

Levels of Hope and Distrust in Political Advertisement Viewing

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Abstract

This study explores different types of political advertisements, specifically emphasizing the differences between positive and negative political advertising strategies. Ample research has been done in this field relating to the effectiveness of positive and negative messaging, as well as how it affects voting behavior in political elections. This study seeks to find a correlation between the emotions of hope and distrust upon thinking of a recently viewed political advertisement, in order to better understand the polarization of emotions that may stem from a certain political advertisement.

Results found a strong negative correlation between hope and distrust, suggesting that people often feel either hope or distrust strongly after viewing a political advertisement, and not both emotions equally. Further, males tended to report higher levels of hope, while females tended to report higher levels of distrust. Further research in this area can use this information and expound on it to understand what elements of advertisements elicit these emotions, which may have implications for future political campaigning and advertising strategies.

A Brief Introduction Into Political Advertisements

Political advertisements can be found via television commercials, billboards, mailing lists, e-mails, and many other mediums. In short, they are almost unavoidable, especially during the months and weeks leading up to elections. Gunsch and colleagues (2000) describe three main types of political advertisements that may be viewed by the general public: positive ads, which tend to highlight the favorable qualities of a candidate and highlight their positive progress in the political realm; negative ads, which tend to be sponsored financially by a competitor and show a candidate in a negative light, highlighting any scandals or mishaps they have had during their political or personal lives; and ads that are a combination of positive and negative aspects, in this study called mixed ads. This study noted that the types of language used in each of these types of political advertisements is vastly different in an attempt to make viewers feel a certain way about candidates through their tone and language use. For example, researchers found that while positive ads included more complex language requiring viewers to think deeply about what they saw, negative and mixed ads tended to appeal more to basic sensory processes, evoking less cognitive processing (Gunsch et al., 2000).

Furthermore, political ads may even be strategically placed in different areas (physically or digitally) in order to reach their target audience. Ridout and colleagues (2012) explored how campaigns place their political advertisements and how they go about this strategy. To study this, they focused on television ads, which accounts for a large majority of political advertisements. To determine whether campaigns do target specific groups, researchers were able to gather data from different television channels and determine their rough programming schedule, as well as who the target audience is for each time slot and program (ex: demographics of those watching a program at 10:00 AM versus the news at 8:00 PM). Upon studying the linguistic makeup of

political ads aired at different times during the day, researchers in this study were able to determine that there is a difference in the ‘target audience’ of ads aired on different television channels at varying times of the day (Ridout et al., 2012). In this way, candidates are able to get a more personalized message to viewers, which may influence them in a greater way than a more generalized advertisement seen by most voters.

With the large quantity of political advertisements that a viewer may see in a short period of time leading up to an election, as well as the competitive nature of these advertisements, viewers may be left with feelings of anxiety or depression. Niederdeppe and colleagues (2021) explored this potential correlation. They studied participants’ health conditions and concerns, political party affiliation, and estimated amount of exposure to campaign advertisements, and found a statistically significant correlation between exposure to campaign ads and anxiety levels in individuals. This study provided unique insight into how repeated exposure to campaign advertisements of all types can actually affect a person’s mental health and well-being (Niederdeppe et al., 2021).

As previously mentioned, there are several different types of campaign ads. One of the most common is the narrative political ad. McLaughlin and colleagues (2019) describes how narrative political ads tell a story in an attempt to relate to the viewer and make them empathize with and support the candidate portrayed. Specifically, this study examined levels of “political visualization”, defined as imagining future political scenarios and their effects. In effect, researchers hypothesized that seeing a narrative political ad would cause people to think about and visualize that candidate in office in the future, which would make them more excited about that candidate and simultaneously less excited about the other candidate(s). These hypotheses were supported, enforcing the idea that narrative political ads are effective at appealing to

people's empathetic and enthusiastic emotions, thus making them prefer one candidate over another (McLaughlin et al., 2019).

