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Cultivation effects of political  
television advertising in influencing and persuading voters

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Abstract

This study surveyed 455 recently-experienced voters in the Southeast to measure the influence of television exposure on their willingness to believe political television advertising in general and acceptance of positive or negative messages in particular. Contrary to cultivation theory, none of the hypotheses were supported, but one finding suggests the opposite effect is present, such that lower viewing voters have a higher reliance on information in political advertising on television.

For every message that is heard, there is a messenger that carries it and an audience that receives it. In the world of contemporary American politics, the audiences of political messages are the voters, who wield power through the casting of votes, and the messengers are often paid media presented by the campaigns of political candidates, or those individuals and organizations which support or oppose the election of particular candidates. To win elections, candidates, party organizations and other interested individuals and organizations create and present elaborate and expensive arrays of messages in an effort to sway public opinion and win the support of voters, including by using television advertising.

Cultivation theory proposes that television programming has the ability to inform, persuade, and motivate viewers in contemporary American society. Research suggests that exposure to television can influence what viewers believe and how they view the world around them, even to the point of holding perceptions which may not be true. This cultivation effect can influence how television viewers perceive threats posed by crime, embrace fashion trends, and believe cultural and racial stereotypes (Bailey, 2006; Brown & Witherspoon, 2001; Gerbner, 1998; Tan, 1979; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). According to Weitzer and Kubrin (2004), the cultivation process has allowed

television to create a:

(M)edia world as very different from the real world, with the implication that heavy consumption of media messages distorts audience beliefs about the world and influences cognitive and emotional states. (p. 499)

Consistent with these findings, research into political advertising has found that television advertising by political campaigns can have a cultivation effect through the presentation of information to voters about candidates and issues (Bartels, 1993; Lau & Siegelman, 1999). Gerbner et al. (1984) examined the growing use of political television advertising, and believed television was:

(A) pervasive cultivator of significant labels and self-designations, and thus a powerful new force on the political scene. (p. 285)

Negative television advertising is part of the mix of political television advertising tactics, and is intended to present critical and unflattering information about candidates, with the intent of helping the opponents of those being attacked win over voters. While research has suggested the use of negative political advertising can be effective in political campaigns, there are concerns that negative campaigning may reduce the level of voter participation (Jamieson, 1992; Mark, 2006). In addition, Kamber (1997) believed that some negative

political television advertising will attempt to distort issues relevant to a particular political campaign, or present messages intended to avoid discussion of issues altogether.

Some believe there has been insufficient research into this method of political communication, which inhibits the development of effective understandings of this form of communication (Gerber et al., 1984; Jamieson, 1992; Kaid & Boydston, 1987; Meirick, 2005; Pfau et al., 2002). It is the intent of this research to examine the ability of political television advertising to cultivate beliefs and influence voting behaviors, to help better understand the effects of this method of political campaigning.

#### Literature Review

Research has shown that television viewing can have a "cultivation effect" upon those who view television, in which television viewers, in the absence of first-hand knowledge, can come to believe what they see on television as accurate depictions of reality, and rely upon these assumptions to guide a wide range of behaviors and decisions (Bailey, 2006; Brown & Witherspoon, 2001; Gerbner, 1998; Tan, 1979; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). Gerbner et al. (1984), believed:

(T)hose who spend more time watching television are more likely to express views, beliefs, and assumptions that are congruent with television's portrayals of life and society.

Amount of television viewing has been found to make an independent contribution to a wide range of conceptions of reality within and across relatively homogenous subgroups. (p. 286)

Posner and Snyder (1975) found that television audiences were able to process and store information presented in television programming unintentionally, without this processing distracting them from other ongoing mental processes. Jamieson (1992) observed the ability of voters to store information presented by political advertising, even if by unconscious decision, and compared them to "pack rats":

Like pack rats, voters gather bits and pieces of political information and store them in a single place. Lost in the store is a clear recall of where this or that "fact" came from. (p. 17)

#### *Political television advertising*

In recent years, research has begun to examine how television can influence voters by exposing viewers to advertising intended to inform them about political issues, as well as the backgrounds of candidates (Gerber et al., 1984; Jamieson, 1992; Kaid & Boydston, 1987; Kamber, 1997; Mark, 2006). This interest in the study of political television advertising has been prompted by the growing use of television advertising by political campaigns in what is seen as an

increasingly competitive political environment. Several notable trends are believed to play pivotal roles in this new environment, including a decline in the importance of political parties in the political process, the growing role of independent political groups in the political process, and a decline in the number of voters who hold strong affiliations with political parties (Boiney & Paletz, 1991; Gerbner et al., 1984; Iyengar, 2001).

