

ALL IN THE FAMILY: EVALUATING VOTER RESPONSE TO NEGATIVE
CAMPAIGN ADVERTISEMENTS IN INTRA-PARTY CONTESTS

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ABSTRACT

STEVEN W. SPARKS: All in the Family: Evaluating voter response to negative campaign advertisements in intra-party contests
(Under the direction of Thomas Carsey.)

Scholars have shown that voters are constrained by party identity in their reactions to negative attacks sponsored by in-group candidates. If party cues are no longer a reliable source for evaluating ad content, how do voters interpret and respond to negative advertising? The present research compares viewer responses to negative political advertising in one-party and two-party contests. Findings support a theory of “unconstrained backlash” in which negativity in both types of contests cause similar decreases in evaluations of the sponsor candidate, but the lack of constraints on party identity cause voters to cast harsher punishments upon ad sponsors in one-party contests.

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Introduction

Televised political advertisements are often credited for their role in shaping voter behavior. Political ads enable citizens to learn and retain important distinctions about the candidates that they would likely otherwise not learn (Freedman et al. 2004; Jamieson 1992). Negative political television advertisements, in particular, are credited by many scholars for having profound effects on voting behavior and electoral outcomes by mobilizing certain segments of the electorate and therefore increasing turnout (Djupe and Peterson 2002; Freedman et al. 2004; Jackson and Carsey 2007; Lau and Pomper 2001; Wattenberg and Brians 1999).

The vast majority of existing research, however, explores how voters respond to negative political messaging in standard two-party contests (see Carraro and Castelli 2010; Freedman and Goldstein 2002; Jackson and Carsey 2007; Lau and Pomper 2001; Matthews and Dietz-Uhler 1998; Stevens et al. 2008). What receives less attention, however, is how voter perceptions, and subsequently their voting behavior, are shaped when two competing candidates are not from opposing parties. Very little is known about how negative advertising affects voter behavior in both non-partisan and single-party contexts, yet a vast number of contests fall within one of these two categories. We cannot yet fully evaluate the true effects of negative advertising because we do not know how they shape behavior in the absence of party cues.

Social identity theory explains why we should expect that party competition shapes voter perceptions of candidates and campaign messaging. When partisanship is activated as a salient component of social identity (Green 1999), partisanship acts as a lens that shapes the way that voters process information (Brewer 1993; Green 1999; Tajfel 1978; Tajfel 1981). Partisans view political stimuli with perceptual and attitudinal biases (Tajfel 1978), causing them to make “us” vs. “them” comparisons with the goal of raising the status of

the in-group and devaluing the status of the out-group (Brewer 1993; Tajfel 1981). When partisanship no longer creates a bias with which people interpret political information in the context of a one-party or nonpartisan race, it should be expected that viewer responses to political advertising will be fundamentally different than in a two-party context.

While voters that dislike negative campaigning may lower their overall evaluation of an in-group candidate that attacks someone of the out-party, it is expected that they will be constrained by their partisan identification and ultimately still vote for the in-group candidate. When the candidate is attacking someone of the same party, however, this constraint is no longer present. This paper proposes a theory of *unconstrained backlash* whereby voters will be more likely to abandon support for an in-group candidate when they attack someone of the same party than when they attack someone of the opposing party.

In this study, I conduct an experiment to test whether there is a difference in the way that respondents perceive and react to negative advertisements in one-party versus two-party contests. Using a hypothetical race between two candidates running for the U.S. House of Representatives, I measure respondent vote choices and overall evaluations of the negative ad sponsor before and after viewing the advertising treatment. Results show that negative advertising causes similar decreases in evaluations of the ad sponsor in both one-party and two-party contests, however, respondents are more likely to withdraw support from both the target and sponsor of the advertisement in a one-party contest.