Another important distinction among campaign ads is issue-based versus character-based. Shen and colleagues (2023) describe the differences between issue- and character-based narrative ads, the main difference being that the former focuses on politicians' platforms and belief systems, whereas the latter focuses on the candidate as a person and their personal qualities. This study uniquely measured transportation, one's ability to feel involved in a political ad, empathy, and counterarguing, defined as the act of opposing an ad/candidate and providing rebuttals. Results of this study interestingly found that narrative political ads seem to make people feel involved in the political process and the intricacies of each candidate. However, when these narrative ads attack the character of a candidate, they can make people feel more empathy toward that candidate and increase negative feelings towards other candidates as a result (Shen et al., 2023).

Because of the interesting dynamic between negative advertisements and people's feelings toward the candidates, the current study will focus on how people feel and react differently to negative political ads, versus those that are exclusively positive. Dardis and colleagues (2008) focused on this distinction in the context of two constructs: self-efficacy and cynicism. Cynicism, defined as a lack of faith in the government, and self-efficacy, defined as the idea that a person can impact the political system in which they participate, will give the public a better idea of how issue-based versus character-based negative ads affect people. Results found a negative correlation between cynicism and self-efficacy in relation to negative political ads in general, suggesting that when one views a negative political ad, they are not likely to at the same time have little faith in the political process and also feel that they personally make a

difference in that same political process. Ultimately, the most important finding from this research is that negative political ads do have a statistically significant effect on these two constructs, but the effect is different based on whether the ad focuses on a candidate's platform or their personal character (Dardis et al, 2008).

Pinkleton and colleagues (2002) focused on this issue as well. Unsurprisingly based on broad public opinion, participants rated negative ads as less useful than positive advertisements. However, the perceived utility of negative ads is far more complex depending on factors such as the amount of evidence provided in support of the claims made about a candidate (Chou & Lien, 2011) and how often a viewer sees the same/similar negative ads (Fernandes, 2013). Chou & Lien (2011) studied how viewers felt differently upon viewing negative ads with baseless claims about a candidate and negative ads with evidence-filled claims about a candidate. Results indicated that negative ads were most effective at arousing negative feelings against the target candidate when evidence was included in the justification for the negative ad. On the other hand, providing baseless negative claims against a candidate can increase empathy for the targeted candidate and actually cause harm to the attacking candidate or entity. Fernandes (2013) similarly studied the effects of negative ads but chose to focus on the issue of ad repetition and how it affects viewers' perceptions of candidates. Results describe a sort of "backlash effect" wherein a viewer, upon seeing the same negative ad several times during a short time frame, may begin to empathize with the target candidate and develop more positive feelings toward them. Surprisingly, in a study analyzing the potential impact of negative political advertising on several variables important to the political process, researchers found that negative ads may actually be deemed more informative than positive ads by viewers, suggesting a slightly different result than most research on the utility and importance of negative political ads (Garra more et al., 1990).

This study will aim to determine how people feel about political advertisements, similar to a study conducted in 2009 by Seung Jin and colleagues. In this study, researchers sought to determine what emotions were evoked upon viewing political advertisements. Results of this study primarily found that while voters found political advertisements informative in the sense that they provide information about candidates and their platforms, most people did not trust the content of these ads. Further, average attitudes in general towards political advertising were below average. However, despite the majority having a negative attitude, a large portion of the population carried the opposite belief (Seung Jin et al., 2009).

In order to expound on this idea, this study will attempt to determine whether there is a correlation between hope and distrust in the context of political ads. In other words, the study will seek to determine if people can simultaneously feel both hope and distrust about a given political advertisement, or if one emotion tends to prevail over the other in people's perceptions. Therefore, the following hypothesis will be tested in this study:

Hypothesis. When prompted to think of a specific political advertisement, hope and distrust will be negatively correlated in people's perceptions of these advertisements.

Method

Participants

To collect data for this project, 89 people were surveyed. Participants were aged 18-27 with a mean age of 19.90 (SD = 1.57). Of those surveyed, 70 were female (78.7%) and 19 were male (21.3%).

