakdown of the stimuli tested by group³⁷.

³⁷ This table only serves to highlight the stimuli employed in the ads, and thus solely includes what varies across ads. For purposes of consistency, structure, and realism, all initiative ads shared the same opening and closing lines; the same was true of all candidate ads. The full script for all ads is available in the appendices.

Initiative Ad – Partisan Identification Stimulus (Group 1):	<i>n</i> = 122	Candidate Ad – “Positive” Group Association Stimulus (Group 6):	<i>n</i> = 124
“Proposition A has been proudly endorsed by leading Democrats from both the state and the national Democratic parties, which have adopted it as part of their platform. It also enjoys strong and unequivocal support from candidates who will be on this year’s Democratic ticket.”		“I am William Smith, and I am proud to count on the support of leading law enforcement and community groups across the state, including the Coalition for Safe Neighborhoods. The head of the Coalition says that I am the best candidate for getting things done in the State Senate to improve life in the cities and towns of our state.”	
Initiative Ad – “Positive” Group Association Stimulus (Group 2):	<i>n</i> = 126	Candidate Ad – “Negative” Group Association Stimulus (Group 7):	<i>n</i> = 125
“Proposition A has been proudly endorsed by leading law enforcement and community groups across the state, including the Coalition for Safe Neighborhoods. The head of the Coalition calls Proposition A a positive step in improving life in the cities and towns of our state, and urges all to support it.”		“I am William Smith. Some are seeking to undermine my candidacy in this race: special interest groups and lobbyists, including the biggest lobbying firm in the state. These special interest groups and lobbyists are peddling their money and influence into defeating me, because they know that if I win, they lose.”	
Initiative Ad – “Negative” Group Association Stimulus (Group 3):	<i>n</i> = 126	Candidate Ad – “Positive” Policy Consideration Stimulus (Group 8):	<i>n</i> = 126
“Some are seeking to undermine this initiative [Prop A]: special interest groups and lobbyists, including the biggest lobbying firm in the state. These special interest groups and lobbyists are peddling their money and influence into defeating this measure, because they know that if Proposition A wins, they lose.”		“I am William Smith, and I will work to crack down on reckless driving, by increasing fines for driving infractions, and using the revenue to help support new investments and offer tax relief. It would give our schools and hospitals a boost, and our taxpayers a break.”	
Initiative Ad – “Positive” Policy Consideration Stimulus (Group 4):	<i>n</i> = 124	Candidate Ad – “Negative” Policy Consideration Stimulus (Group 9):	<i>n</i> = 126
“Proposition A [...] would increase fines for statewide road infractions to help support new investments in social programs, as well as tax relief. All revenue collected would be set aside, with half for new funding to education and healthcare, and half to an individual tax refund. It would give our schools and hospitals a boost, and our taxpayers a break.”		“I am William Smith. My opponent in this race promises to block a crackdown on reckless driving. By blocking an increase in road infraction fines, he would put dangerous drivers ahead of responsible citizens. With the death and injury toll on our roads in the hundreds every year, the status quo is not acceptable.”	
Initiative Ad – “Negative” Policy Consideration Stimulus (Group 5):	<i>n</i> = 126	Apolitical Ad – Control Treatment (Group 10):	<i>n</i> = 120
“Proposition A [...] would increase fines for statewide road infractions to help support new investments in social programs, as well as tax relief. When all is said and done, opposition to this measure would mean more dangerous roads. It would keep money in the pockets of reckless drivers rather in those of responsible citizens. With the death and injury toll on our roads in the hundreds every year, the status quo is not acceptable.”		“Are you in need of legal representation but unsure as to how to proceed? This can seem like an overwhelming burden – and without the proper guidance, it usually is. Call the offices of Martin Vail for a free consultation. We are here to walk you through any legal issue you may have. And, unlike with other firms, you do not have to pay anything until services have actually been rendered. Call us today.”	

Table 4.2: Stimulus Breakdown by Group

Given this design, one should expect groups whose respondents were exposed to stimuli having a positive persuasive impact in the aggregate to show higher percentages of support for William Smith / Proposition A, and / or higher average levels of support for William Smith / Proposition A (depending on whether the stimulus dealt with the State Senate contest of the initiative race) than do respondents from the control treatment group. Of course, it follows that the opposite should be observed if a stimulus carried a negative persuasive impact – i.e. made respondents less likely to grant their support to William Smith or to Proposition A. Recall from Chapter 4 that all ads were originally created to have a positive impact on either candidate Smith or Prop A; none of the ads tested were purposefully constructed to decrease support for either Smith or Prop A.

Pre-Test

Prior to launching the full study, I ran, as previously mentioned, a pilot study with an online sample of 100 respondents through Amazon’s *Mechanical Turk*. The aim was mainly two-fold. First, I wanted to ensure that the formal study’s basic design could be expected to actually work – that is, that the various stimuli used were properly understood by subjects (e.g. being able to see that some cues were policy-driven while others pertained to associations with groups and/or political parties). Second, I wanted to get respondents’ take on the realism of the fictional initiative and ads³⁸ put before them – that is, that voters could “buy” that this initiative could conceivably be put before them

³⁸ Since the ads were produced *after* running the pilot study, *Mechanical Turk* respondents were asked for their reaction to the scripts for the ads. In the end, except for a few fairly minor modifications, the final ads almost perfectly mirrored the scripts.

and these ads could conceivably be run on television as part of a campaign regarding the initiative. The pre-test took place on February 6, 2016.

Participants

To run my formal experiment and test my various hypotheses, I recruited a general sample of over 1,200 respondents through a private research firm, Qualtrics, which specializes in assembling high-quality online panels. These respondents were then randomly assigned to one of 10 samples. Each of these samples was composed of 120 to 126 distinct respondents, which made up for a total of 1,245 individuals having participated in the experiment. No individual was ever assigned to more than one group, meaning that all respondents were exposed to one treatment, and one treatment only.

Selection was solely limited to American citizens who were also registered voters. Any non-U.S. registered voter was automatically discarded. More specific criteria were also used to ensure that, while technically not randomly drawn as Qualtrics uses an “opt-in” panel, my pool of participants adequately represented the actual general U.S. electorate to the best of my ability. This was an especially important consideration given some of the inherent risks, notably non-observation bias, associated with opt-in online samples (Baker et al. 2010) similar to the ones used for this study.

Of course, given the considerable costs associated with imposing multiple sets of quotas on my samples, I was limited in the number of criteria that I could utilize to select participants. I thus chose to focus on two that are of particular importance in explaining

and anticipating political attitudes and behavior: tight quotas were set first with regards to race (reflecting U.S. Census bureau figures³⁹), and second with regards to partisan identification (reflecting the most recent numbers available from Gallup prior to launching the study⁴⁰). These quotas were respected across all 10 samples, meaning that at the very least in terms of both race and partisan affiliation, all samples exhibited characteristics similar to those found in the general population.

A “quality check” question was inserted toward the end of the survey to ensure that participants were paying attention while completing the questionnaire⁴¹. Any respondent failing this question was automatically discarded from the study. Very few did overall.

The complete formal experiment, across all 10 groups, was run between March 16 and March 19, 2016.

Putting the Study in Context and Recognizing its Limitations

For all its methodological care and considerations, this study – like any other of the sort – is bound by certain limitations, and the results it produces must be handled and interpreted with care.

³⁹ The breakdown was as follows: Caucasian / White 62%; African American / Black 13%; Hispanic / Latino 17% ; Other 7%.

⁴⁰ The breakdown was as follows: Democrat 31%; Republican 29%; Independent 39%.

⁴¹ This question asked respondents to specifically select the third of four possible answers between “strongly approve,” “somewhat approve,” “somewhat disapprove,” and “strongly disapprove.”

First, as was just discussed regarding sampling, quotas could not be imposed to reflect an exact replication of general population features. Of particular interest, I should note that while partisan affiliation did reflect population patterns across all samples, it behooves me to briefly mention that the same cannot quite be said about ideology.

Though partisan affiliation and ideological preferences are at a minimum strongly correlated with one another, especially in historical terms (Levendusky 2009), and one should thus expect to find a nearly even ideological split in samples with a nearly even partisan split such as ours, it is not the case here. My samples skewed left: self-identified conservative voters comprised 22% of my sample, even though they made up a little over a third (35%) of the national U.S. electorate in 2012 (Sabato 2013); on the other hand, self-identified liberals comprised 43% of my sample, while making up only a quarter (25%) of the U.S. electorate. The reason is simple: proportionally more Republicans, in comparison to the general population, identified here as moderates, and more Independents identified as liberals. In other words, while the partisan makeup of my samples suggests ideological parity with the population's partisan affiliation breakdown, participants tacked somewhat further left ideologically overall than does the population.

This is to say that, despite my best efforts, my pool of participants may not have been *perfectly* representative of the general electorate. However, it was *considerably* superior to those used in a myriad of comparable studies which often exclusively draw, for instance, from undergraduate students at a single university (and sometimes in a single department). Qualtrics helped draw from a pool which, in addition to being extremely

representative in terms of race and partisan identification, also sprang across all age groups, education and income levels, and regions of the country.

Of course, nowhere in these pages would I suggest that the messages contained in the ads shown to voters would have the exact same impact on voters regardless of ad production choices. It is not inconceivable that changes to form, if not substance – be it the actor’s appearance, voice or accent, the more elaborate use of graphics or visual support for the arguments articulated, or the incorporation of sound effects or music – may have played a role in shaping some participants’ responses. As the number of these potential changes or modifications approaches infinity, here, as elsewhere, choices had to be made. Of utmost importance for the purposes of this study was that production values be consistent across all ads produced – and they were.

Before delving into actual results, a few more words are warranted precisely with regards to data interpretation. Since the ads will be completely isolated, this first⁴² study allows for examining their fullest possible impact on viewers, as well as contrasting between the effect on voters of the two “types” of ads – dealing either with a proposed initiative or a flesh-and-blood candidate. That said, given the number of hours of television Americans watch – approximately 34 hours of television per week on average according to Nielsen Research, close to the equivalent of a full-time job (Stelter 2011) – one must be cognizant of the relative weight (or lack thereof) of any one commercial spot.

⁴² The project should be seen for what it is: essentially a first stab at experimentally measuring the impact of advertising in initiative races. Considering maximal effects makes sense for an initial foray, but it should be viewed as a stepping stone for additional work .

Furthermore, it is important to always bear in mind the decaying nature of political advertising effects (Gerber et al. 2011; Hill et al. 2013): if an ad fails to move the needles simply by being “buried” in a 30-minute segment, its odds of impacting an election that is held days or weeks afterwards are, to put it mildly, bleak. The aim of this study, then, is to show the *maximal possible impact* of advertisement – while remaining mindful of the fact that the actual impact may, in some cases, very well turn out to be smaller, either immediately or over time.

Finally, even as the following pages discuss attitudes changing as a result of exposure to treatment, one must always bear in mind that this reflects an aggregate projection of attitude change. Since I am using a post-test instrument only and am comparing groups between each other (and not *among* each other), no one individual having participated in this experiment can be said to have had his attitude measurably, demonstrably changed by it.

CHAPTER 5 – PERSUASION EFFECTS

When wondering whether a particular piece of advertising “works,” one’s natural inclination may often be to first look at its ability to persuade (Hunt 1976; Huber and Arceneaux 2007; Armstrong 2010). Does watching the ad in question cause some voters to move their view on or their opinion of the issue discussed from Point A to Point B? If so, how prevalent is this movement? Of course, as will be shown in the subsequent chapter, it is not all that can – or should – be considered when evaluating the impact of advertising, but it is nonetheless a sensible place to start discussing results from my formal experiment, as well as their implications.

Before looking at each type of stimulus tested, I should first note that, contrary to both my expectations and to results obtained in the pre-test, Proposition A earned much more baseline support than opposition. In the formal study’s control group, a little over seven in ten voters (73%) answered that the initiative put before them should be enacted – in stark contrast with pilot study respondents, who broke down almost perfectly 50-50 on the same question⁴³. This, in turn, *may* have helped limit the potential for stimuli to appreciably grow approval for the measure, given how high it already scored with the baseline group (although the various results discussed below should arguably temper this concern).

⁴³ Given the much larger and higher-quality pool of respondents participating generated by Qualtrics than by Mechanical Turk, it follows that, in light of this unexpected discrepancy, we be predisposed to trust the formal study results.

Despite this surprise, support was, as expected and in fact as designed, distributed almost perfectly evenly among Democratic, Republican, and Independent voters, as well as among liberal and conservative voters. Proposition A accomplished the rare feat, in contemporary American politics, of *not* being inherently praised or shunned along partisan or ideological lines.

Tests of statistical significance reported below, which are for the most comprised of comparisons of means and of proportions, are *z*-tests.