Partisanship, Social Identity, and Impression Formation

Much of the American electorate lacks a coherent ideological framework and does not maintain firm positions on most political issues (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Palfrey and Poole 1987; Zaller and Feldman 1992). Voters are likely to favor a particular candidate or issue based on party cues alone, as partisanship shapes perception of policy, candidates, and governmental performance (Bartels 2002). It would be a nearly impossible task for even the most sophisticated voters to learn and maintain detailed information on every candidate running in every contest during an election cycle. This is especially true

in low-information contests such as U.S. House elections (Abramowitz 1980; Converse 1966; McDermott 1997; Stokes and Miller 1966), where the majority of citizens are unable to make sophisticated, well-informed voting choices. Yet despite lacking detailed knowledge of candidates and issues, voters are quite adept at using cues to make ideologically-consistent decisions (McDermott 1997). Voters use party identification, in particular, as an information shortcut to make meaningful inferences about candidate ideology (Conover and Feldman 1982; McDermott 1997; Tversky and Kahneman 1974).

Whether caused by party sorting (Levendusky 2009; Nivola and Brady 2006), ideological polarization (Abramowitz 2010; Bafumi and Shapiro 2009), or conflict extension (Layman and Carsey 2002), the contemporary party system now presents voters with clearly distinct images of the two major parties. Even inattentive voters are able to adopt positions that match up with their party affiliation on issues of which they have little detailed knowledge. With the two parties growing farther apart and easier to distinguish from each other ideologically, it has become easier for voters to interpret important cues that inform them about the policy implications that might arise from this inter-party competition.

Party identity plays an important role in the way that people view and interpret the political world around them. According to social identity theory, membership in a given group shapes a person's self-concept through the value and emotional significance that this membership plays for identity. Humans naturally seek positive distinctiveness for their own group, which they resolve by making dichotomous social comparisons of "us" vs. "them" (Brewer 1993; Tajfel 1981). Humans naturally exaggerate perceptual contrasts between one's in-group and the out-group (Turner et al. 1987), seeking to raise the status of their own group while simultaneously lowering their evaluation of the out-group by evaluating information in a manner that is consistent with this view of the world. In this way, social identity acts as a lens through which people make evaluations. When an identity becomes a salient lens in a given context, it leads to perceptual and attitudinal biases that favor the in-group and devalue the outgroup, altering perception of external actors and events. (Tajfel 1978).

Importantly, partisanship acts as a fundamental aspect of social identity (Green 1999),

contributing to one's perception of both the self and the outside world. Therefore, it should be the case that electoral contexts that make this aspect of a voter's identity a salient lens through which they process information will be fundamentally different from those that do not. When candidates and advertising messages are evaluated in a manner that seeks to maintain positive distinctiveness for the in-group, there should be important biases in information processing that may not be present when party identity is not a salient lens through which voters process these stimuli. In the context of the present research, it is expected that partisanship will become a salient component of respondents' social identity when evaluating a contest between two candidates of opposing parties, but not when both candidates are of the same party. This should have important consequences for how viewers shape their candidate evaluations and importantly, how they ultimately make voting decisions in response to negative advertising.

Given what we know about the effect of partisanship on information processing, how does the presence or absence of party cues affect the ways that viewers respond to negative advertising? How do voters react to stimuli when they are no longer able to rely on partisan cues to shape perceptions as influenced by their social identity?

Constrained Backlash to Negative Advertising in Two-Party Contests

Partisans are susceptible to processing political information through motivated reasoning, whereby they view sources that are preference-consistent as credible and trustworthy. When information does not align with preconceived notions, however, people tend to be critical and dismissive (Ditto and Lopez 1992; Edwards and Smith 1996; Kunda 1990; Slothuus and de Vreese 2010; Taber and Lodge 2006; Taber et al. 2009). This behavior extends to viewer response to televised political advertising, with political messaging being most powerful when it reinforces and strengthens the perceiver's expectations and beliefs about candidates and issues. Viewers have a tendency to reject or ignore advertising content that is incongruent with their existing beliefs (Nelson and Garst 2005). Citizens also pay selective attention to positive and negative signals in campaign advertising, depending on how it conforms with their existing belief structures about the candidate. Moskowitz and

Stroh use an experimental setting with respondents assigned either a negative or positive descriptive treatment of a candidate running for office. Respondents emphasized their policy disagreements with candidates who were described negatively, while they ignored their policy disagreements with candidates who were described in a positive manner (1996).

