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Does negative campaign advertising stimulate uncivil communication on social media? Measuring audience response using big data



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ABSTRACT

Using the 2012 presidential election as a case study, this work set out to understand the relationship between negative political advertising and political incivility on Twitter. Drawing on the stimulation hypothesis and the notion that communication with dissimilar others can encourage incivility, it was predicted that (1) heightened levels of negative campaign advertising would be associated with increased citizen activity on Twitter, (2) increased citizen activity would predict online incivility, and (3) that increases in citizen activity would facilitate a positive indirect relationship between negative advertising volume and citizen incivility. This theoretical model was tested using data collected from over 140,000 individual Twitter users located in 206 Designated Market Areas. The results supported the proposed model. Additional analyses further suggested that the relationship between negative political advertising and citizen incivility was conditioned by contextual levels of economic status. These results are discussed in the context of political advertising and democratic deliberation.

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1. Introduction

Social media platforms play an increasingly prominent role in how Americans engage with politics. However, this increased engagement comes with a variety of concerns related to the functional *quality* of such engagement. Mirroring broader concerns over civility in the modern age, Forni (2011) has observed that “In today’s America, incivility is on prominent display: in the schools ... in the workplace ... in politics, where strident intolerance takes the place of earnest dialogue; and on the Web, where many check their inhibitions at the digital door” (par. 1). Responding to these concerns, scholars have explored incivility from a number of angles, including the relationship between news media and citizen discussion quality (Borah, 2014), the relationship between individual level traits and uncivil discourse online (Hmielowski, Hutchens, & Cicchirillo, 2014), and the effects of uncivil commentary on people’s understanding of information (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014).

Despite an increased scholarly emphasis on the relationship between new media use and the quality of contemporary political

deliberation, a number of questions persist. For instance, to-date research tends to treat online democratic communication processes in prospective, rather than observed, terms. Additionally – and perhaps most importantly to the current work – there exist a wide array of questions relative to the degree that democratic discourse on social media is responsive to (and/or a product of) offline contextual realities. Research emanating from the political science, sociology, and mass communication fields suggests that offline civic involvement is associated with a host of contextual factors, including socio-economic conditions, community heterogeneity, ideological polarization, and media environment (e.g., Costa & Kahn, 2003; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002). However, such models of offline behavior have not, generally speaking, been applied to online behavior.

In light of the foregoing, the goal of this study was to better understand the relationship between contextual political advertising factors and observed online behavior in terms of both volume and quality (i.e., *civility*) during the 2012 presidential election. To do so, we draw upon literature describing the so-called stimulation effect (the tendency for negative political advertising to stimulate voter engagement with the election) to develop and test a model that suggests (a) increased levels of negative campaign advertising will predict increased levels of campaign-relevant participation on social media and (b) increased participation on social media will, itself, be associated with higher levels of citizen incivility online. To

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test the above-described propositions, we capitalize on recent advances in computational social science to use novel big data and computer-assisted textual analysis techniques to analyze the campaign-relevant behavior of approximately 140,000 Twitter users located in 206 designated market areas (DMAs).

2. Literature review

2.1. Negative advertising and civic behaviors

During the past three decades there has been a fairly stiff debate over the degree to which negative, or *attack*, advertising influences citizen-based outcomes such as political efficacy and voting behavior (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1996; Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, & Babbit, 1999). Perspectives framing the debate can be segmented into two camps. The first perspective holds that as the tone of political discourse becomes increasingly uncivil, Americans are more likely to become dissatisfied with the state of politics and discontinue their involvement in the political process (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1996). Conversely, the alternate perspective suggests just the opposite, stipulating that as negative, attack-oriented advertisements increase, so does citizen engagement with the political process (e.g., Brooks, 2006; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002; Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007; Lau et al., 1999; Stevens, Sullivan, Allen, & Alger, 2008).

Recent evidence has increasingly supported the latter proposition that negative campaign advertising stimulates – often on a conditional basis – citizen involvement with the election. A number of presumed mechanisms underlie this effect. First, negative campaign messages communicate “that something important is at stake in the outcome of the election” (Goldstein & Freedman, 2002, p. 735). This perceived importance effectively serves as an arousing agent (Martin, 2004), driving citizen involvement. Moreover, negative advertisements are most commonly used in competitive electoral races (Kahn & Kenney, 1999). A high volume of negative political advertising may therefore signal to the voter his or her individual vote may well play a role in determining important future outcomes.

