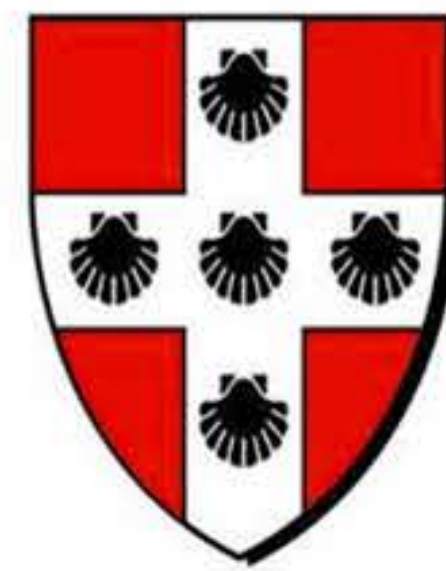


Do On-Screen Citations Affect Perceptions of Political Ads?

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INTRODUCTION

Political science researchers have frequently investigated the relationship between the content of political advertisements and their effects on voter turnout or political sophistication (Finkel & Geer 1998, Goldstein & Friedman 2002, Kahn and Keeney 1999). Very little research has been done, however, to investigate a connection between the content of political advertisements and public perception.

In the past, researchers have categorized the content political ads in a few different ways – by tone (negative ads, contrast ads, and promoting ads), by the information conveyed in the ad (personal characteristics, policy discussions, or both), and even by emotional composition: how enthusiastic is the ad? To what extent does it appeal to anger? (Ansolabehere et al. 1994, Geer 2006, Sides 2006).

The field recognizes that the public is relatively skeptical about the effectiveness of political advertisements – especially negative ads. Unfortunately, the field has failed to measure this skepticism as a function of the content of ads aired. Including on-screen citations (references that back up assertions) in political ads may increase the extent to which the public finds a message credible. In other words, ad makers may be inclined to include references in an ad if they have reason to believe that the public will be skeptical of the effectiveness of its content.

Thus we expect the following:

1. Negative ads are more likely to contain on-screen citations than positive ads.
2. Interest groups and political parties are more likely to air negative ads, and thus are more likely to air ads that contain citations.
3. All other factors equal, exposure to ads with on-screen citations will make the public more likely to view political ads as credible sources of political information; when compared to those that do not have on-screen citations.

METHODOLOGY

Our research utilized two datasets in order to investigate the following research questions:

1. Which factors influence whether or not a political ad contains an on-screen citation?

In order to answer this question, we obtained data from the Wesleyan Media Project's study of televised political advertisements. The data was collected between September 2010 – Nov 4 2010. All video files were provided by CMAG, and reflect advertisements aired during the 2010 electoral cycle. Extensive coding was completed by the Wesleyan Media Project in order to collect a number of characteristics found in political ads: citation variables included references to newspapers, websites, other media sources, opponents ads (omitted from our analysis) and legislation.

2. How is the public's perception of political ads influenced by the presence or absence of on-screen citations?

This survey data was obtained from the Wesleyan Post Election Survey, collected between Dec. 30 2010 – Jan. 4 2011. The survey consisted of 1135 respondents who were matched down to a sample of 1000.

Relevant variables, obtained or generated from the Wesleyan Media Project data, were merged onto the Wesleyan Post Election Survey for final analysis.

AD CONTENT RESULTS

Factors Associated With Appearance of an On-Screen Citation

On-Screen Citation (Does not include Op-Ads)	Ad Sponsor - Party	0.247
	Ad Sponsor - Int. Group	-0.0394
	Ad Sponsor – Coordinated	0.791***
	Republican	-0.713***
	Enthusiasm	0.0822
	Anger	0.332***
	Fear	0.159***
	Ad Tone - Negative Ad	1.708***
	Ad Tone- Contrast Ad	2.150***
	House Ad	-0.215
Observations	Senate Ad	-0.368**
	Constant	-1.120***

***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1
Estimation uses clustering at the "Candidate" level

AD CONTENT ANALYSIS

After running logit regressions on the content of the political ads, we found the following variables to have a statistically significant association with whether or not an ad contained an on screen citation. Coordinated ad sponsors (between a candidate and a party), negative & contrast ads, and ads with some element of anger or fear are all associated with the chance that an ad would contain a citation. Ads aired by Republicans and ads aired in Senate races both decreased the probability that an ad would contain a citation.