While preference-inconsistent information is often discredited and dismissed, it also tends to further polarize views among partisans. Recent work has shown that when respondents learned additional information about the death penalty (Peffley and Hurwitz 2007), the Iraq War (Gaines et al. 2007; Nyhan and Reifler 2007), political candidates (Redlawsk 2002), or tax policy (Nyhan and Reifler 2007), the broad finding is that the discovery of new incongruent information usually further polarizes opinions rather than moderating them. Not surprisingly, this effect also occurs in response to viewing negative advertisements. An ad that attacks the candidate of the viewer's preferred party will typically cause defensive reactions that favor the in-group rather than cause an erosion of support for the target. Partisans tend to see negative attacks against their favored candidate as unfounded (Stevens et al. 2008). Televised attack ads also mobilize voters who support the target candidate due to the perceived threat to their candidate and party (Martin 2004) while simultaneously evoking feelings of sympathy among viewers who support the target candidate, a phenomenon known as the *victim syndrome effect* (Franz and Ridout 1997).

While the threshold for tolerance of negativity may be higher when attack ads target the outgroup, evidence shows that voters are repelled by negativity regardless of who sponsors the advertisement. Despite the influence of motivated reasoning, voter frustration with negative advertising isn't limited to that which comes from the opposing party. People simply dislike negative attacks; when a viewer's preferred candidate attacks the opposition, viewers tend to lower their evaluations of their own candidate, distancing themselves from their candidate in this backlash reaction once they perceive that the attacks that have gone too far, a response known as the *black-sheep effect* (Carraro and Castelli 2010; Matthews and Dietz-Uhler 1998).

In addition to lowering viewers' evaluations of the attacking candidate, experimental-based research on campaign advertising argues that negativity turns voters off from the

process entirely. When asked about their likelihood of voting, respondents in negative treatment groups report that attacks make them less likely to go to the polls on election day altogether (Ansolabehere et al. 1994; Ansolabehere et al. 1999; Kahn and Kenney 1999). There is disagreement about this effect, however, with observational research instead showing that heightened negativity raises the urgency of a contest, creating a perception of threat and thereby increasing turnout (Djupe and Peterson 2002; Freedman et al. 2004; Jackson and Carsey 2007; Lau and Pomper 2001; Wattenburg and Brians 1999).

Despite the lack of consensus between these two strains of research, the important point is that respondents in experimental settings are so repelled by negative campaigning that they report a desire to sit the process out entirely. In accordance with the *black sheep effect*, voter evaluations in response to attacks aired by their own candidates is so off-putting that they no longer want to support their own party. It should be meaningful that this pattern persists even when attacking the opposing team. Given all that we know about motivated reasoning and the perceptual and attitudinal biases imposed by social identity, it may be surprising that partisans don't relish the thought of tearing down the opponent. The aforementioned research on the *black sheep effect* and on viewer response to negativity, however, suggest strongly that viewers dislike negativity without regard for whom the ad is attacking. It is this mechanism that motivates the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: There should be no difference in the degree to which respondents will lower their evaluations of an in-group negative ad sponsor, regardless of whether the candidate is attacking somebody of the opposing party or somebody of the same party.

Yet the puzzle remains: why do voters say that they are less likely to participate but then turn out in greater numbers in observational data? Social identity theory helps to explain why partisans are constrained by their party identity to support their in-group candidate, even when they perceive their in-group candidate to be a *black sheep*. In-group members devalue the status of the outgroup to help maintain positive self-esteem (Hogg and Abrams 1988). This positive self-esteem is also maintained through evaluating deviants within the in-group more negatively than those in the out-group (Abrams et al. 2014). Those who betray their own team are viewed as being of lower status than those who are of the op-

posing team. Voting for the opposing party lowers a strong partisan's self-evaluation by placing them among deviants in their own in-group while simultaneously *raising* the status of the out-group. We might consider the betrayal felt among Democrats when Georgia Senator Zell Miller endorsed President Bush for re-election in 2004. The subsequent backlash among copartisans and branding of him as a "Zell Out" serves as an example of this effect. This desire to maintain self-esteem and positive distinctiveness helps partisans stay loyalty to their respective teams.