Procedures

Participants will be recruited through a variety of methods. This will include reaching out to friends and family of the researcher via text or social media applications, such as Instagram and Snapchat, and recruiting students via GroupMe group messages. Potential participants will be given a link to a Qualtrics survey which will provide information about the project and an option to participate in the data collection. Before beginning the survey, participants will be given an information letter and the option to voluntarily participate and verified to be age 18 or older. Following the screening questions, participants will answer questions from two different scales on a five-point Likert Scale (18 questions in total). Finally, participants will answer age and gender demographic questions. Once all of these sections are completed, participants will be shown a page thanking them for their time and telling them their response has been recorded for data collection. They are free to close the window following this notification.

Measures

There are two scales used to collect data on the usefulness of political advertisements. The first of these is the IPIP Distrust Scale, which includes 10 items, such as "I feel attacked by others" (Goldberg, 1992). These responses are recorded via a five-point Likert Scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha value for this measure is 0.852, indicating its reliability (Goldberg, 1992).

The second scale is the IPIP Hope/Optimism scale (Goldberg, 1992). This scale includes 8 items on the same five-point Likert Scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). An example of an item in this scale is, "I expect the worst." This measure has a Cronbach's alpha value of .81, again indicating the reliability of these measures (Goldberg, 1992).

Results

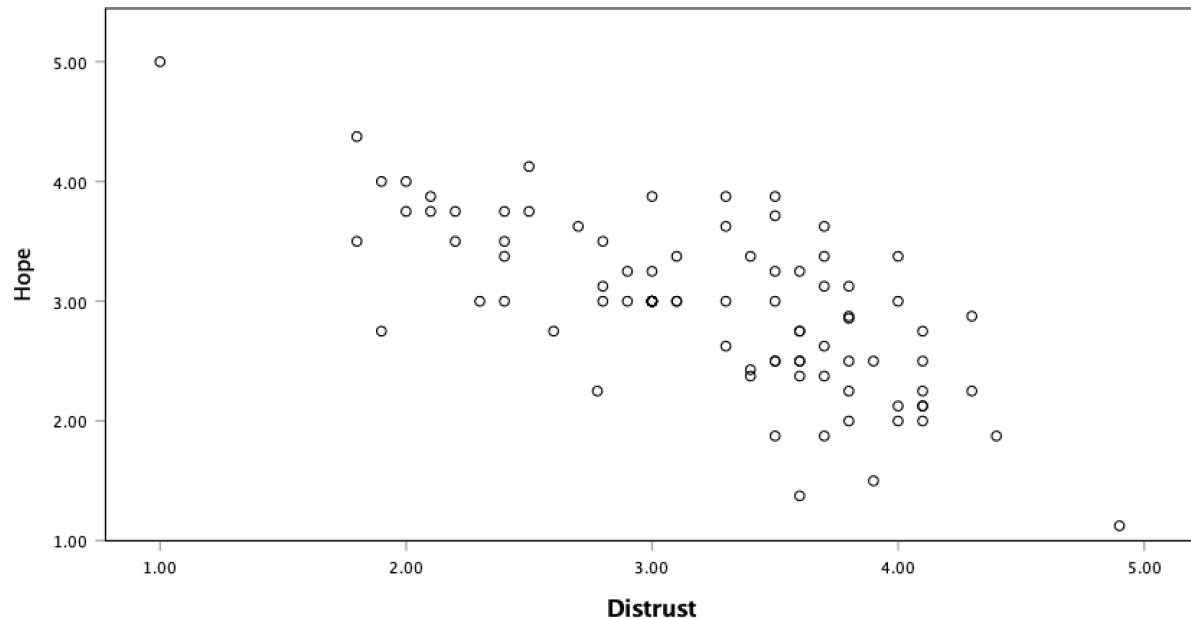
Upon data analysis, a significant difference between males and females relating to each of the two measured constructs (hope and distrust) was found for both of the two measures. For hope, the mean male score was 3.29 (SD = .45) and the mean female score was 2.87 (SD = .72). This was measured on a 1-5 Likert scale. A paired samples t-test found a significant difference between these two values ($t(87) = 2.41, p = .02$). For distrust, the mean male score was 2.88 (SD = .66) and the mean female score was 3.32 (SD = .72). This was measured on a 1-5 Likert scale as well. A paired samples t-test found a significant difference between these two values ($t(87) = -2.36, p = .02$).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics using t-test for Gender

	Female		Male		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Hope	2.87	.72	3.29	.45	2.41	87	.02
Distrust	3.32	.72	2.88	.66	-2.36	87	.02

After performing the above t-tests, a Pearson's correlation was run through SPSS to determine whether there was a statistically significant correlation between levels of hope and distrust in participants. Results did find a significant correlation between these two values ($r = -.712, p < .001$). This data can be seen in the below scatterplot.