Partisan Affiliation

My very first hypothesis, H_1 , postulated that partisan affiliation, or “party ID,” should carry particular strength. It should push those identifying with a given political party to use announced support from that party for a proposed ballot initiative as a “cue” encouraging them to be more supportive of the initiative than they otherwise would be, while simultaneously having the opposite effect on those identifying with the other party. Note that, since the ballot presented to respondents already clearly indicated each State Senate candidate’s party affiliation, no “candidate ad” using party ID as a cue was made or tested.

As outlined in the previous chapter in Table 4.2, the first sample of voters was exposed to ads touting support from the Democratic Party for Proposition A.

Now, before going into any potential effects from the political stimuli tested, let us first consider results from the control treatment group. This sample of voters ($n = 120$) was shown a 30-second commercial featuring the exact same actor, angle, lighting and background as in the other (political) ads, only in this case pitching counseling from a fictitious law firm. Having been exposed to no political stimulus, these respondents' attitudes regarding Proposition A and the State Senate contest between Democrat William Smith and Republican Michael Roberts should be viewed as the baseline from which to judge the results from all other samples.

As stated at the chapter's onset, baseline support for Proposition A was strong – to a surprising degree, as it was for candidate Smith. To the extent that it may have blunted some of the potential positive impact from the political stimuli tested, this is relevant – especially as it pertains to Prop A, which was originally designed in part to divide the electorate as evenly as possible, something which the pre-test suggested that it actually achieved quite well⁴⁴. While candidate Smith carried the favor of nearly six in ten (59%) of control treatment group participants and boasted a mean value of a little over 7 ($M = 7.08$, $SD = 2.07$) on a support scale of 0 to 10, Proposition A enjoyed support from nearly three quarters (73%) among the same pool of respondents and also had a mean value close to 7 ($M = 6.89$, $SD = 3.17$) on the same type of scale. In other words, both Smith and Prop A were broadly popular with voters *without* any stimulus of any sort being applied.

⁴⁴ In the pre-test evaluation, a sample of respondents ($n = 120$) drawn through Mechanical Turk found an almost perfectly even split, with 51% in support of and 49% in opposition to the same proposed initiative.

Indeed, when one looks at the differences between baseline results and those from Group 1, any stimulus-derived effect seems essentially nil at first glance. In the aggregate, there is little to no movement between the two samples.

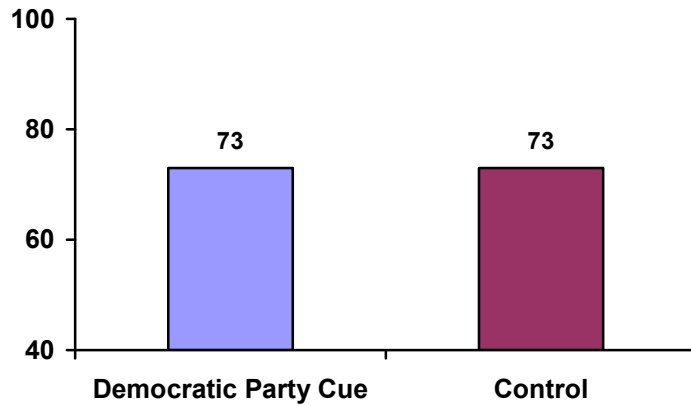


Figure 5.1: Cross-Sample Percentage of Voters Supporting Proposition A

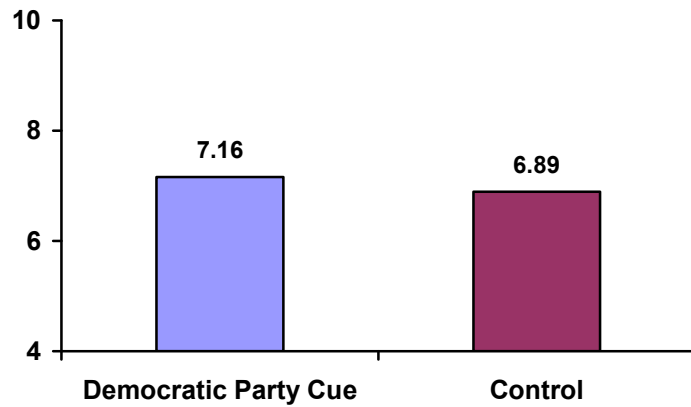


Figure 5.2: Cross-Sample Average Value Assigned by Voters to Proposition A on a 0-10 scale

While little movement is visible in the surface, as illustrated by Figures 5.1 and 5.2 above, the partisan affiliation stimulus is nonetheless very much operating and having an impact

– in line with my expectations – on voters. That effect, however, only becomes observable when breaking down the electorate along party lines.

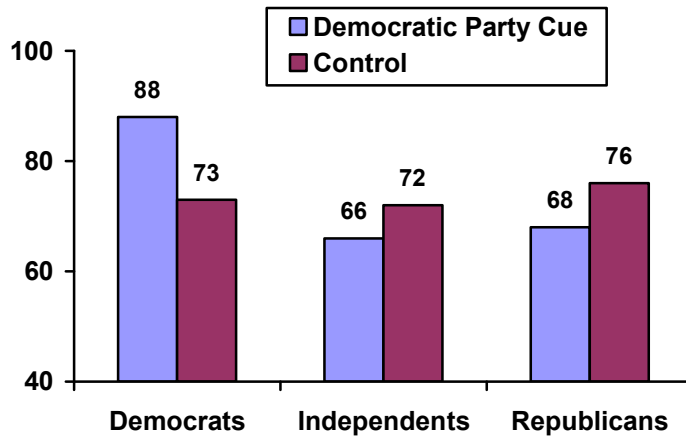


Figure 5.3: Cross-Sample Percentage of Voters Supporting Proposition A, by Party Affiliation

Clearly, the cue is having a discernable effect – it is serving to sort the electorate along party lines in a contest that had no partisan attachment to it whatsoever in the first place. This is meaningful. It is important to keep in mind that we are dealing here with a straightforward ballot initiative – and not with a candidate who may behave / vote on a myriad issues over several years once elected. In principle, one could argue that it should make no difference if a political party or another supports or opposes an initiative, as a party’s support for an initiative stands to have little to no practical impact on it. This is not to suggest that voters, particularly when they are uncertain or lack understanding of an issue, can never be well advised to heed the recommendation of an actor they generally trust – in this case, the political party they affiliate with. However, if only from a historical standpoint, this finding is still striking in that the most fundamental goal of

developing the initiative process in the first place was to circumvent the power of political party machines and elected officials (Tallian 1977; Matsusaka 2004).

Moreover, there are serious normative implications here to consider. At a very general level, it recasts the debate over the desirability, from a democratic theory standpoint, of voters using heuristics. Is it to be lauded (Lupia 1994) or to be cause for concern (Kuklinski et al. 2000)? This debate is arguably made even more prescient given that we are specifically talking here about ballot initiatives, which were originally introduced in the Progressive Era largely as a broader effort to sterilize politics from the corroding, corrupting influence of political parties. What does it say of the initiative, then, if partisan **and**, perhaps even more remarkably, non-partisan cues generate heterogeneous partisan differences among voters? For one thing, it indicates that even a contest that is nominally about policy can be shaped, even potentially decided rather by partisan predispositions and considerations.

In addition, this initiative was specifically designed to carry no obvious partisan undertone, as it purposely includes elements traditionally favored by both major parties: increased public funding for education and healthcare (a traditional Democratic preference) and tax cuts (a traditional Republican preference). And indeed, the data from the control treatment group speak for themselves: support is almost equal among Democratic (73%), Republican (76%), and Independent identifiers (72%).

And yet, once informed in an ad that the very same initiative has been endorsed by the Democratic Party, things change. Democrats become statistically significantly more likely to support Prop A ($z = 2.14, p < 0.05$, two-tailed), while Republicans move in the opposite direction. Interestingly, Independents – *despite* being on the whole ideologically closer to Democrats than Republicans – behave in this regard much more like Republicans, as they become less likely to support Prop A (though changes in attitudes for both Republicans and Independents fall just short of conventional statistical significance standards). The asymmetrical nature of the effect here is noteworthy: the positive “jolt” that the Democratic endorsement to Democratic voters more or less doubles the negative reaction observed among each sub-sample of Independent and Republican voters.

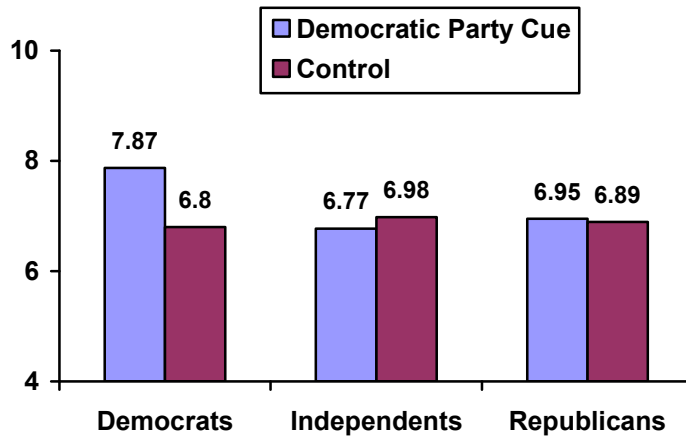


Figure 5.4: Cross-Sample Average Value Assigned by Voters to Proposition A on a 0-10 scale, by Party Affiliation

Tellingly, the partisanship cue in the context of an initiative ad seems to hold more persuasive power – if not immediately visibly in the aggregate, at least when looking at different types of voters and seeing them pulled in opposite directions – than does the policy cue in the context of a candidate ad.

In a way, groups 8 and 9 served as something of a mirror image of group 1: in lieu of being shown an ad lauding an initiative on the basis of its partisan appeal, they saw ads lauding a candidate on the basis of his policy appeal (for group 8) and of his rejection of his opponent's policy appeal (for group 9). The latter two had very little discernable effect on voters' support for candidate William Smith, either in the aggregate or when drilling down to look at partisanship or ideology.

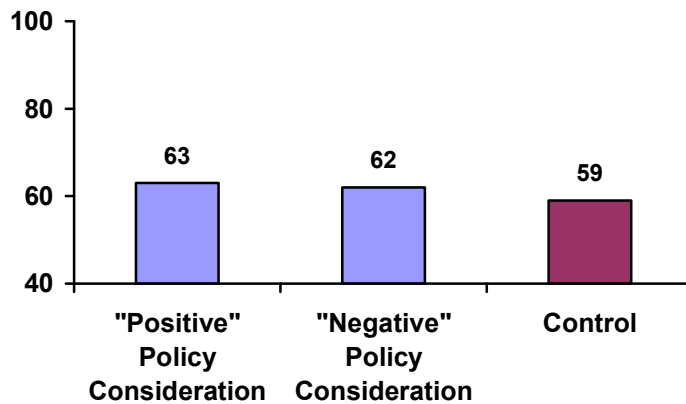


Figure 5.5: Cross-Sample Percentage of Voters Supporting William Smith

Before being subjected to any stimulus, Democrats largely embraced Smith (a Democrat whose party affiliation was listed on the fictional ballot shown to voters), while Republicans largely rejected him. No public policy consideration – or, at least, none of the public policy considerations brought up in the ads – sufficed to significantly move those preferences⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ Although support for William Smith scores slightly higher in groups 8 and 9 than in the control group, the fact that the difference does not clear any conventional statistical significance thresholds calls for caution when attributing this to any meaningful treatment effect.

This stands in contrast with voters in group 1 who, as just discussed, saw their attitudes toward Prop A affected by the use of a partisanship cue. It is also remarkably consistent with Hetherington and Keefe's (2007, pp. 186-187) observation that partisan identification "is by far the most stable political attitude, which means that it typically influences other opinions and behaviors rather than being influenced by them." Most importantly for my purposes, it is consistent with my theoretical expectations, formulated under H_2 , that party ID cues in initiative ads will hold greater persuasive power than the reverse, i.e. policy cues in candidate ads.

Group Association

The experiment initially set out to test two types of associations with groups: those that would broadly be expected to be viewed favorably by the electorate, and those that would broadly be expected to be viewed unfavorably. In both cases, though, these stimuli were meant to bolster support for the initiative (the candidate); the former stressed that Proposition A (William Smith) had been endorsed by an array of community groups, including the fictitious "Coalition for Safe Neighborhoods," while the latter underlined the fact that Proposition A (William Smith) was opposed by an ensemble of special interest groups, including the state's largest lobbying firm.

While the "negative" associations – both with regards to the initiative and to the State Senate election – had essentially no measurable impact, the "positive" associations seemed, on the other hand, to be quite potent. There is here a non-trivial twist, however: this potency worked in the direction opposite that predicted. Specifically, being told that

Proposition A (William Smith) had been endorsed by the “Coalition for Safe Neighborhoods” prompted voters to actually *pull* their support for the said initiative. This was true both in the case of the ads pertaining to Prop A and to William Smith.