Negativity in Intra-Party Contests: A Theory of Unconstrained Backlash

Past research explains the role of negative advertising in shaping voter behavior in two-party contests in which partisanship and social identity act as constraining mechanisms that limit voters from defecting from their party when campaigns become overly negative. When both candidates are of the same party, however, partisanship is no longer a salient lens through which citizens view the dynamics of the contest. Differences in party cues should not drive vote choice anymore, so the forces of social identity would no longer direct the voter into viewing the contest in an "us" vs. "them" scenario. Absent the pressures of voting against their own social identity and thereby supporting the out-group, voters should be better able to shift their support from one candidate to the next without devaluing the status and self-esteem they derive from that identity. With the effects of partisan constraint no longer present, voters should instead demonstrate what I call *unconstrained backlash* when their preferred candidate is overly negative. By this, I mean that when negativity leads respondents to lower their evaluations of the ad sponsor in a two-party contest, their backlash will be constrained by party ID and they should still vote for their in-group candidate. In contrast, negativity in a one-party setting will not have these same constraining features of partisanship, allowing respondents to abandon support for their candidate more easily.

Additionally, since social identity theory dictates that people seek positive distinctiveness from their in-group (Brewer 1993; Tajfel 1981), voters should find negative attacks against *any* candidate of their in-group to be intolerable. Research shows that in-group members derogate in-group deviants more so than out-group deviants (Abrams et al. 2014).

Here, candidates that tear down one of their own party members are the ultimate in-group deviants. If this lowers the threshold for causing a *victim syndrome effect* among voters when both candidates are of the in-group, then voters should more readily abandon support for a candidate in response to negative attack advertisements in intra-party contests.

It is these combined mechanisms that motivate the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The negative ad sponsor will lose more supporters after running a negative attack in a one-party contest than in a two-party contest.

One might argue that it would be unusual to observe a contest where only one candidate goes negative, making these expectations normatively uninteresting. The goal in this experimental setting, however, is to isolate the impact of negativity on both the sponsor and the target. An experiment in which both candidates attacked each other would be unable to isolate this effect, making it unclear whether the evaluation changed because they were the target or because they were the sender. Here, however, it allows us to isolate effects that would be next to impossible to disentangle in observational data.

Research Design

To test the theory of unconstrained backlash, I create an experiment to measure candidate evaluations and vote choice for a hypothetical scenario in which a candidate who is of the respondent's in-group party launches a negative attack against an opponent. The experimental manipulation included a control group with two candidates of opposite parties, while the treatment group included two candidates that were of the same party as the respondent.

Respondents were first asked to report their partisan affiliation to determine whether they would be assigned to a treatment where the ad sponsor was a Republican or a Democrat. Those who reported no party affiliation were asked to choose which party they agree with most often. Respondents who reported neither party were dropped from the study¹

¹ In total, 60 of 435 respondents were dropped from the results, representing 13.7% of the original sample. The final analysis includes 375 respondents.

Fig. 1: Experimental Treatment Groups

Respondent Party ID	One-Party Contest	Two-Party Contest
Republican	<u>Republican</u> vs. Republican	<u>Republican</u> vs. Democrat
Democratic	<u>Democrat</u> vs. Democrat	<u>Democrat</u> vs. Republican

because the experiment is concerned with evaluating the ways in which partisanship shapes perception of information and changes voting behavior.

Participants were then randomly assigned into one of four treatments shown in Figure 1. Each manipulation consisted of a hypothetical matchup between two candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives. The names and photographs of the sponsor candidate and target candidate were consistent across all four treatment groups. Below, the underlined candidate indicates the ad sponsor. In each treatment group, the respondent and the ad sponsor are of the same political party, while the party of the ad target varies between in-party and out-party members.

Respondents were presented with a side-by-side profile of both candidates, shown in Figure 2. Candidate profiles from the remaining three manipulations are presented in Appendix A. Respondents were asked to review the stated positions on three issues: climate change, abortion, and the economy. These were chosen because they represent three highly salient issues in the current political climate and allow for distinct preferences to be formed in a hypothetical laboratory setting.