While political television advertising plays an important role in American political campaigns, its influence is also spreading on an international scale. Political television advertising, based upon approaches studied in American political campaigns, are becoming commonplace in political campaigns in other nations, including Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and Taiwan (Yoon, Pinkleton & Ko, 2005).

Boiney and Paletz (1991) believed several characteristics described the contemporary American political landscape:

- While voters will identify with political parties, and these identifications have important influences upon voting behavior, the overall importance of political party identification has declined;
- As party loyalties lessen, the importance of the image of individual candidates has increased to the point where this image is the primary factor in influencing voter

opinions;

- Positions on issues influence the image of a candidate, but they alone do not define the image of a candidate;
- Voters look back at past events in considering how they will vote in an upcoming election;
- While voters act as individuals, the influences of group loyalties and behaviors must be considered. (p. 10)

#### *Negative political advertising*

Negative political advertising, which is used to make negative claims with the intent of reducing support for a political candidate, is a controversial form of political communication. According to Kamber (1997), the use of this form of political advertising has grown rapidly, with the share of political television advertising devoted to negative political television advertising having grown from one in five of ads aired on television in the 1970s to approximately one-half of political television ads aired in the 1990s. In the 2006 election cycle, negative television advertising sponsored by the political parties in congressional races outnumbered positive advertising by a factor of ten-to-one (Kuhnenn, 2006).

Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) identified several functions that are performed by negative political campaign advertising:

- Provide information to the public about political



candidates and their issues;

- Encourage voters to consider and prioritize issues in a manner which favors support for the sponsoring candidate's (or on whose behalf the ads are sponsored) record, issues, and background;
- Make voters less willing to consider supporting the candidate attacked by the advertising, and therefore more willing to consider supporting the other candidate;
- Simplify the choice to be made by voters by creating clear and stark contrasts between the candidates (p. 25).

According to Pfau and Kenski (1990), negative political television ads develop clear and distinct messages that can easily be recalled in the minds of audiences. These findings are supported by Eagley and Chaiken (1993), who found that threatening messages in television advertising serve as heuristic cues which encourage the mental processing of those messages by television viewers. Lau (1982, 1985) found that negative messages in political advertising stood out more clearly in the minds of voters than positive messages and therefore may be given more weight in making voting decisions.

Kamber (1997) expressed concerns that negative campaigning can increase levels of cynicism and distrust among voters about the political process, and that exposure to negative political advertisements may decrease voter turnout. However, this point

of view is challenged by research which showed that races which saw heavy usage of negative political advertising showed an increase in voter participation (Diamond & Bates, 1992; Kern, 1989). Given the varying points of view on this subject, the claims of both sides may have some degree of validity, and there may well be no uniform mobilization or demobilization effect, a belief which is held by Finkel and Geer (1998).

Research has shown that negative political advertising may have greater limitations than positive political advertising as to its ability to persuade voters and achieve the goals of those who use those messages. It is believed that negative political television ads may have a limited lifetime of effectiveness, and therefore may need to be replaced more often than positive advertisements during the course of a television campaign to hold the attention of audiences (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991). Also, the effectiveness of negative political advertising is believed to vary widely, depending on many factors, including the willingness of voters in a given area to tolerate negative campaign advertising, and how information presented in such advertising may compare to what they already about know a candidate or an issue (Mark, 2006).

In addition, research has indicated that in some instances, negative campaigning may hurt those who use it as part of their campaigns, giving an unintended benefit to those targeted by

negative advertising. Campaigns which engage in excessive attacks risk creating a voter backlash, in which voters offended by negative advertising are motivated to vote against the attacking candidate to express discontent with the negative advertising being used, or to show sympathy for the targeted candidate (Garramone, 1984; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991; Mark, 2006). In races with more than two candidates, candidates who engage in negative campaigning against each other risk seeing these efforts backfire, by persuading voters not to trust the attacking candidates and cast their votes for one of the candidates who refrained from the use of negative campaigning on a "better safe than sorry" basis (Mark, 2006).