Results from Figures 5.6 and 5.7 show lower scores both with regards to the percentage of voters supporting Prop A and to the average value ascribed to it, although only in the case of the former is the difference with the control treatment group statistically significant ($z = 1.69, p < 0.1$, two-tailed; and $z = 0.68, p \approx 0.5$, two-tailed, respectively).

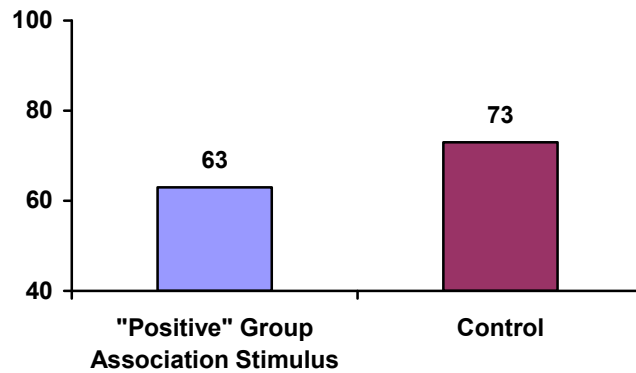


Figure 5.6: Cross-Sample Percentage of Voters Supporting Proposition A

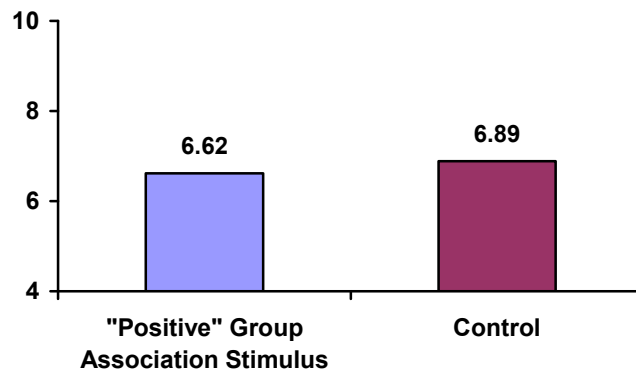


Figure 5.7: Cross-Sample Average Value Assigned by Voters to Proposition A on a 0-10 scale

While this obviously runs counter to my initial expectations, it is far from being without explanation. Indeed, as Figure 5.8 below illustrates, there appears to be a profound ideological divide at play – which would suggest that respondents’ ideological predispositions conditioned them to view and consider the stimulus differently. While liberal support remained fairly consistent, there was a small, statistically insignificant drop among independent support and a massive, highly statistically significant ($z = 2.5, p < 0.05$, two-tailed) despite relatively small sample sizes, meltdown of conservative support, which fell in minority territory at 42%.

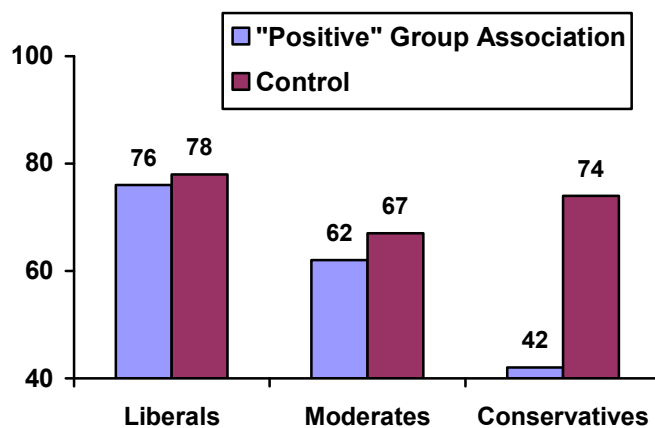


Figure 5.8: Cross-Sample Percentage of Voters Supporting Proposition A, Broken Down by Ideology

In the ad shown to Group 2 participants, focus was put on the fact that one group in particular, the “Coalition for Safe Neighborhoods,” had endorsed Proposition A, along with a glowing quote from its spokesman. While admittedly unintentional, it is entirely plausible that conservative voters would view such a “community group” as a liberal special-interest group and, therefore, took this as a “cue” from the initiative’s

proponents that it was indeed a tool designed and promoted by groups whose ideals are usually opposite from their own.

In fact, in addition to contributing to the growing scholarly dialogue on the importance of associating with / against a group in shaping one self's sense of political identity (see, for instance, Green, Palmquist and Shickler 2002; Theodoridis 2013), this reinforces previous scholarly findings. Perhaps most notably, it nicely parallels those by Arceneaux and Kolodny (2009), whose study concluded that conservative voters used the endorsement by a group perceived as liberal as a *negative* heuristic in shaping their decision to reject those candidates at the ballot box. In Green, Palmquist and Shickler's words (2002, p. 23), "Citizens' group attachments shape the way that they evaluate political candidates and the policies they espouse. [S]eldom does the political environment change in ways that alter how people think of themselves or their relationship to significant social groups." In retrospect, it turns out to be particularly tricky, in a polarized polity, to find groups that will create unanimity among the electorate.

Breaking down the results by party, as Figure 5.9 does, offers a similar picture, albeit not quite as clear, with Democratic support for Prop A holding steady and both Independent and Republican support crumbling. The reason the latter two are still in relatively high overall (at 57% and 59%, respectively), is that self-described "moderate" Independents (60%) and "moderate" Republicans (50%) show a greater tendency to back Prop A than do "conservative" Independents (32%) and "conservative" Republicans (42%).

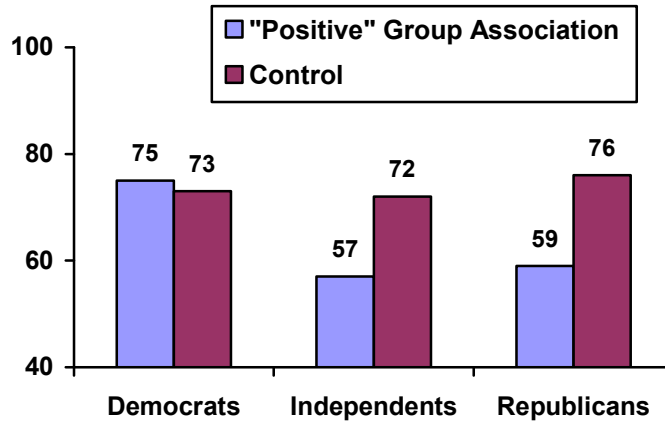


Figure 5.9: Cross-Sample Percentage of Voters Supporting Proposition A, Broken Down by Party

So while the outcome may run contrary on the surface to my theoretical expectations, it does yield important findings that are in a way, in fact, consistent with Hypothesis 3, which stipulated that group associations cues would be constricted in their ability to increase initiative support. These findings strongly imply support for the idea, outlined in my literature review and under H_3 , that it is much more difficult to “sell” an initiative than it is to defeat one. Granted, initial support for this particular initiative was already high – so an argument could be made that in such a scenario there are more ways for it to go down than up. Still, the fact that a piece of advertising which aimed at *boosting* the measure led to a decline in its support – conceivably because a segment of the electorate may have been turned off by an association made in the ad between the measure and its backers – carries important questions. For one: if *this* suffices to significantly drive down support for an initiative, what would happen if an ad *actually designed* from start to finish to defeat the initiative were to be shown to voters? One could reasonably anticipate finding larger negative effects on initiative support – and additional credence for the

claim that initiatives are indeed easier to defeat than to “sell” through campaign messaging.

Interestingly, looking over at results from those groups exposed to candidate ads touting the endorsement by the Coalition for Safe Neighborhoods and other community groups, a similar pattern emerges. In my control treatment group, Democratic candidate William Smith earned 59% overall support. This support, as predicted, largely broke down along partisan lines – with 83% of Democrats, 63% of Independents, and 32% of Republicans backing Smith. In the group told about the Coalition’s endorsement of the candidate, support dropped somewhat precipitously, by nine percentage points overall, to only 50% – the only statistically significant, $z = 1.41$, $p < 0.1$ (one-tailed), deviation in either direction from the control group, in fact, for any group exposed to a candidate-stimulus ad. Where did the drop come from?

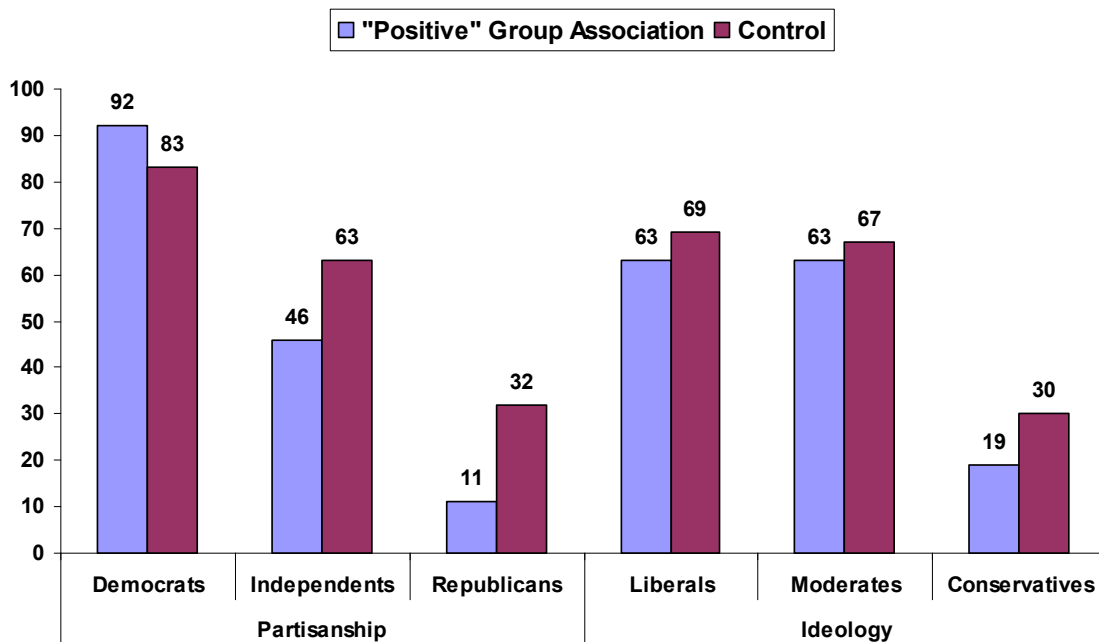


Figure 5.10: Cross-Sample Percentage of Voters Supporting William Smith, Broken Down by Partisanship and Ideology

Now, the fall in support for William Smith may not be as stark as it was for Proposition A among respondents exposed to the corresponding stimulus – in no small part because support for the Democratic State Senate candidate was never as strong among Republicans and/or conservatives as Prop A was to begin with. That said, these data *appear* to suggest that the Coalition’s endorsement having a negative impact on non-Democratic, non-liberal voters in the initiative ad sample is no fluke – in accordance with the existing literature, individuals are driven away when they perceive themselves as members of the “out” group. That said, it should be noted that one cannot affirm this in complete confidence. Alternative explanations, such as that Republican and/or conservative voters are generally less trusting of outside political groups or coalitions, cannot be ruled out. If nothing else, the fact that the Coalition was explicitly linked to “law enforcement” in the actor’s message, should normally have been a magnet, not a repellent, for these voters. One should thus proceed with great care when interpreting these results.

Policy Considerations

The final “type” of stimulus tested was, in a way, that which should inherently feel the most natural in a ballot initiative campaign: the actual policy implications of approving or rejecting the proposed statute. Given that the two “candidate policy ads” discussed much of the same issues in much of the same terms – i.e. candidate William Smith promising to tackle dangerous driving by increasing road infraction fines – results from respondents in those two groups are included side-by-side in Figure 5.11. On the left are the percentages

of voters supporting Proposition A after having seen the two “initiative policy” pitches; on the right are the percentages of voters supporting William Smith after having seen the two “candidate policy” pitches.