In all treatment groups, photographs and names of the ad sponsor and target were held constant. Both candidates are depicted as white males in their early 40s to limit the intervening effects of race, gender, or age for respondent evaluations. Issue positions for the Republican and Democratic candidates were held constant across both of the two-party treatment groups. The experiment is investigating respondent evaluations of the ad sponsor, so issue positions of the ad *sponsors* in the one-party treatment groups were the same as those of the ad *sponsors* in two-party treatment groups. See Appendix A for the complete

Fig. 2: Two-Party Candidate Profiles for Republican Respondents

 <p>Derek Kilmer Republican</p> <p>Pro-life: I am committed to protecting the rights of the unborn and reversing pro-abortion policies.</p> <p>Climate Change: Our planet is in a natural climate cycle. Proposals by environmentalists will further damage our struggling economy,</p> <p>Jobs/Economy: The government's role is to get out of the way, helping job creators and entrepreneurs by decreasing regulation.</p>	 <p>Jim Esch Democrat</p> <p>Pro-choice: Abortion should be safe, legal, and rare. Contraception should be provided by insurance providers.</p> <p>Climate Change: Climate change is a disastrous consequence of human activity. Congress must take action before it's too late.</p> <p>Jobs/Economy: We need real tax fairness that requires millionaires and billionaires to pay their fair share.</p>
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set of candidate profiles used in each treatment group.

After reviewing the candidate issue positions, respondents were asked to rate the negative ad sponsor according to the ANES 100-point feeling thermometer using a sliding scale tool. Once this was completed, they were asked to report which candidate for which they would be most likely to vote. Choices included Derek Kilmer, Jim Esch, Not Sure, or Neither. This report served as a pre-test of preferences prior to viewing the negative advertisement.

All respondents then viewed the same 20-second negative advertisement. In the existing literature on the *black sheep effect*, we know that there exists some imaginary threshold of negativity that causes voters to sit out, which occurs when it is perceived that the candidate has crossed that line (Carraro and Castelli 2010; Matthews and Dietz-Uhler 1998). If “crossing the line” translates to unnecessarily nasty in tone, this should happen when ads are not substantively policy-related and do not convey information that voters deem necessary for an informed vote choice. Therefore, “crossing the line” can be operationalized as an attack that is personal, character-oriented, and lacking substantive policy statements. To meet these criteria, the chosen ad had no mention of policy or issues. The ad was a character-based attack about the opponent’s conviction for driving under the influence of

alcohol, implying that the candidate therefore lacks the judgment necessary to be an elected member of Congress. The total runtime of the ad was 20 seconds. Any mentions of party were removed by editing to allow for consistency across all manipulations.

After viewing the ad, respondents were asked to give their vote choice a second time, with the options of Derek Kilmer, Jim Esch, Not Sure, or Neither Candidate. They were also asked to give a second rating of the ad sponsor on the 100-point feeling thermometer. The survey was then concluded.

This survey² was conducted twice, once in October 2014 and again in February 2015. Participants were recruited via e-mail from introductory American government classes at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Students completed the survey online and received course credit in exchange for their participation.³ In all, 375 individuals participated in the experiment. There were no significant differences in the results when comparing the two administrations.

Distribution of respondent ideology and partisanship is presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Respondent Ideology and Partisanship

Ideology	N	Party ID	N
Extremely Conservative	4		
Conservative	63	Democrat	156
Somewhat Conservative	83	Democratic Leaner	46
Moderate	50	Republican Leaner	39
Somewhat Liberal	66	Republican	134
Liberal	90	No Affiliation*	60
Extremely Liberal	11		

*Respondents with no party affiliation were dropped from the results.

Results

Feeling thermometer evaluations are presented in Table 2. The *Initial Rating* column lists the mean respondent evaluation of the ad sponsor *prior* to viewing the negative ad

² IRB number 14-2788.

³ The benefits and potential drawbacks of using a student sample are discussed in the conclusion.

treatment. Interestingly, the mean initial rating for the two-party treatment group is 4.8 points higher than that of the one-party treatment group. A difference in means test shows these to be statistically different ($p < 0.01$). When partisanship becomes a salient lens through which to evaluate the candidates, the baseline evaluation of the ad sponsor raises by nearly 5 points. The *Final Rating* column lists the mean evaluation of the sponsor candidate *after* the respondent has viewed the negative advertisement. Once again, the negative ad sponsor in two-party treatment groups is rated 4.7 points higher than in one-party treatment groups. A difference in means test shows this to be statistically different ($p < 0.05$). For both treatment groups, the differences between the *Initial Rating* and *Final Rating* means are statistically different ($p < 0.01$).