Given the concerns expressed about the effects of political television advertising, as well as the need to develop more informed understandings of how this advertising works, and its potential effects, this research will examine the cultivation effect of political television advertising by assessing its ability to influence voting behaviors, as well as determine the levels of credibility of both positive and negative political advertising. If there is a significant cultivation effect present in political television advertising, the findings of this research should show that increased viewing of television, which would presumably increase exposure to advertisements, including those of political nature, should result in an

increased willingness to believe the claims made by such advertising, as well as to consider those claims in making voting decisions.

To assess the presence of a cultivation effect, three specific hypotheses will be tested:

*Hypothesis 1:* The more viewers watch television, the more they rely on television to shape their impressions on information with which they do not have direct familiarity. As such, this general susceptibility should extend to their willingness to believe political television advertising.

*Hypothesis 2:* The more voters view television, the more believable they will find positive political television advertisements (those that make positive statements about a candidate).

*Hypothesis 3:* The more voters view television, the more believable they will find negative political television advertisements (those which make negative statements about a candidate).

## Research

### *Method and Sample*

Data for this study was produced by a telephone survey conducted by one of the authors of [South-eastern county] households with at least one voter who voted in at least two out of the four general elections in the years 1998, 2000, 2002, and

2004 between October 22, 2006 and November 14, 2006. Voters were identified using voter data downloaded from the Voter Vault, an online voter registration database provided by the Republican National Committee.

A convenience sample of 455 voters was contacted out of a study population of 28,112. The voting households with phone matches were called in a random manner. When a call was answered, the voter was asked for by name, to assure the participation of only those voters in the study population. Any voter who reported watching less than one hour of television was not included in the study.

The selection of voters who had voted at least twice in past general elections was intended to focus upon those voters who had shown a consistent history of voting. This selection process is supported by research which indicates that regular voters believe it is essential to become informed prior to casting ballots, and are therefore more likely to respond to messages, such as television advertising, which present information for voters to consider in making voting decisions (McCombs and Poindexter, 2001; Yoon, Pinkleton & Ko, 2005).

Of those 455 voters who participated in the study, 59.6% (271) were female, ranging in age from 19 to 92 ( $M=58.84$ ,  $SD=16.02$ ), and 40.4% (184) were male, ranging in age from 19 to 90 ( $M=52.73$ ,  $SD=16.41$ ). This gender ratio of participants

compares to the 55.8% of all [county] voters in those elections who were female and 44.2% who where male ([State] Election Commission, 2006), and a study population ratio of 55.4% female and 44.6% male. The mean number of elections in which the voters surveyed participated was 2.418 general elections ( $SD=1.26$ ).

### *Questions*

This study intended to assess the ability of exposure to television to cultivate beliefs among voters. In each question, respondents were asked to express their opinions of that particular subject on a Likert scale (1=very little to 5=very much):

Q1: On a scale of 1 to 5, how influential is television advertising in helping you decide who to vote for?

Q2: On a scale of 1 to 5, how believable do you find positive political TV ads, those that make positive statements about the candidate?

Q3: On a scale of 1 to 5, how believable do you find negative political ads, those that make negative statements about a candidate?

### *Television viewing*

As cultivation theory proposes that increased exposure to television will have a greater cultivation effect upon television viewers, the independent variable in this study was

the number of hours which respondents watched television on a daily basis. Viewing times were determined by asking respondents how many hours they watched television. The study participants reported watching from one to ten hours of television, with a mean viewing time of 2.96 hours a day ( $SD=1.67$ ), with 96.04 percent of the respondents (437) watching one to five hours a day (96.04 percent), and the remaining 3.96 percent (18) watching between six and ten hours a day.

To test for cultivation effects, respondents were grouped by the number of hours of television watched, and mean scores were assigned to the responses given by respondents in each group to each of the three questions. Following Gerbner's heavy and light distinction, viewers were split near the mean, but at the median (3.0 hours). Light viewers were those who viewed less than 3 hours and heavy viewers watched 3 or more.