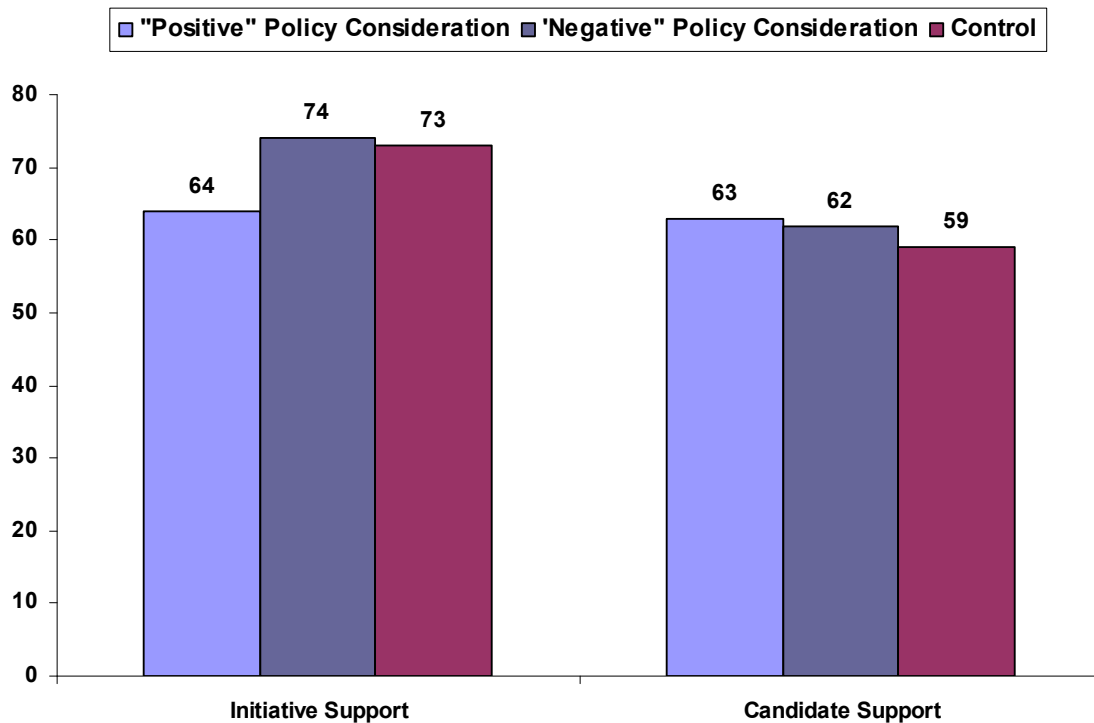


Figure 5.11: Cross-Sample Percentage of Voters Supporting Proposition A and William Smith

As can readily be seen, there is very little movement across the board in relation to attitudes detected in the control treatment group – with one notable exception. It is found with Group 4 – the “positive” policy pitch for Proposition A. The fact that the contrast with the control group is the only one to show statistical significance, $z = 1.51, p < 0.1$, is not merely what makes these results interesting – it is that, remarkably, the ad’s impact on voter support is significantly *negative*. In fact, there seems to be something of a replica of what happened with the “positive” group association ad. Here, just as with Group 3, the observed drop in support is far from even or random. As vividly illustrated

by Figure 5.12 below, while support remained quite stable among Republican voters and dropped among Independents, it figuratively *cratered* among Democrats.

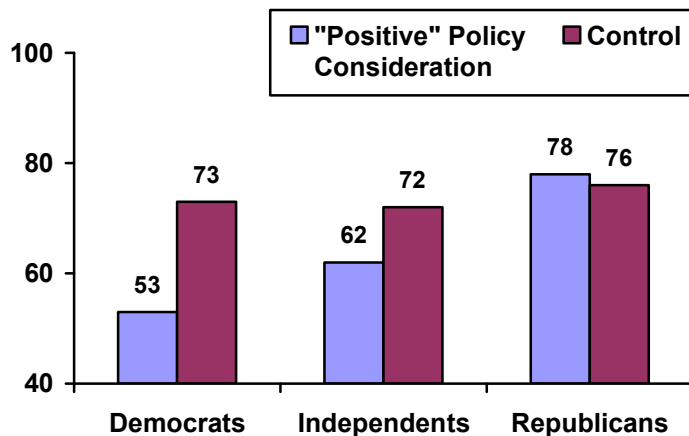


Figure 5.12: Cross-Sample Percentage of Voters Supporting Proposition A, Broken Down by Party

When one digs deeper into the data, at least one possible explanation arises. A question following those pertaining to people’s attitudes towards the proposed initiative asked them to state (in an open-ended format) what they thought Proposition A was mainly about⁴⁶. By and large, in both the control treatment group and most other stimulus treatment groups, the answers were largely predictable and similar, a different type of answer was given by multiple respondents assigned to Group 4:

- ◆ “Another way to screw the traffic violator which would raise the car insurance rates”
- ◆ “Taking more money from the working class”
- ◆ “About them trying to get more money and not use it the way they say”

⁴⁶ The exact wording was: “To you, what is this initiative mainly about? Is it about road safety, public expenditures and taxes, or something else?”

- ◆ “It is about raising money from the poor who commit the largest number of infractions due to cheaper vehicles and low maintenance”

To the extent that this, much like the results reported earlier with Group 3⁴⁷, may seem to run contrary to our experimental design at first glance, it nonetheless gives credence in some respect to H_3 , which stressed the difficulty of enhancing public support on a policy appeal basis. It also again raises an important question: if *this* is all that is required to nip at support for a ballot initiative, what would happen to that support if a strong, compelling case explicitly negative case against the initiative were to be made? It also lends support for H_4 , which predicted that voter support would generally be more stable (i.e. immune from stimulus effects) in the State Senate race as opposed to the initiative race. Having William Smith always identified as a Democrat on respondents’ ballots seems to have anchored more firmly their vote choice as it pertains to him than it was with regards to Proposition A, which saw greater fluctuation across relevant samples.

These findings from the “initiative policy” stimulus group additionally bring to light the possibility that *framing* effects may have been at work here – making voters exposed to one ad view the initiative as being about something else compared to voters exposed to another ad. Framing is precisely where I turn in the next chapter. Before doing so, however, let us consider a brief, additional dimension.

⁴⁷ As with Group 3, one must also be cognizant of the fact that the apparent interaction between the “policy considerations” treatment and partisanship/ideology constitute ad hoc finding – and it is by no means the sole possible reason as to why participants responded to the stimulus contrary to expectations.

Political Awareness and Political Persuasion

As discussed in Chapter 2, researchers have for decades now posited that citizens are not equally immune to potential media effects. Indeed, under Hypothesis 5, I expected those possessing more political knowledge at the onset to be more likely to resist attempts made through campaign messages to persuade them. Is this phenomenon observable in the results? Overall – and particularly in two remarkable instances, discussed in the following pages – it does seem to be.

Through a five-question standard political knowledge battery⁴⁸, respondents were categorized as either “high-political knowledge” or “low-political knowledge.” The first general takeaway looking at the five “initiative ad” samples is the difference in variance when it comes to the two different types of voters’ support for Proposition A. High-political knowledge subjects displayed great stability – none of the stimuli managed to statistically significantly sway them from their counterparts in the control group. The story is not quite the same with low-political knowledge voters, whose attitudes showed much greater fluctuation.

⁴⁸ The battery is derived from the American National Election Studies (ANES) and is discussed in greater detail in the appendices.

	Dem. Party Stimulus	“Positive” Group Stimulus	“Negative” Group Stimulus	“Positive” Policy Stimulus	“Negative” Policy Stimulus	Control Group	s^2
High-pol. know.	59	63	64	65	66	66	7.4
Low-pol. know.	87	65*	76	64*	81	80	100.3

* $p < 0.1$ (two-tailed)

Table 5.1: Percentage of Voters Supporting Prop A, Broken Down by Political Knowledge Level

As is readily apparent from Table 5.1 above, much of the overall variance among low-political knowledge subjects come from two samples: the “positive” group association stimulus and the “positive” policy stimulus. Recall, of course, that these also happen to be the two groups in which general support for the initiative, contrary to initial expectations when designing the experiment, dropped significantly in contrast with the control group.

As we have seen, there likely was a fairly strong partisan and ideological component to this drop. Interestingly, it turns out that there may also have been an additional one: political knowledge. Notice that in the two samples, support among high-political knowledge respondents, for all intents and purposes, does not fall much from that found among high-political knowledge respondents in the control group. Rather, most of the decrease comes low-information voters⁴⁹.

⁴⁹ Upon inspection, this finding seems to be limited to “initiative” groups: in the comparable “candidate ad” sample in which a “positive” heuristic was in effect operationalized as a negative by several respondents (Group 6), the drop from the control group was fairly similar along cognition-level lines. Support for candidate William Smith dropped roughly 10 points among both high-political knowledge (54% to 44%) and low-political knowledge voters (64% to 54%) That said, one should remember that “candidate ad”

This is particularly interesting in that it *arguably* offers fresh evidence, in its own way, in favor and Lau and Redlawsk's (2001) findings, discussed in my earlier review of the literature, charging less politically aware citizens with being more likely to use heuristics incorrectly. I emphasize *arguably*, in that a counter-argument could be made that these cues were not used improperly – they were, rather, imperfectly designed. What does appear to be unequivocal is the support this finding lands to Zaller's (1992) pioneering theory to the effect that lower-information voters are more sensitive to potential media effects and, importantly for the purposes of this project, to H_5 by extension.

However, also in keeping with Zaller, one should keep in mind that in the “real world,” where they were not captive subjects, these voters may have been less likely, given their greater indifference towards politics, to put themselves in a position to be exposed to these political stimuli in the first place (see also, again, Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). In other words, while I find significant effects stemming from exposure to political ads among these voters, the best evidence available to us suggests that they are also the same voters less likely to be both targeted and reached by political ad-makers. This stresses the need to proceed with caution when interpreting the practical implications of the effects found here – and it all the while underscores a potential limit with regards to external validity, already alluded to earlier, often inherently found in experimental research.

An additional dimension, not wholly unrelated to political knowledge, was considered and tested: that of need for cognition. Defined as an “individual's tendency to engage in

groups also had a baseline party cue that may have interacted with other considerations, including whatever stimulus was put before them, in a way not seen in the “initiative” groups.

and enjoy effortful cognitive endeavors” (Cacioppo, Petty and Kao 1984, p. 306) and derived from an 18-item scale in a series of seminal studies by Cacioppo and Petty (1982; 1986; Cacioppo, Petty and Kao 1984; Cacioppo, Petty and Rodriguez 1986; Cacioppo et al. 1996), need for cognition offers in this context a tool for classifying respondents on the basis of their propensity to think abstractly or not. Under this reasoning, a respondent scoring higher on the need for cognition scale should be more likely to pay close attention to an argument’s quality – to engage, in Cacioppo and Petty’s terms, in “systematic” processing. On the other hand, a respondent scoring lower should be more likely to rely on peripheral processing – that is, to fall back on heuristics. Is this what can be observed in my samples? That is hard to say. Results shown in Figure 5.13 cast a somewhat muddled picture⁵⁰.

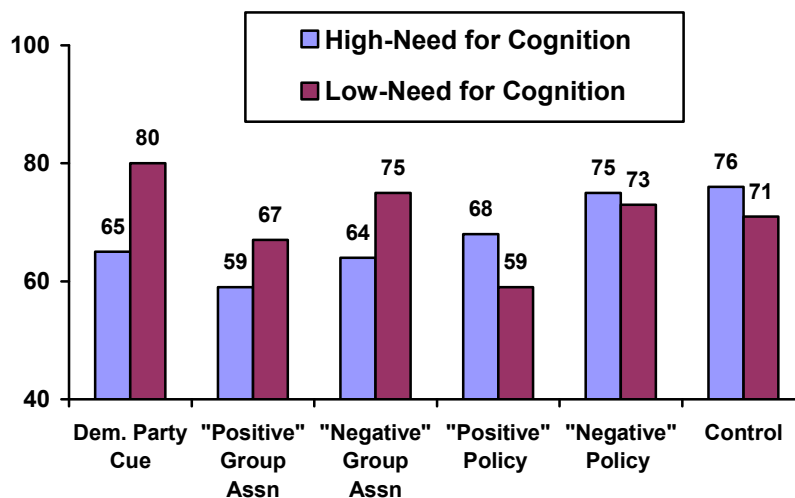


Figure 5.13: Cross-Sample Percentage of Voters Supporting Proposition A, Broken Down by Need for Cognition

⁵⁰ Details as to how respondents were classified as high or low in need for cognition are provided in the Appendices. An additional battery of questions, also available in the appendices, was asked in order to classify respondents as high or low in need for affect. Contrary to expectations (e.g. Arceneaux and Vander Wielen, forthcoming), results closely resembled those for need for cognition (e.g. high-need for affect voters were less likely to be positively influenced by the Democratic Party endorsement cue, while low-need for affect voters were more likely to be), appear to reveal very little substantively, and are thus not displayed here.

As can readily be seen, need for cognition is not universally associated with an increase, a drop, or no change in contrast with the control treatment group. Respondents who are high in need for cognition respond differently to Proposition A across different groups. The same basic pattern can also be observed in groups exposed to candidate ads.