Table 2: Respondent Feeling Thermometer Evaluations of Negative Ad Sponsor

	<i>N</i>	Initial Rating	Final Rating	Change
One-Party Races	167	64.8	53.5	-11.1
Two-Party Races	155	69.6	58.2	-10.5

Hypothesis 1 predicted that negative ads would lower respondent evaluations of the sponsor candidate similarly in both one-party and two-party contests. The results offer strong support to confirm this prediction. The *Change* column in Table 2 shows the mean shift in evaluation between measurements *before* and *after* the ad exposure. Mean evaluations of the sponsor lowered by 11.1 points in one-party contests and by 10.5 points in two-party contests, a difference in means that is not statistically significant ($p > 0.7$). There is no statistically significant difference between the change in respondent evaluations for the ad sponsor, regardless of whether the attack is launched against an out-party opponent or an in-party opponent. Regardless of whether party identification is made salient through a two-party contest, negativity lowers respondent evaluations of the ad sponsor by approximately 11 points across all treatment group.

This finding offers support to prior research that suggests that partisan voters do change their candidate evaluations in accordance with the *black sheep effect* when someone of their own party “crosses the line” with negative attacks. The novel contribution here is that there is no difference between whether the candidate is attacking somebody of the same

party or someone from another party. Put simply, respondents don't like to see candidates resort to character-based negativity in campaign communications. If there is no meaningful difference in the degree to which partisans lower evaluations of a candidate of their own party between one-party and two-party contests, the remaining question is how this lowered evaluation ultimately shapes voting behavior in both electoral contexts.

In addition to feeling thermometer evaluations, respondents were asked to make a voting decision based on the information provided about each candidate. Table 3 displays the *change* in the percentage of respondents that chose each candidate from *before* viewing the negative ad to *after* viewing the ad. For the ad sponsor, Derek Kilmer, the number of supporters declined by 7.4 percentage points after respondents viewed the ad when both candidates were of the *same* party. In contrast, when candidates were from *different* parties, the proportion of respondents supporting Kilmer only dropped by 2.7 percentage points. Thus, the drop in support for Kilmer after respondents viewed the ad that he sponsored was 4.7 percentage points larger in the one-party treatment when compared with the two-party treatment. The remaining rows of the table present the same details for the other three vote choice options offered to respondents: Jim Esch (ad target), Neither, or Not Sure. Starred rows in Table 3 indicate whether the difference in difference between the two treatment groups for that vote choice is statistically significantly different.

Table 3: Change in Vote Choice After Negative Ad Treatment

	1 Party	2 Parties
Vote Choice		
Derek Kilmer (<i>sponsor</i>)	- 7.4 PP	- 2.7 PP
Jim Esch (<i>target</i>)	- 11.6 PP	- 3.8 PP*
Neither	+4.8 PP	+3.2 PP
Not Sure	+14.3 PP	+4.8 PP*
	(N = 189)	(N = 186)

*p<.05

Hypothesis 2 predicted that the negative ad sponsor would lose more supporters in a one-party contest than in a two-party contest. Findings provide evidence to support this hypothesis, although the difference in differences does not reach the conventional threshold of statistical significance. Statistical significance is tested through permutation testing to determine whether that difference in differences is meaningfully different from random

assignment of the treatment variable (see Appendix B). Greater loss for the ad sponsor in a one-party contest fails to reach statistical significance at the conventional .05 level, however, it is worth noting that there is a sizable effect in the expected direction and suggests that the findings of this study warrant further research with a larger sample.

While these results suggest that respondents are more likely to abandon support for the negative ad sponsor in a one-party contest, the findings also demonstrate that voters are more likely to abandon support for the ad *target* in one-party contests. The targeted candidate lost 7.8 more percentage points in one-party races, which does reach statistical significance under permutation testing. When an ad says something negative about somebody's preferred candidate, that message is more effective when it comes from a source within the party than when it comes from a source within the rival party.