Secondly, Martin (2004) points out that negative campaign advertising may incur a sense of so-called republican duty. Here it is again assumed that “American citizens share some deep concern over the future of the country and that this concern can be stimulated to encourage participation” (p. 549). Attack advertisements suggest that maintenance of the status quo will result in negative future outcomes for the country. Attempts to disrupt citizens’ faith in the status quo therefore can exert a mobilizing effect on the citizenry (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Martin, 2004).

Third, scholars (e.g., Dayberry, 1991; Pratto & John, 1991; Taylor, 1991) have shown that people pay more attention to negative information (when compared to positive or neutral information). This effect is thought to be automatic in nature. As illustrated by Pratto and John (1991), “Events that may negatively affect the individual are typically of greater time urgency than are events that lead to desirable consequences. Averting danger to one’s well being, such as preventing loss of life or limb, often requires an immediate response” (p. 380). In the context of political advertising, attack ads may be attended to more than non-attack advertisements (Marcus, 2000), resulting in greater engagement and, ultimately, heightened levels of voter turnout (Martin, 2004).

Fourth, attack advertisements facilitate the formation of negative emotional states among message receivers (e.g., Brader, 2005; Fridkin & Kenney, 2008; Valentino, Hutchings, Banks, & Davis, 2008). These negative emotional states, in turn, lubricate citizen mobilization. Negative emotional states are particularly effective at altering behavior because of the heightened state of arousal that is

associated with them. In his exploration of the relationship between negative campaigning and voter turnout, Martin (2004) noted that the “power of emotions such as anxiety to motivate participation should not be underestimated” (p. 550).

The literature reviewed above refers primarily to the relationship between negative campaign advertising and voting behaviors. Research interrelating negative advertising and citizens’ communication behaviors (in terms of both information seeking and self-expression) is both less common and less definitive. For example, a 2007 study by Shah and colleagues indicated that consumption of both traditional and online news was positively related to political advertising exposure. However, there was a *negative* relationship between exposure to negative advertising (calculated as the estimated proportion of negative to positive advertising experienced) and exposure to traditional news sources. Alternately, a separate study by Wang, Gabay, and Shah (2012) found that exposure to negative political advertisements among adolescents was associated with human-interest candidate knowledge, potentially suggesting that negative advertising may play an educational role among young people. As it specifically relates to social media, a recent study by Settle, Bond, Coviello, Fariss, Fowler, and Jones (2015) indicated that Facebook users who reside in heavily contested “battleground” states were more likely to post election-relevant content than those living in less competitive “blackout” states. Although the authors did not explicitly measure the effects associated with advertising exposure, they contextualized their results by surmising that the competitive nature of campaigns, communicated in part through the heavy use of attack advertising, may drive user engagement online.

As it relates to the current study, we believe that Settle et al.’s (2015) findings coupled with research on negative advertising’s so-called stimulation effect suggest that negative political advertising may stimulate broader levels of participation on Twitter. Building upon the discussed studies of voter behavior both on and offline, we specifically suggest that contextual environments featuring high levels of negative advertising may serve to prime users to believe that the election is a high stakes competition that is worthy of their attention. Thus, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1. DMAs with high levels of negative advertising will be associated with broader political participation on Twitter.

2.2. Incivility

Incivility describes a wide array of communicative and non-communicative behaviors that range from rudeness and name-calling to vandalism and theft. Civil political discourse is generally thought to be central to a well-functioning democracy. As pointed out by Coe, Kenski, and Rains (2014), “commitment to civil discourse—the free and respectful exchange of ideas—has been viewed as a democratic ideal from the ancient Athenian forums to the mediated political debates of modern times” (p. 658). Similarly, Boyd (2006) posited that civil communication helps individual citizens “communicate respect for others and generate habits of moral equality in the everyday of life of a democracy” (p. 863).

What does uncivil online discourse look like? In Coe, Kenski, and Rains’s (2014) study of uncivil discussion on online news comment forums, the authors defined incivility as “features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics” (pg. 660). Similarly, Santana (2014), defined incivility as possessing at least one of the following nine characteristics: (1) name calling; (2) threats; (3) vulgarities; (4) abusive or foul language; (5) xenophobia; (6) hateful language, epithets or slurs; (7) racist or bigoted sentiments; (8) disparaging comments on the basis of race/ethnicity; and (9)

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