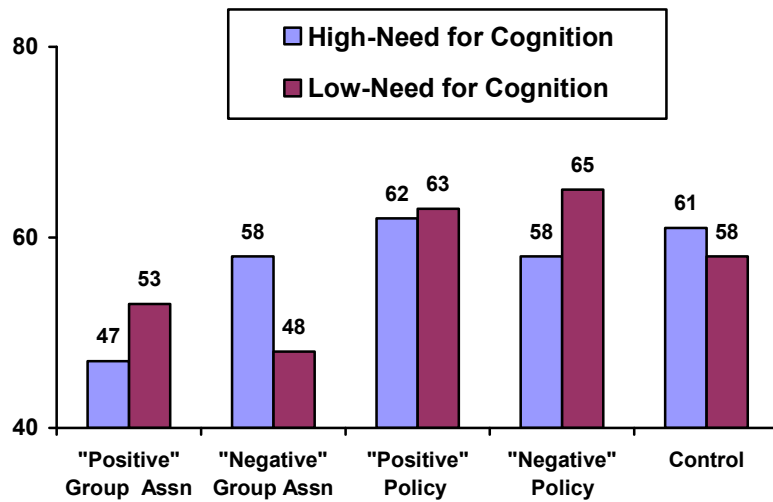


Figure 5.14: Cross-Sample Percentage of Voters Supporting Smith (D), Broken Down by Need for Cognition⁵¹

Then again, recall that some of the cues used showed signs of having backfired with the overall body of respondents in certain groups. What is one to make, then, of results from Group 2, for instance – exposed to the “positive” group association cue which was in fact perceived as negative by several respondents? Does the fact that disproportionately more people who are low in need for cognition voice support for Prop A in this sample suggest that they did, in fact, rely more on the heuristic offered via the advertisement shown to

⁵¹ Although largely absent from our earlier analysis of results in this chapter, the careful reader might correctly infer from Figure 5.16 that overall support for Candidate Smith in Group 7 (exposed to “negative” group association) is lower than in the control group – actually offering fresh evidence for much of the literature on negative advertising finding that ads in which a candidate is clearly identified as personally attacking his opponent tend to produce a “boomerang” effect against that sponsoring candidate (Dowling and Wichowsky 2015; Brooks and Murov 2012; Johnson, Dunaway and Weber 2012; Shen and Wu 2002; cf. Meirick 2005).

them? Or, conversely, does it suggest that people who are high in need for cognition thought harder about the cue used in the ad, were more likely to view it through more critical lenses, and thus to ultimately consider it as a legitimate reason to reject the initiative?⁵²

The safest thing we might be able to extrapolate here in support of my general expectation is that in all stimulus treatment groups where the stimulus used did not backfire with the general sample, low-in-political knowledge respondents were either as or more likely to support either Prop A or William Smith. That said, it may prove wiser altogether to admit that my results, quite plausibly because of the unintended effect of some of the stimuli with some of the respondents, offer scant evidence of a discernable pattern of voting behavior along need-for-cognition lines.

In sum, I have uncovered evidence that *some* voters can be persuaded to change their stand on a ballot initiative through the use of *some* stimuli. Even under a highly captive, freshly exposed audience, not all persuasion attempts tested are effective – and, in fact, when voters perceive that the message is tailored for people belonging to a group different from theirs, some may actually backfire. When attempting to convert the persuadable, “caution” should be the watchword.

⁵² Proponents of Cacioppo and Petty would likely reflexively answer this second question in the negative, as people who are high in need for cognition are generally less likely to rely on heuristics, period – regardless of whether they view these heuristics in a favorable or an unfavorable light. Be that as it may, the nature of our general findings still begs the question.

CHAPTER 6 – AGENDA-SETTING AND FRAMING EFFECTS

While persuasion is, as we have just seen, a fundamental component of appreciating the impact advertising can have on an audience, it is by no means the only one. In addition to convincing one to support or oppose a measure or a candidate is the potential to make one assign greater importance to that measure or candidate, and / or to interpret how he views that measure or candidate. This chapter thus turns to uncovering the other possible effects from advertising tested through my original experiment – those of agenda-setting and framing.

Agenda-Setting

Does seeing / hearing about a particular public policy issue make one more susceptible to consider it more important than he otherwise would? This is what I attempted to measure in terms of potential agenda-setting effects. The way I proceeded to do so was basically two-fold: asking respondents, upon viewing the ad they were exposed to, (1) which issues were important to them; and (2) the extent to which they considered the ballot initiative and the State Senate election put before them, regardless of their personal position on them.

Participants were first given a series of 10 issues, and asked how important they thought each to be to them – very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all respondents. For further analysis, I combined responses in the first two categories to produce a total of “important” responses, and did likewise with the last two to produce a

total of “not important” responses. Three of the ten issues – emphasized in bold and italics in Table 6.1 below – pertained to Proposition A, while the other seven did not.

#	Issue	Total important	Total not important	<i>n</i>
1	Abortion	102	18	120
2	Climate change/Environment	97	23	120
3	Gun control	107	13	120
4	<i>Education funding</i>	<i>111</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>120</i>
5	<i>Healthcare funding</i>	<i>110</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>120</i>
6	Immigration	95	25	120
7	Jobs	116	4	120
8	<i>Road safety</i>	<i>90</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>120</i>
9	Taxes	107	13	120
10	Terrorism/National security	111	9	120

Table 6.1: Importance Given to a Series of 10 Issues by Control Treatment Group Voters

The baseline figures here, derived from my control treatment group, shows essentially all issues are considered important by a net majority of voters – with some issues seen as almost universally important. These include jobs, terrorism and national security, and two of the issues falling under the scope of Proposition A – education and healthcare funding.

Interestingly, the single least important issue to voters is that which is arguably most central to Prop A – road safety. Even still, fully three quarters of voters deem it important, including 43% who view it as “very important.” This means that, much like with support for Proposition A, the baseline numbers are quite high, and make it potentially more difficult for any of the stimuli to have a statistically significant positive impact – and all the more remarkable when they do.

Yet, while no significant difference in terms of agenda-setting can be observed between the control treatment group and any of the stimulus treatment groups when it comes to education or to healthcare funding, this is precisely what can be seen with regards to road safety.

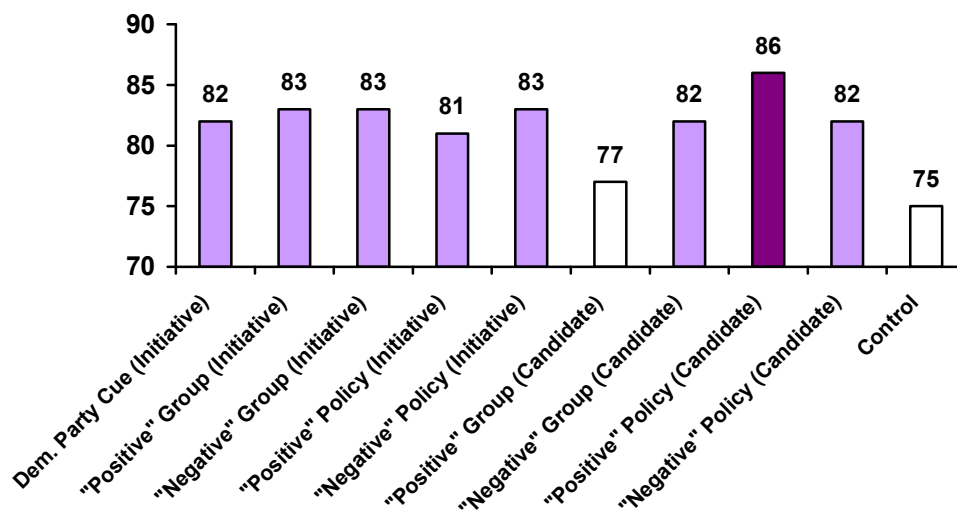


Figure 6.1: Cross-Sample Percentage of Voters Considering Road Safety to be an Important Issue. Bars in dark purple denote $p < 0.05$ (one-tailed); bars in light purple denote $p < 0.1$; bars in white denote no statistical difference with the control group.

The *x*-axis in Figure 6.1 represents the baseline percentage of voters claiming to consider road safety to be an important issue, while colored bars represent statistically significant differences between that and the percentage of each stimulus group (the darker shade for $p < 0.05$, the lighter shade for $p < 0.1$, one-tailed). Save for Group 6 – which was exposed to the “candidate” ad touting the endorsement from community groups, every single stimulus is associated with a significantly higher share of respondents claiming that road safety is a matter of importance to them. This includes other “candidate” ads, including the one shown to Group 8, which scores the highest of all. Recall that this group was shown the ad featuring candidate William Smith promising that he would “crack down on reckless driving” if elected by passing legislation identical to that contained in Prop A.

This, in some ways, reinforces the links between initiative and candidate races outlined in Nicholson’s (2005) work: these campaigns do not necessarily operate in closed silos – they can have an impact on one another by raising the awareness about the other. Most crucially for my purposes, it at least partially confirms Hypothesis 6, which predicted that advertising stimuli would cause voters to assign greater importance to the issue(s) at play. While this was not the case for education or healthcare funding, it clearly appeared to be the case for road safety.

That said, although nearly all the stimuli tested appeared to have an impact on making voters assign greater weight to road safety as an issue, the same cannot be said about pushing them to assign greater weight to Proposition A itself. In fact, not a single stimulus treatment group showed any significant difference with the control treatment

group as it pertains to the mean score given, on a scale of 0-10, to the initiative’s perceived importance – a clear rejection of Hypothesis 7, which stated that ad messages would increase the importance given by voters to the initiative. One potential reason – and a potential inherent problem with the experimental design in the first place – was that Prop A was and was always going to be a hypothetical, fictional initiative. In this setting, there is plausibly less – if anything – that an ad can do to make such an initiative “more” or “less” important to voters.

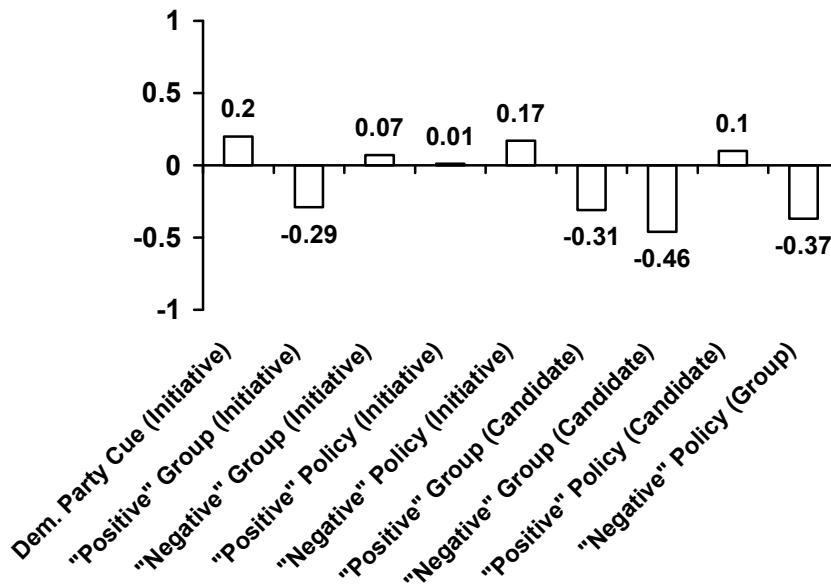


Figure 6.2: Cross-Sample Difference in the Importance Given by Voters to Proposition A on a 0-10 Scale

Figure 6.2 above reports the spread in mean values between the importance given by voters across all stimulus treatment samples on a 0 to 10 scale to Proposition A and the average score given by voters in the control treatment group, which forms the *x*-axis. The

larger the spread (i.e. the more different the values), the longer the vertical bars on the graph. In comparison with the control treatment group, every single stimulus group, in the aggregate, is clustered within half a point in either direction. In no case is the difference with the baseline results statistically different. The assessment is essentially the same when one breaks down each sample, except for one meaningful exception, which directly pertains to Hypothesis 8: Group 1, which was exposed to the ad stating that Proposition A had been endorsed by the Democratic Party, showed some movement when divided by partisan affiliation. H_8 assigned to the “party ID” cue a singularly powerful role in terms of agenda-setting – and this prediction seems to have been borne out here.

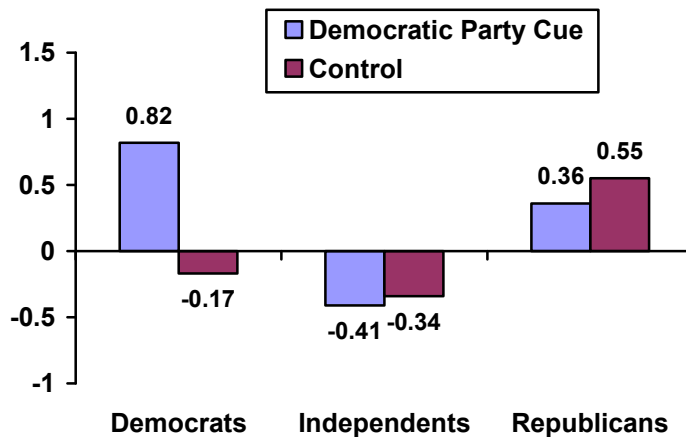


Figure 6.3: Cross-Sample Difference in the Importance Given by Voters to Proposition A on a 0-10 Scale, Broken Down by Party Affiliation

Being told that their party leadership is backing Prop A causes a remarkable – and statistically significant, $z = 1.66$, $p < 0.1$ (one-tailed) – spike in Democratic voters’ evaluation of the measure’s importance.