One critique of this experiment might be that it could be the case in a laboratory setting that respondents simply move their support arbitrarily from one candidate to the other in one-party treatment groups. Results in Table 3 show that this is not the case. Rather, the ad treatment is leaving voters with uncertainty because they are left with the choice between one candidate who sponsored a particularly nasty attack and another candidate who, as the ad claims, used poor judgment and was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol. Faced with this "lesser of two evils" choice and without a party cue to help them resolve it, a large number of respondents appear to be choosing simply not to choose either candidate. The one-party treatment group experienced a 14.3 percentage point *gain* in respondents in the *Not Sure* category, compared with a 4.8 percentage point gain in the two-party treatment group.

Discussion

Taken together, these findings provide evidence that the presence or absence of party competition cues will influence the way that voters respond to political messaging. When partisans use their social identity to view the contest through the lens of an "us" vs. "them" scenario, they are more likely to retain support for their initial candidate choice after view-

ing the ad treatment. It should be of no surprise that partisans exhibit motivated reasoning and motivated skepticism when making voting decisions in a two-party contest. Perhaps more compelling, however, is the finding that in a one-party setting, voters are more likely to punish both the sponsor and the target in response to content of the ad. When party identity no longer constrains respondents to maintain their support for their initial candidate choice, there is greater flexibility to alter behavior based on the ways that political messaging is perceived and less evidence of motivated reasoning in the interpretation of advertising content.

The present research also suggests the importance of source cues for respondent evaluations. When respondents who expressed their vote choice as support for the *target* candidate see attacks coming from the opposite party, they are less likely to abandon support for that candidate than if the attack is coming from the same party. This is important for developing a complete understanding the role of political messaging in primary contests, but not necessarily surprising. Although voters may be more willing to abandon support for an in-group candidate that attacks a copartisan, the attack is also more effective in eroding support for the target. It may be that these two mechanisms largely cancel each other out in terms of overall vote percentages earned by each candidate. More normatively troubling, especially in the context of the top-two primary where two candidates of the same party may face each other in the general election, is that single-party contests may ultimately lead to lower voter turnout as a result of these two mechanisms working together.

While the aforementioned findings have captured a meaningful increase of voter uncertainty in response to negative advertising in one-party contests, future research should improve upon this measurement by seeking to uncover *how* voters handle this uncertainty. It could be that when facing greater confusion that respondents will seek out additional distinguishing information about each candidate that may better direct an informed decision. Uncertainty may lead to less-informed decision-making processes, instead making choices based on varying idiosyncratic features of the contest. Perhaps most plausible is that excessive negativity in one-party races will ultimately lead voters to abstain from voting in that contest entirely. It could be the case that abstention in up-ballot, high-salience races could

have a trickle down effect for lower-ticket contests, ultimately having profound impacts for participation and outcomes far beyond the original scope of conflict.

There are limitations to the present research that deserve acknowledgment. A larger sample size in future studies will allow for a stronger test of the theory. Further, using a sample of university students enrolled in an introductory political science course may raise concerns for external validity when it's impossible for the sample to be representative of the American population as a whole. Further, it may be the case that the young age of the respondents may translate to partisan identifications that are not as strong or developed as would be found in a representative adult sample. If this is the case, however, then arguably this study has served as a conservative test of the hypotheses. Respondents with partisan identifications that have developed over the course of many years and through many election cycles would perhaps demonstrate a sharper difference between the intra-party and the inter-party treatment groups. Regardless, it is worth noting that past experimental studies have found no significant differences between samples of college students and nationally representative adult subjects (Druckman 2004; Marcus et al. 1995).

Further research would also be well served to investigate how respondent behavior is shaped further by the degree of ideological difference between the candidates. In other words, it may be important differences between how respondents perceive messaging when two candidates of the same party are ideologically similar versus when they are not. In other words, a contest between two ideologically-similar Republicans may elicit far different results than a contest between a moderate Republican and a Tea Party Republican. In the latter example, ideological distinctiveness between two copartisans may lead respondents to exhibit behavior closer to that of a two-party contest.