Table 1:

*Mean scores of respondents to Questions 1-3, by viewing group.*

	Q1		Q2		Q3	
	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD
Low viewing	2.14	1.08	2.67	1.13	1.93	1.06
High viewing	1.72	0.85	2.61	0.97	1.78	1.14

### *Statistical Analysis*

Independent sample two-tailed T-tests were used to test each of the three hypotheses. To determine significant findings, an alpha of  $p < .05$  was used as the criterion for each hypothesis.

### Results

Hypothesis 1, which predicted those who watch more television would have a higher level of willingness to rely on television advertising in making voting decisions, was not supported. In fact, the opposite was true. The lower viewing group had a higher willingness to rely on political television advertising,  $t(454)=4.61, p < .001$ .

Cultivation research has been criticized for splitting continuous data into groups (Hirsch, 1980). When a correlation between the number of TV hours and self-reported influence was measured, Pearson's  $r = -.12, p = .012$ , indicating the same opposite result. This weak correlation may also be attributed to the large sample ( $N = 455$ ).

Hirsch (1980) also complained the other demographic had an influence. A hierarchical regression shows that age, gender, and political party did not contribute a significant explanation for self-reported influence of political advertising in this study.

Hypothesis 2, which predicted that the willingness to



believe positive claims about candidates made in political television advertising would generally increase along with viewing time, was not supported. Hypothesis 3, which predicted that the willingness to believe negative claims about candidates made in political television advertising would generally increase along with viewing time, was not supported.

Overall, the research findings presented here did not show a significant cultivation effect to be present with regard to political advertising. In addition, there were no significant differences based on political party, age, or gender.

#### Discussion

Political campaigns use television as a means to transmit messages to voters to help inform and persuade them, in order to motivate them to cast ballots in elections. This gives those who craft campaign messages tremendous power that may not be readily apparent to the uninformed citizen. Understanding how television advertising influences voters can help better educate voters about how political campaigns work, allow campaigns to more effectively disseminate information, as well as help empower those who seek to protect democratic values by unmasking deceptive campaign practices.

Although cultivation theory offers useful insights into understanding how one's beliefs can be shaped by what they see

on television, this study suggests the effectiveness of this theory in helping understand the persuasive effects of political television advertising has severe limitations.

Further, the study results indicate that while respondents put little trust in both positive and negative political television advertising, they trusted the messages contained in negative advertising even less, as indicated by an overall mean score of 1.78 for negative advertising, and a 2.49 overall mean score for positive advertising. However, as there is much research which shows that television programming, including advertising, can have effects upon viewers, these findings alone cannot be assumed to deny that such an effect exists.

A number of unexamined factors in this study could have affected the willingness of voters to consider the claims made in political television advertising. These factors include personal viewing interests and motives, as well as the amount of political advertising in programming that viewers watched. For example, a voter who viewed television for purely entertainment motives may largely disregard political advertising (as well as other forms of advertising), while one who watches news programming regularly might pay closer attention to such advertising.

Another point worth considering is that while voters may claim to have a low level of willingness to rely upon political

advertising, research indicates that there may be subliminal processes at work which allow messages to be processed and stored in the minds of viewers without conscious thought (Posner and Snyder, 1975; Jamieson, 1992). Further research into what takes place in the minds of television viewers who are exposed to political television advertising can help determine if these findings are an aberration, or an indication of the shortcomings of cultivation theory in this area.

Finally, social desirability bias is a limitation of this study. Those who are proud of their lower viewing levels may be more likely to assert pride in their attention to political messages, possibly accounting for the unexpected direction of the first hypothesis. In all three hypotheses, few respondents are likely to self-report that messages influenced them, especially in a negative direction, regardless of the actual situations.

Political advertising has a significant influence upon voters who are exposed to it, even if such effects may not be fully understood. While this alone presents sufficient justification for further research, the knowledge that campaign tactics used in American political campaigns may later be used in political campaigns in other nations should serve as caution that these methods of political communication can have effects on a global scale. Given the potential global reach of these

effects, the need to better understand this form of political communication presents a challenge which should not be taken lightly.

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