Figure 1*Hope vs. Distrust in Political Advertisement Attitudes*

Discussion

Results from this study show a strong negative correlation between the emotions of hope and distrust when participants were prompted to think of a political advertisement. Further, there was a significant difference in levels of hope and distrust among males and females. Males indicated significantly higher levels of hope, while females indicated significantly higher levels of distrust, potentially opening the door for further research regarding how different genders are affected by political campaigning and advertising. In this realm, significant research has analyzed the effectiveness of male and female candidates in their appeals through political advertising, generating interesting findings. For example, a 2015 study found that when female candidates focused more on 'feminine' issues and male candidates focused on more 'masculine' issues, they were viewed more favorably by the voting public (Lee). Another 2001 study found

that while male and female candidates tend to discuss the same issues, female candidates have a tendency to 'soften up' these issues and become more favorable in voters' eyes (Carlson). While this specific topic has been a major source of political psychology research over recent decades, little is known about how different genders react to political advertising and how candidates may be able to reword or refocus their advertising to appeal to a certain gender. With the significant findings found in this study, this issue ought to be studied further, as it can potentially have real-world implications for political campaigning.

With the findings on hope and distrust levels, further research ought to explore what types of political advertisements elicit these specific emotions, as well as which specific emotions elicited by a political advertisement has the strongest ability to sway voters in the candidate's favor. Ted Brader, in a 2005 study, found that certain design-related aspects of political advertising, such as cinematography and music, have an effect on viewers' emotions. He also learned that there is much more emotional complexity to the positive versus negative political advertisement issue, which should be studied further in subsequent research. He even suggests that the emotions felt upon viewing political advertisements don't directly affect how one votes, but how one thinks about an election and then later votes. With these findings, as well as further research on these topics, may not only be able to explain the presence or lack of certain emotions when thinking about political advertisements (as this study discovered), but may also gain insight into the complexity of how humans behave after experiencing certain emotions, as well as how campaigning teams can use this information to sway voters in their favor. Further research is required in these fields, but findings in this study, that hope, and distrust had a significant negative correlation, may lay the basis for future research, as these emotions could prove significant in affecting the way people think about candidates and vote in elections.

While this research provides interesting insights, there were several limitations that may have affected the strength of the correlation found. Firstly, the sample size was only 89 people, most of which were females aged 18-22. It is possible that this specific demographic would have a different experience with political advertising than other demographic groups, affecting the strength and direction of the results. Further, with this study having a correlational design, no causation may be assumed. Therefore, it is unable to be determined the source of this strong correlation.

In conclusion, this study recruited 89 male and females, mostly college-aged students, to complete a survey about levels of hope and distrust when prompted to think of a political advertisement that they had recently viewed. Two major findings came out of this study. First, there was a significant negative correlation between hope and distrust levels. This suggests that when a person feels hopeful about a political advertisement they have low levels of distrust, and when they feel distrust about a political advertisement, they don't feel hopeful. Further, paired samples t-tests found a significantly higher level of hope in men and a significantly higher level of distrust in women, suggesting that gender may play a role in the effectiveness of political advertising and viewers' takeaways from certain types of messaging. Further research should attempt to determine a causation effect for the found correlation between hope and distrust, as well as determine how the evocation of certain emotions affect their voting behavior in political elections. Further, while the gender difference in political candidates' messaging has been explored, research ought to analyze the difference in how genders are affected by political campaigning and how politicians can evoke positive emotions from each gender using different marketing and messaging strategies.

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