Framing

“At the most general level,” writes Iyengar (1991, p. 11), “the concept of framing refers to subtle alterations in the statement or presentation of judgment and choice problems, and the term “framing effects” refers to changes in decision outcomes resulting from these alterations.” Since political stimuli tend to be intrinsically ambiguous, open to interpretation, and subject to subjective judgment, the potential impact of framing effects on public opinion when it comes to political issues is important (Iyengar 1990). This potential, as discussed in Chapter 2, has been borne out in fact through several studies over the last two decades. How a political problem is defined helps shape how that problem is thought of.

My evaluation of framing effects, saved here for last, is somewhat more limited than in those studies (as it is somewhat more peripheral to this study’s core object), but it offers interesting takeaways nonetheless. Towards the end of the survey, once respondents had been exposed to the ad and had answered the other questions pertaining to the initiative and Senate election on the ballot placed before them, they were asked an open-ended question prompting them to briefly explain what the proposed initiative was about – road safety, public expenditures and taxes, or something else.

This offered me a way to see whether / how the different ways of presenting Proposition A managed to alter respondents’ perception of it. Recall, of course, that the competing stimuli tested utilized varying language to present the initiative to voters. For instance, subjects assigned to Group 2 were exposed to an ad stressing the Coalition for Safe

Neighborhoods' endorsement of Prop A (with on-screen text saying as much), while subjects assigned to Group 4 were shown an ad in which the emphasis (notably in the caption appearing on screen) emphasized the fact increased fines for road infractions. If there is here room for framing effects, one should expect to see these by voters coming away with different takes on what the initiative is about. Does an ad stressing the initiative's proposal to hike fines manage to *frame* the initiative as being first and foremost about fines (as opposed to, say, road safety or public expenditures, which it also is), in accordance with Hypothesis 9? Results indicate that in *some* cases, the answer appears to be yes.

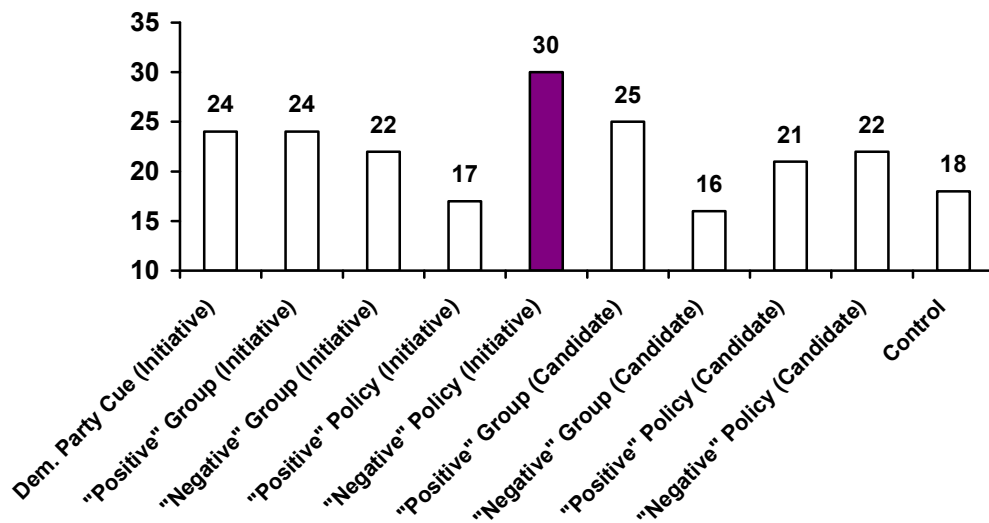


Figure 6.4: Cross-Sample Percentage of Voters Considering Prop A to Be Mainly about Road Safety
 Bars in dark purple denote $p < 0.05$ (one-tailed); bars in white denote no statistical difference with the control group.

In the control group, a little under 18% of respondents identified road safety as the issue that Prop A was mainly about; 19% did likewise with education / health / public

expenditures, and 30% with taxes (either in the sense of a perceived tax hike via increased fines, or of a tax cut promised with the new revenue collected). These percentages held roughly steady for most groups. All bars left blank (or white) on the graph denote the absence of statistically significant differences with the control group.

One major exception, however, was found with Group 5, which was exposed to an ad stressing the dangers of *rejecting* Prop A, including the current “unacceptable death toll” on our roads and the idea that “reckless drivers” would be rewarded. After viewing the ad, the percentage of Group 5 voters viewing Prop A as mainly about road safety surged almost two-fold, to a little over 30% – a highly statistically significant contrast with the control group, $z = 2.2$, $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed). While most other stimuli were associated with a higher proportion of respondents to whom the initiative was mainly about road safety, only those in Group 5 boasted statistically different results from the control treatment group.

Results for Group 4 additionally provide circumstantial evidence (at least partly) supporting the idea put forth earlier in this chapter to the effect that voters exposed to the “positive” policy consideration ad at least saw the initiative as being about something *other* than road safety. In fact, while not significantly different, the proportion of voters in this group claiming Prop A was about safety was smaller than in all but one other group, including the control treatment sample.

CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSION

Ballot initiatives are remarkable in many regards. For the elected official, they can represent a threat, usurping his will on legislation, or even his desire to remain in office⁵³ – or, on the other hand, as an additional tool, when frustrated by gridlock or opposition by his or her colleagues, to see the adoption of a favored policy proposal. For the citizen, they conversely afford the opportunity to have a direct and binding say on some of the issues facing his community. As for the political scientist interested in media effects and voting behavior, they constitute nothing short of a treasure trove, in that they should be, at least in *principle*, all about policy.

Campaign effects, which prominent political scientists have for years sought to diminish as circumscribed by “fundamentals” like the electorate’s partisan affiliation breakdown or an incumbent president’s job approval rating, should know no comparable limits in the context of a ballot measure. In the words of one, “these campaigns should be purely about message⁵⁴.” A skilled campaign should be able to move voters in a way that could only be envied by traditional, candidate-centered campaign strategists – or so it would appear at first glance. The evidence uncovered here points to considerably more nuanced dynamics. Far from being devoid of considerations predominant in candidate-centered elections, initiative campaigns can compel voters to incorporate some of these considerations into their decision-making process.

⁵³ See, for instance, Issue 3 in Ohio (1992) and Measure 415 in Nebraska (2000), both of which were approved by voters and consequently instituted strict term limits for state legislators that are still effective to this day (National Conference of State Legislatures 2015).

⁵⁴ Quote from Dr. Robin Kolodny, April 23, 2014.

What We Have Yet to Learn

It goes without saying that a project of this nature will carry its share of limitations. These, however, should not be considered so much as flaws as potential avenues for future research. We thus conclude in these last few pages by considering a number of unresolved queries stemming from the research presented here.

First of all, a single ballot initiative pertaining to a single set of specific issues was put before voters in my study. While my findings are certainly generalizable to at least some extent, it may prove interesting – and revealing – to run the same type of experiment with another (or, even better, multiple other) initiatives. What happens when we are dealing with an initiative whose baseline support is weak or moderate, as opposed to already strong? What about initiatives dealing with issues that are seen as significantly less (or even significantly more) important to voters? Would policy considerations hold more sway if they pertained to more high-profile issues, such as a massive, universal tax increase, or a complete overhaul of the healthcare system?

Second, my effort has of course been concentrated on trying to “sell” people on reasons why they should support an initiative. Would the same types of messages boast the same types of results if we used them to try selling people on reasons why they should *not* support the same initiative? In a similar vein, would there also be a risk for boomerang effects with some of the stimuli used here – actually serving to inadvertently increase support for the initiative? More generally speaking, given what we know about the uneven nature of the playing field when it comes to passing versus defeating ballot

measures, should we expect most – if not all – messages and cues to prove more effective in advertising aimed at driving *down* support for an initiative as opposed to the kind of advertising, like the one I tested, aimed at driving up support?

Finally, while I am extremely grateful for the work and assistance of all those having contributed to this research, and remain confident in the basic quality and realism of the ads employed, there is no denying that their production values would have in all likelihood been different with a greater budget and a larger professional staff. Would the same messages prove more powerful when inserted in a glossier, perhaps more visually arresting ad featuring more sophisticated sound design to boot? While one can at first blush be skeptical that major differences in results would be observed, this, too, remains to be tested.

When all is said and done, what I have sought to do here is to build upon existing literature by pursuing a road seldom – if ever – traveled. While increasingly popular within the discipline at large, experimental political science still only remains in its “Renaissance” phase. Its contemporary use to evaluate traditional political advertising is limited at best, and its use to do so with regards to advertising in ballot initiative campaigns specifically is virtually unprecedented. In other words, to the extent that my research may hopefully be viewed as successful, it will likely be first and foremost by helping to pave a new – and potentially rich – path for scholars in the years that have yet come to pass.

What We Have Learned

Of particular importance to the voter deciding on how to pull the lever is his partisan attachment. Of course, going back some six decades to the late great Philip Converse and his fellow Michigan scholars, we have long been aware of “party ID”’s pull on voters in traditional, candidate-centered elections. The current research unearths fresh, compelling evidence that this influence extends beyond – to also affect voting behavior in ballot initiative contests. Tellingly, it appears to more solidly drive policy attitudes on an initiative than policy considerations do on a partisan contest between two candidates. The fact that even in the context of an initiative – which, in principle, should be first and foremost about policy considerations – voters can get pulled in one direction or another on the basis of partisan cues strikes one as extremely telling. It lays bare the remarkable wisdom found in the Michigan scholars’ insistence on the largely unparalleled role played by partisan affiliation in shaping voters’ attitudes and behavior which, it turns out, is clearly not exclusively bound to tradition elections between partisan candidates. Partisan cues did more to move voters in initiative contests than policy cues did in *either* candidate-centered or initiative contests. This is meaningful. At its core, it suggests that as a general – albeit not universal – principle, in accordance with more recent work, notably Hetherington and Keefe (2007), party trumps policy.

Self-identified Democrats told that officials in their party have thrown their weight behind an initiative are not only more likely to support this initiative, but to support it more intensely. Conversely, support for the same initiative among both Republican and Independent voters is dragged down by airing the fact that the Democratic Party has

formally endorsed it, although the negative impact is not as powerful among these voters as the positive impact is among Democratic voters.

One might be tempted to wonder as to what practical importance exists in an effect causing Democrats to be pulled in one direction while pushing Republicans in the opposite direction. After all, in a nationally representative sample where partisan affiliation approaches parity, vote allocation will move relatively little in the aggregate under such a scenario. The answer is simple: ballot initiatives are not decided nationally. In fact, as Butler and Ranney (1994) highlight, the United States has actually never, in its history, held a nationwide referendum – making it one of only a handful of advanced, established democracies in the world not to do so⁵⁵, along India, Israel, Japan, and the Netherlands.

Initiatives are, of course, state-level affairs⁵⁶ – where the partisan makeup of the electorate may or may not resemble that of the country at large. While partisan affiliation is a powerful cue, then, it also presents itself as one that cannot be used universally without incurring significant risk. In fact, because it appears to repel voters who do not identify with the party in question, its use is basically best reserved for electorates made up of a clear majority of that party's voters. For instance, it may be productive for a campaign working to enact an initiative in Massachusetts to stress support among Bay

⁵⁵ This was not for a lack of trying, at least in one memorable, fateful instance. On January 3rd, 1861, U.S. Senator John Crittenden of Kentucky proposed a national referendum on an ensemble of compromises pertaining to slavery that promised to stave off a civil war (Suksi 1993; Cooper 2013). The Senate rejected his plea by a single vote. A month later, the Civil War began.

⁵⁶ Initiatives and referenda are also held across the country at sub-state levels (e.g. city, township), which does alter the argument made here.

State Democratic officials, as a majority of the state's voters self-identify as Democrats themselves (Gallup 2016). The opposite holds, of course, for emphasizing GOP support for an initiative in, say, Wyoming. Of course, professional campaigns rely on the use of targeting and, increasingly, micro-targeting (Ridout et al. 2012) to reach a very precise portion of the electorate with certain messages. Great prudence and precision in targeting specific segments of the electorate and not others with this message (i.e. "in-group" partisans) may be particularly warranted.

The risk of having "positive" cues being processed negatively by various swaths of voters is not limited to the use of party ID as a heuristic. Quite the contrary: the potential for producing a "boomerang" effect stretched to cues having to do both with group associations and policy considerations. The key word here is "potential": *if* voters perceive a given cue as signaling conniving with groups they do not feel part of, exposition to this cue may push them away. Most notably, the evidence uncovered in my study suggests that out-group voters along partisan and ideological lines may have become less likely to support both Proposition A (in the initiative ad stimulus groups) and candidate William Smith (in the State Senate ad stimulus groups) once they had learned of support the proposition and the candidate enjoyed by the group in question.

This is interesting in a context in which a deliberate effort was made to have support be voiced in the ads by the most uncontroversial, universally-appealing, non-threatening-sounding group possible. A need for caution, if nothing else, should be inferred from my study when it comes to using this type of cue also. It may in actuality be near (if not

outright) impossible, especially in the current U.S. polity, to put forward a group whose embrace will be viewed evenly across the electorate. The aim, then, may be to use such a heuristic assuming that it will work to drive away some voters – and try to ensure that it more than makes up for it in gaining others.