These findings are consistent with the theories that drove our research – negative ads are, in fact, more likely to contain citations than positive ads. Party & Interest Group sponsors did not yield statistically significant impacts on the citation variable because they also air more negative ads than candidates (thus negativity is the true contributor to significance). Coordinated sponsors, surprisingly, had a statistically significant association with the presence of citations (when compared to candidate sponsored ads), indicating that they are more likely to provide on-screen citations regardless of the tone of ads they aired. Our assumption that certain emotional appeals in ads (anger, fear) are more likely to contain citations is also supported. Finally, compared to gubernatorial ads, we were not surprised to find that Senate ads were less likely to employ citations. Interestingly, however, House ads were no less likely than gubernatorial ads to contain citations

SURVEY RESULTS

“Political Ads are Helpful in Learning About Candidates”		“The Government Should Do More to Regulate Political Ads”	
Exposure to Ads With Citations	-3.80e-05	Exposure to Ads With Citations	-4.24e-05
Exposure to Ads Without Citations	0.000146	Exposure to Ads without Citations	0.000327**
Conservative	0.152	Conservative	-0.239*
Partisan Strength	-0.188	Partisan Strength	-0.147
Republican	0.0218	Republican	-0.183***
Female	0.175	Female	0.321*
Age	0.00820	Age	0.00460
Education	-0.0893	Education	-0.0433
Income	-0.0341	Income	-0.0366*
Observations	500	Observations	502
***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1		***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1	

IMPORTANT NOTES ABOUT SURVEY DATA

Combining our theoretical expectations, concerning the effect of citations on public perception, with the results of our content analysis, we merged citation variables (capturing the partisan affiliation of each ad and presence/absence of a citation) onto the survey data. In order to measure the public's opinions about political ads, we used two questions from the survey “Political Ads are Helpful in Learning About Candidates Running For Office” (Question 18) and “The Government Should Do More To Regulate Political Ads” (Question 19). Both questions are coded so that an increase in numeric value corresponds to higher levels of agreement with the statement.

We have no variable that directly measures credibility in our dataset, but these specific questions are likely related to the more general perception. Our goal is to analyze whether or not the presence/absence of citations effects whether or not citizens view political ads as credible sources of political information. The helpfulness of ads, as well as whether or not they should be regulated, serve as indicators of credibility.

CONCLUSIONS

These ordered logit regressions allowed us to determine whether exposure to on-screen citations is associated with public perceptions of ads and/or the extent to which the government should regulate political ads. The two questions yielded drastically different results, allowing us to draw the following conclusions:

1. Neither the presence nor absence of on-screen citations, in a political ad, has a statistically significant association on whether or not the public perceives political ads to be helpful in learning about candidates.
2. Exposure to ads that do not contain on-screen citations has a statistically significant effect on increased agreement with the statement that “the government should do more to regulate political ads.”

The second conclusion highlights an interesting trend – though the presence of citations is not associated with the opinion that regulation is less important (defying our expectations) their absence certainly confirms the opposite (confirming our expectations). Thus, we can infer that the public's perception of political ads becomes less trustworthy when on-screen citations are absent.

It is also important to note that a few other factors were significant when considering the regulation survey question: conservatives and Republicans were statistically less likely to favor regulation of political ads. Since both conservatives and Republicans are less likely to favor regulation in general, this result is not surprising. It is also important to note that increased income lead to a statistically significant decrease in favorability of regulation, while females were more likely to favor it. These two factors may be driven by other socio-political factors not directly analyzed in this regression: females tend to be more liberal, and the wealthy tend to be less trusting of government regulation.

FUTURE REVISIONS & IMPLICATIONS

1. The Proxy Variable: Unfortunately, the two survey questions we relied on for analysis are not perfect indicators of ‘credibility.’ We, however, have reason to believe that public perceptions of distrust occur when citations are absent from ads. More in-depth survey data, containing questions that ask respondents ‘how they feel’ about certain ads could provide a clearer affirmation of this trend.
2. Methodological Design: Currently, our data accounts for individual exposure to ads based on a crude estimation of how often they watch television – given more time, we would like to examine whether or not measuring exposure on a more refined basis (how many hours of television watched during certain timeslots and local news programs, calculating how many ads were aired during those times) influences our results. Should such a methodological approach yield similar results, our findings would be even more compelling.
3. Analytical Structure: In an ideal world, we would be able to investigate the potential existence of a causal connection between on-screen citations and perceptions credibility. Using experimental data, we could more accurately analyze this trend – exposing subjects to political ads with different content (the presence/absence of citations, for example) and then prompting subjects to document their perception.
4. Relationship to American Democracy: an informed electorate, that makes decisions based on political information that they can trust to be accurate, should be an essential component of American political life. Research that leads ad-makers and politicians to make more credible advertisements may allow more Americans to internalize the information they obtain from advertisements and vote in a more politically sophisticated way. Consequently, Americans should feel better-represented by the politicians they elect, and will hold stronger levels of confidence in our political system.

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