A focus on public policy considerations, for its part, appears to do little to spur growth in support for either the ballot proposal or the candidate put forth. However, one must be cognizant of the fact that this limitation may, at least in part, be a function of the actual policy considerations at hand. And one must acknowledge the possibility that a different set of issues (or the same set of issues presented differently) may have played differently with voters.

While not all voters are easy to move, some are easier to move than others. In accordance with reams of existing literature on voting behavior in candidate-centered elections, lower-information voters show a greater inclination to be influenced by political messaging in ballot initiative races as well. More than relying on heuristics, they also at least appear to be more prone to do so *incorrectly*. In contrast, not a single one of the high-information voter contingents across all groups exposed to an initiative ad showed a support level for the initiative statistically different (be it higher or lower) from the control group. Whatever the direction, higher-information voters do not “swing” easily. All this suggests at least tentative evidence for the argument that while voter competence varies across different swaths of the electorate, at least a substantial portion of it holds

genuine preferences not easily movable by mere manipulation and, as such, could be construed as competent enough to decide on some public policy matters.

Finally, as it relates to agenda-setting and framing in initiative contests, the power of advertising is in some respects very real – but also seriously limited. On one hand, exposure to ad discussing an initiative’s core issue⁵⁷ was associated with increased importance given to that issue. On the other hand, exposure to advertising did not translate into more voters considering the *initiative* to be of importance. The effect on this front was for all intents and purposes entirely muted. However, a caveat may also here be in order: the fact that voters were offered a *hypothetical* ballot measure – and, moreover, were explicitly told in the questionnaire that the measure was in fact hypothetical – may have blunted the potential to give it greater consideration. After all, how much more important can a fictional ballot initiative truly become to a voter through the sheer exposition of advertising discussing it?

With all that said, the chief takeaway as it relates to ad effects overall may be that managing to sell the electorate on an initiative through advertising is far from an easy feat. Key messages can backfire and / or be incorrectly interpreted, and few (if any) show by themselves the promise of universally swaying voters from the “No” side to the “Yes” side. If a magic bullet exists for accomplishing such a thing, it has largely proven elusive in this study.

⁵⁷ This includes the five initiative ads, as well, as two of the candidate ads (groups 1 through 5, 8, and 9).

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – PILOT STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

Q1. Are you a U.S. citizen?

Yes

No (*discontinue*)

Q2. Are you a U.S. registered voter?

Yes

No (*discontinue*)

Q3. What is your year of birth?

(*provide drop-down menu*)

Q4. What is your gender?

Male

Female

Other

Q5. What race / ethnic background best describes you?

Caucasian / White

African American / Black

Hispanic / Latino(a)

Asian

Other (specify _____) (*open-ended*)

Q6A. When it comes to politics, generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?

Republican

Democrat

Independent

Other

Q6B. (*for those having selected “Republican” in Q6A*) Would you call yourself a strong Republican?

Yes

No

Q6C. (for those having selected "Democrat" in Q6A) Would you call yourself a strong Democrat?

Yes

No

Q6D. (for those having selected "Independent" in Q6A) Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?

Republican

Democratic

Neither

Q7. When it comes to politics, generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as being...

Extremely liberal

Liberal

Slightly liberal

Moderate

Slightly conservative

Conservative

Extremely Conservative

Below are three hypothetical amendments that could appear on the statewide ballot to amend the State Constitution.

Proposition A

This measure concerns driving infractions. It would double all fines for existing statewide road infractions. New revenue would be split in two, with half going to provide additional funding to education and healthcare programs, and half going toward an annual individual tax cut.

Q8A. To what extent do you support or oppose this measure?

Strongly support

Somewhat support

Somewhat oppose

Strongly oppose

Q8B. On a 0 to 10 scale, please indicate how important you consider this issue to be (0 being not important at all, 10 being supremely important).

Proposition B

This measure concerns veteran benefits. It would create a new state lottery ticket, with all new net revenue to be used to fund programs and services for veterans. Should this measure be enacted?

Q9A. To what extent do you support or oppose this measure?

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

Q9B. On a 0 to 10 scale, please indicate how important you consider this issue to be (0 being not important at all, 10 being supremely important).

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

Proposition C

This measure concerns school year calendars. It would set a uniform statewide standard ensuring that no public school classes be held either before Labor Day (the first Monday of September) or after the first day of summer (June 20). Should this measure be enacted?

Q10A. To what extent do you support or oppose this measure?

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

Q10B. On a 0 to 10 scale, please indicate how important you consider this issue to be (0 being not important at all, 10 being supremely important).

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

Q11. Below are a series of scripts for televised advertisements that would run in a hypothetical campaign over Proposition A outlined in the previous section. For each script, you will be given a series of opposite words and phrases. In each case, you will be asked to indicate which of the opposite words and sentences you think comes closest to describing the ad's content by selecting the appropriate position on the scale.

Ad Script 1:

“In the next election, you will get to vote on Proposition A, which would double fines for statewide road infractions to help support new investments in social programs, as well as tax relief. Proposition A is supported by leading Democrats, including both the state and national Democratic parties. Next November, vote Yes on Proposition A.”

For each pair of words and sentences, which do you think comes closest to describing the ad?

Democrat	0 0 0 0 0 0	Republican
Positive	0 0 0 0 0 0	Negative
Who is for or against the initiative	0 0 0 0 0 0	What the initiative proposes to do
Liberal	0 0 0 0 0 0	Conservative
Unbiased	0 0 0 0 0 0	Biased
Hostile	0 0 0 0 0 0	Friendly
Realistic ⁵⁸	0 0 0 0 0 0	Unrealistic

Ad Script 2:

“In the next election, you will get to vote on Proposition A, which would double fines for statewide road infractions to help support new investments in social programs, as well as tax relief. Proposition A is supported by leading law enforcement and community groups, including the Coalition for Safe Neighborhoods. Next November, vote Yes on Proposition A.”

For each pair of words and sentences, which do you think comes closest to describing the ad?

Democrat	0 0 0 0 0 0	Republican
Positive	0 0 0 0 0 0	Negative
Who is for or against the initiative	0 0 0 0 0 0	What the initiative proposes to do
Liberal	0 0 0 0 0 0	Conservative
Unbiased	0 0 0 0 0 0	Biased
Hostile	0 0 0 0 0 0	Friendly
Realistic	0 0 0 0 0 0	Unrealistic

⁵⁸ By “realistic,” we mean that the ad’s message is reasonably similar to what you could expect to hear in an actual campaign ad.

Ad Script 3:

“In the next election, you will get to vote on Proposition A, which would double fines for statewide road infractions to help support new investments in social programs, as well as tax relief. Who is helping fund and support the opposition to this initiative? Special interest groups and lobbyists, including the biggest lobbying firm in the state. Next November, vote Yes on Proposition A.”

For each pair of words and sentences, which do you think comes closest to describing the ad?

Democrat	0 0 0 0 0 0	Republican
Positive	0 0 0 0 0 0	Negative
Who is for or against the initiative	0 0 0 0 0 0	What the initiative proposes to do
Liberal	0 0 0 0 0 0	Conservative
Unbiased	0 0 0 0 0 0	Biased
Hostile	0 0 0 0 0 0	Friendly
Realistic	0 0 0 0 0 0	Unrealistic

Ad Script 4:

“In the next election, you will get to vote on Proposition A, which would double fines for statewide road infractions to help support new investments in social programs, as well as tax relief. All revenue collected would be set aside, with half for new funding to education and healthcare, and half to an individual tax refund. It would give our schools and hospitals a boost, and our taxpayers a break. Next November, vote Yes on Proposition A.”

For each pair of words and sentences, which do you think comes closest to describing the ad?

Democrat	0 0 0 0 0 0	Republican
Positive	0 0 0 0 0 0	Negative
Who is for or against the initiative	0 0 0 0 0 0	What the initiative proposes to do
Liberal	0 0 0 0 0 0	Conservative
Unbiased	0 0 0 0 0 0	Biased
Hostile	0 0 0 0 0 0	Friendly
Realistic	0 0 0 0 0 0	Unrealistic

Ad Script 5:

“In the next election, you will get to vote on Proposition A, which would double fines for statewide road infractions to help support new investments in social programs, as well as tax relief. When all is said and done, opposition to this measure would mean more dangerous roads. It would keep money in the pockets of reckless drivers rather in those of responsible citizens. With the death and injury toll on our roads in the hundreds every year, the status quo is not acceptable. Next November, vote Yes on Proposition A.”

For each pair of words and sentences, which do you think comes closest to describing the ad?

Democrat	0 0 0 0 0 0	Republican
Positive	0 0 0 0 0 0	Negative
Who is for or against the initiative	0 0 0 0 0 0	What the initiative proposes to do
Liberal	0 0 0 0 0 0	Conservative
Unbiased	0 0 0 0 0 0	Biased
Hostile	0 0 0 0 0 0	Friendly
Realistic	0 0 0 0 0 0	Unrealistic

Q12. Below are the names of a few groups and associations. For each, please indicate on a 0 to 10 scale how you feel about them, with 0 having a completely negative view, and 10 having a completely positive view.

- A. Coalition for Safe Neighborhoods
- B. Coalition for Veteran Service and Support
- C. Coalition for Child Well-Being
- D. Law enforcement
- E. Veteran groups
- F. Youth groups
- G. Community groups
- H. Special interest groups and lobbyists

APPENDIX B – ADVERTISING SCRIPTS

Ad Script – Group 1 (initiative ad highlighting party affiliation):

“In the next general election, you will get to vote on Proposition A, which pertains to statewide road infractions. Proposition A has been proudly endorsed by leading Democrats from both the state and national Democratic parties, which have adopted it as part of their platform. It also enjoys strong and unequivocal support from candidates who will be on this year’s Democratic ticket. This November, vote Yes on Proposition A.”

Ad Script – Group 2 (initiative ad highlighting positive group association):

“In the next general election, you will get to vote on Proposition A, which pertains to statewide road infractions. Proposition A had been proudly endorsed by leading law enforcement and community groups across the state, including the Coalition for Safe Neighborhoods. The head of the Coalition calls Proposition A a positive step in improving life in the cities and towns of our state, and urges all to support it. This November, vote Yes on Proposition A.”

Ad Script – Group 3 (initiative ad highlighting negative group association):

“In the next general election, you will get to vote on Proposition A, which pertains to statewide road infractions. Some are seeking to undermine this initiative: special interest groups and lobbyists, including the biggest lobbying firm in the state. These special interest groups and lobbyists are peddling their money and influence into defeating this measure, because they know that if Proposition A wins, they lose. This November, vote Yes on Proposition A.”

Ad Script – Group 4 (initiative ad highlighting positives of proposed policy):

“In the next general election, you will get to vote on Proposition A, which pertains to statewide road infractions. Proposition A would increase fines for statewide road infractions to help support new investments in social programs, as well as tax relief. All revenue collected would be set aside, giving our schools and hospitals a boost, and our taxpayers a break. Most of all, it would help make our roads safer. This November, vote Yes on Proposition A.”

Ad Script – Group 5 (initiative ad highlighting policy negatives of opposing initiative):

“In the next general election, you will get to vote on Proposition A, which pertains to statewide road infractions. Proposition A would increase fines for infractions to help support new investments in social programs, as well as tax relief. Opposition to this measure would keep money in the pockets of reckless drivers rather than in those of responsible citizens. The death toll on our roads is not acceptable, and neither are the fines currently on the books. This November, vote Yes on Proposition A.”

Ad Script – Group 6 (candidate ad highlighting positive group association):

“In the next general election, you will get to elect your new State Senator. I am William Smith, and I am proud to count on the support of leading law enforcement and community groups, including the Coalition for Safe Neighborhoods. The head of the Coalition says that I am the best candidate for getting things done in the State Senate to improve life in our cities and towns. This November, vote William Smith for State Senate.”

Ad Script – Group 7 (candidate ad highlighting negative group association):

“In the next general election, you will get to elect your new State Senator. I am William Smith. Some are seeking to undermine my candidacy in this race: special interest groups and lobbyists, including the biggest lobbying firm in the state. The special interest groups and lobbyists are peddling their money and influence into defeating me, because they know that if I win, they lose. This November, vote William Smith for State Senate.”

Ad Script – Group 8 (candidate ad highlighting positives of candidate’s policy stand):

“In the next general election, you will get to elect your new State Senator. I am William Smith, and I will work to crack down on reckless driving, by increasing fines for statewide road infractions. All revenue collected would be set aside, giving our schools and hospitals a boost, and our taxpayers a break. Most of all, it would help make our roads safer. This November, vote William Smith for State Senate.”

Ad Script – Group 9 (candidate ad highlighting negatives of candidate’s policy stand):

“In the next election, you will get to elect your new State Senator. I am William Smith. My opponent in this race opposes an increase in statewide road infractions. He would keep money in the pockets of dangerous drivers, rather than in those of responsible citizens. Our next Senator has to recognize that the death toll on our roads is not acceptable, and neither are the fines currently on the books. This November, vote for William Smith for State Senate.”

Ad Script – Group 10 (apolitical ad):

“Are you in need of legal representation but unsure as to how to proceed? This can seem like an overwhelming burden – and without the proper guidance, it oftentimes is. Call the offices of Martin Vail for a free consultation. We are here to walk you through any legal issues you may have, be it of a professional or personal nature. And, unlike with other firms, you do not have to pay anything until services have actually been rendered. Call us today.”

APPENDIX C – FORMAL STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

Q1. Are you a U.S. registered voter?

Yes

No (*discontinue*)

Q4. What is your year of birth?

(*provide down-menu*)

Q5. What is your gender?

Man

Woman

Other

Q6. What race / ethnic background best describes you?

Caucasian / White

African American / Black

Hispanic / Latino(a)

Asian

Other (specify _____) (*open-ended*)

Q7A. When it comes to politics, generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, and Independent, or what?

Republican

Democrat

Independent

Other

Q7B. (*for those having selected "Republican" in Q7A*) Would you call yourself a strong Republican?

Yes

No

Q7C. (*for those having selected "Democrat" in Q7A*) Would you call yourself a strong Democrat?

Yes

No

Q7D. (for those having selected "Independent" in Q7A) Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?

- Republican
- Democratic
- Neither

Q8. When it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as being...

- Extremely liberal
- Liberal
- Slightly liberal
- Moderate
- Slightly conservative
- Conservative
- Extremely Conservative

The next few questions are about recent elections. In asking people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they weren't registered, they were sick, they didn't have time, or something else happened to prevent them from voting. And sometimes, people who usually vote or who planned to vote forget that something unusual happened on Election Day one year that prevented them from voting that time. So please think carefully for a minute about the election held in November 2012, and other past elections in which you may have voted, and answer the following questions about your voting behavior.

Q9A. In the 2012 presidential election, the major candidates were Barack Obama for the Democrats and Mitt Romney for the Republicans. In that election, did you definitely vote, definitely not vote, or are you not completely sure whether you voted?

- Definitely voted
- Definitely did not vote
- Not completely sure

Q9B. (for those having selected "Not completely sure" in Q9A) If you had to guess, would you say that you probably did vote in the election held in November 2012, or probably did not vote in that election?

- Probably voted
- Probably did not vote

Q9C. (for those having selected "Definitely voted" in Q9A) In the last presidential election, whom did you vote for?

- Barack Obama
- Mitt Romney
- Other
- I don't remember

Q10A. How about the last midterm elections, in 2014? Did you definitely vote, definitely not vote, or are you not completely sure whether you voted?

Definitely voted

Definitely did not vote

Not completely sure

Q10B. (*for those having selected “Not completely sure” in Q10A*) If you had to guess, would you say that you probably did vote in the election held in November 2014, or probably did not vote in that election?

Probably voted

Probably did not vote

Q11. How much attention do you pay to politics and to news about politics?

A great deal

Some

Very little

None

Q12. Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you? To what extent would you say you have been interested in the political campaigns so far this year?

Very much interested

Somewhat interested

Not much interested

Not at all interested

Q13. Regardless of your personal opinion or position on them, to what extent do you or do you not consider the following issues in your state to be important to you?

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not at all important
Abortion				
Climate change				
Gun control				
Education funding				
Health care funding				
Immigration				
Jobs				
Road safety				
Taxes				
Terrorism				

Q14. What do you think is the most important issue facing the country?
(open-ended)

Now we have a set of questions to see how much information about politics gets out to the public⁵⁹.

Q15. Do you happen to know what job or political office is now held by Joe Biden?
(*open-ended*⁶⁰; *code Vice President as 1, all other answers as 0*)

Q16. Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not? Is it
The President
The Congress
The Supreme Court
I don't know

Q17. Do you happen to know which political party currently holds the most seats in the U.S. House of Representatives?
Democratic Party
Republican Party
I don't know

Q18. Do you happen to know how much of a majority is required to override a presidential veto?
A majority in both houses of Congress
Two thirds in both houses of Congress

Q19. Would you say that one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level? Which party is more conservative?
The Democratic Party
The Republican Party

⁵⁹ The index of questions measuring political knowledge (Q15 through Q19) is taken from Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993). This index, which employs select questions from the American National Election Study (ANES) to produce a parsimonious tool for evaluating political awareness, has been widely adopted and replicated by other scholars over the years (e.g. Mutz 2002; Nyhan and Reifler 2010), in addition to having been at the center of the theoretical discussion in the discipline on how political knowledge should be measured (Lupia 2006; Reilly 2010; Barabas et al. 2014). As for the battery of questions measuring “need for cognition” and “need for affect” (Q20), it is taken from Cacioppo, Petty and Kao (1984) and from Appel, Gnamb and Maio (2012), respectively. Factorial analysis was then conducted to produce a general “need for cognition” score for all individual respondents. Those whose score fell above the group mean were coded as high in need for cognition; those who score fell below were coded as low in need for cognition. The same technique was applied with regards to need for affect.

⁶⁰ Using at least one open-ended question here carries the benefit of limiting “satisficing” – that is to say, it helps compel survey respondents to truly show their level of political knowledge.

Q20. Below is a list of statements. You will find that some of these statements describe you, and some will not, to various degrees. For each of the statements below, please indicate how well each statement describes you on the following scale:

- 1 = extremely *uncharacteristic* of you (not at all like you)
- 2 = somewhat *uncharacteristic* of you
- 3 = uncertain
- 4 = somewhat characteristic of you
- 5 = extremely characteristic of you (very much like you)

- A. I would prefer complex to simple problems.
 - B. I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.
 - C. Thinking is not my idea of fun.
 - D. I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities.
 - E. I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is likely a chance I will have to think in depth about something.
 - F. I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours.
 - G. I only think as hard as I have to.
 - H. I prefer to think about small, daily projects to long-term ones.
 - I. I like tasks that require little thought once I've learned them.
 - J. The idea of relying on thought to make my way to the top appeals to me.
 - K. I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems.
 - L. Learning new ways to think doesn't excite me very much.
 - M. I prefer my life to be filled with puzzles that I must solve.
 - N. The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me.
 - O. I would prefer a task that is intellectual, difficult, and important to one that important but does not require much thought.
 - P. I feel relief rather than satisfaction after completing a task that required a lot of mental effort.
 - Q. It's enough for me that something gets the job done; I don't care how or why it works.
 - R. I usually end up deliberating about issues even when they do not affect me personally.
-
- AA. If I reflect on my past, I see that I tend to be afraid of feeling emotions.
 - BB. I feel that I need to experience strong emotions regularly.
 - CC. Emotions help people to get along in life.
 - DD. I find strong emotions overwhelming and therefore try to avoid them.
 - EE. I think that it is important to explore my feelings.
 - FF. I would prefer not to experience either the lows or highs of emotion.
 - GG. I do not know how to handle my emotions, so I avoid them.
 - HH. It is important for me to be in touch with my feelings.
 - II. It is important for me to know how others are feeling.
 - JJ. Emotions are dangerous—they tend to get me into situations that I would rather avoid.

Q21. Are you...

Married

Single

Widowed

Separated/Divorced

I prefer not to answer

Q22. Do you have children under 18 living in your household?

Yes

No

Q23. What race / ethnic background best describes you?

Caucasian / White

African American

Hispanic

Asian

Other

Q24A. What is your religion?

Protestant

Catholic

Jewish

Muslim

Other (specify) (*open-ended*)

None

Q24B. (*for those having selected "Protestant," "Catholic," or "Jewish" in Q24A*)

Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible? Yo

The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word.

The Bible is the word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word.

The Bible is a book written by men is not the word of God.

Other (specify) (*open-ended*)

Q24C. How frequently do you usually attend religious services?

Once per week or more

Occasionally (less than once per week)

Never

Q24D. (for those having selected "Protestant," "Catholic," or "Jewish," "Muslim," or "other" in Q24A)

Outside of attending religious services, how frequently do you usually pray?

Several times a day

Once a day

A few times a week

Once a week or less

Never

Other

Q25. What is the highest level of formal education you have completed?

Elementary school

High school

College

College degree

Post-graduate degree

Q26. In which of the following categories is the gross (pre-tax) annual income of all members of your household, including yourself?

Less than \$25,000

Between \$25,000 and \$49,999

Between \$50,000 and \$75,000

Between \$75,000 and \$100,000

Between \$100,000 and \$150,000

Over \$150,000

Below is a hypothetical election ballot containing an election for the State Senate in your district, as well as an initiative for an amendment to the State Constitution.

We know that you generally gather more information about elections before making a decision, but we would like to get a sense of your gut reaction about the following candidates/issues.

Imagine there was an election in your state and it contained two candidates running for the State Senate.

William Smith is an attorney who has served three terms in the State House of Representatives.

Michael Roberts is an accountant who has run a private business for 10 years⁶¹.

(Randomize name and biographical information provided above. Do NOT randomize name and party affiliation provided below)

Q27A. If the choices for State Senate were William Smith and Michael Roberts, for whom would you vote?

State Senate Seat
William Smith
Democrat
Michael Roberts
Republican

Q27B. On a 0 to 10 scale, please indicate how supportive you are of candidate William Smith – 0 being not at all supportive, 5 being completely neutral, 10 being fully supportive.

⁶¹ Candidate names and biographical information were randomized. Candidate names and party affiliation, however, were not randomized – i.e. William Smith was always the Democrat, Michael Roberts was always the Republican.

Q27C. How strongly do you hold this position?⁶²

Very strongly

Somewhat strongly

Not very strongly

Not at all strongly

Q27D. On a 0 to 10 scale, please indicate how important you consider this election to be (0 being not important at all, 10 being supremely important).

An Additional Primer on the Political Knowledge Battery

The battery used to measure respondents' level of political awareness follows the same basic template as the American National Election Studies'. In the questionnaire, the relevant questions go from Q12 through Q16. Responses were subsequently coded (1 = accurate, 0 = inaccurate) and added, giving each individual respondent a score ranging from 0 to 5. Since, for all 10 samples, the median score was 3 and the mean fell somewhere between 3 and 4, the cut-off point established to delineate the two categories was straightforward: respondents having answered 4 or 5 answers correctly were coded as "high- political knowledge," while those having obtained 3 or fewer right answers were coded as "low- political knowledge."

In instances of profound sadness for any coder faithful in the citizenry's political competence, at least two distinct respondents asked what office Joe Biden currently occupies answered "accountant." Both, incidentally, fell below the "high-political knowledge" threshold.

⁶² The logic in formulating questions Q26 and Q27 is perfectly captured by this passage from Pasek and Krosnick (2009) who, also reflecting on Converse's work, write the following : "Converse (1964) did have an important insight [...]. Not all people who express an opinion hold that view equally strongly, based upon equal amounts of information and thought. Instead, attitudes vary in their strength. A strong attitude is very difficult to change and has powerful impact on a person's thinking and action. A weak attitude is easy to change and has little impact on anything. To understand the role that attitudes play in governing a person's political behavior, it is valuable to understand the strength of those attitudes. Offering a "don't know" option is not a good way to identify weak attitudes. Instead, it is best to ask follow-up questions intended to diagnose the strength of an opinion (37).

**APPENDIX D – KEY RESULTS BROKEN DOWN
BY POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE LEVEL**

Group 1	High-pol. know.	Low-pol. know.	Group 2	High-pol. know.	Low-pol. know.
Yes on Prop A	36 (59%)	53 (87%)	Yes on Prop A	44 (63%)	36 (65%)
No on Prop A	25 (41%)	8 (13%)	No on Prop A	26 (37%)	20 (35%)
Group 3	High-pol. know.	Low-pol. know.	Group 4	High-pol. know.	Low-pol. know.
Yes on Prop A	41 (64%)	47 (76%)	Yes on Prop A	46 (65%)	34 (64%)
No on Prop A	23 (36%)	15 (24%)	No on Prop A	25 (35%)	19 (36%)
Group 5	High-pol. know.	Low-pol. know.	Group 6	High-pol. know.	Low-pol. know.
Yes on Prop A	38 (66%)	55 (81%)	W. Smith (D)	23 (44%)	39 (54%)
No on Prop A	20 (34%)	13 (19%)	M. Roberts (R)	29 (56%)	33 (46%)
Group 10	High-pol. know.	Low-pol. know.		High-pol. know.	Low-pol. know.
Yes on Prop A	37 (66%)	51 (80%)	W. Smith (D)	30 (54%)	41 (64%)
No on Prop A	19 (34%)	13 (20%)	M. Roberts (R)	26 (46%)	23 (36%)

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