The novel contribution of the present research has been to demonstrate that partisanship conditions the way that people respond to negative attacks sponsored by in-group candidates. This study has investigated how the effects of negative advertising differ when respondents no longer interpret messaging through the lens of their party identification and offered evidence to confirm that the absence of party competition leads respondents to behave with *unconstrained backlash* against the ad sponsor. In contrast, when partisanship is

made salient in two-party contests, respondents show that they lower their evaluation of the negative ad sponsor but are unlikely to abandon support for their party.

Appendix A: Candidate Profiles

Fig. 3: Two-Party Candidate Profiles for Democratic Respondent



 <p>Derek Kilmer Democrat</p> <p>Pro-choice: Abortion should be safe, legal, and rare. Contraception should be provided by insurance providers.</p> <p>Climate Change: Climate change is a disastrous consequence of human activity. Congress must take action before it's too late.</p> <p>Jobs/Economy: We need real tax fairness that requires millionaires and billionaires to pay their fair share.</p>	 <p>Jim Esch Republican</p> <p>Pro-life: I am committed to protecting the rights of the unborn and reversing pro-abortion policies.</p> <p>Climate Change: Our planet is in a natural climate cycle. Proposals by environmentalists will further damage our struggling economy,</p> <p>Jobs/Economy: The government's role is to get out of the way, helping job creators and entrepreneurs by decreasing regulation.</p>
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Fig. 4: One-Party Candidate Profiles for Republican Respondents





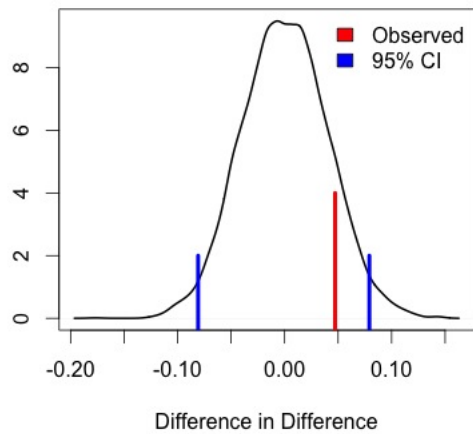
 <p>Derek Kilmer Republican</p> <p>Pro-life: Government employee insurance plans should not pay for contraception or abortions.</p> <p>Climate Change: Although we should be good environmental stewards, we must create policies under which businesses can thrive.</p> <p>Jobs/Economy: Cutting government spending will allow us to lower taxes on business that are the engine of our economy.</p>	 <p>Jim Esch Republican</p> <p>Pro-life: I am committed to protecting the rights of the unborn and reversing pro-abortion policies.</p> <p>Climate Change: Our planet is in a natural climate cycle. Proposals by environmentalists will further damage our struggling economy,</p> <p>Jobs/Economy: The government's role is to get out of the way, helping job creators and entrepreneurs by decreasing regulation.</p>
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Fig. 5: One-Party Candidate Profiles for Democratic Respondents

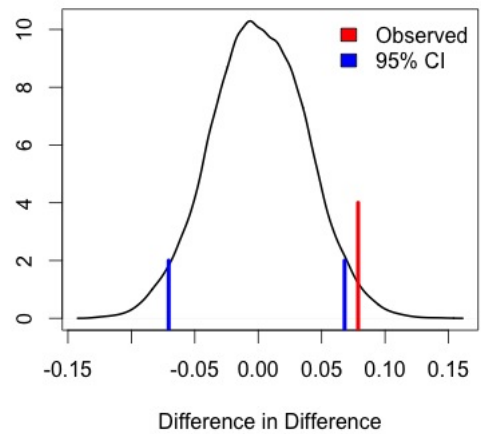
 <p>Derek Kilmer Democrat</p> <p>Pro-life: Women should be able to make reproductive and health care decisions without government interference.</p> <p>Climate Change: Government should offer tax incentives to consumers that encourages green technology that invest in green technology and</p> <p>Jobs/Economy: Raising the minimum wage will help working-class families make ends meet.</p>	 <p>Jim Esch Democrat</p> <p>Pro-choice: Abortion should be safe, legal, and rare. Contraception should be provided by insurance providers.</p> <p>Climate Change: Climate change is a disastrous consequence of human activity. Congress must take action before it's too late.</p> <p>Jobs/Economy: We need real tax fairness that requires millionaires and billionaires to pay their fair share.</p>
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Appendix B: Results from Permutation Testing

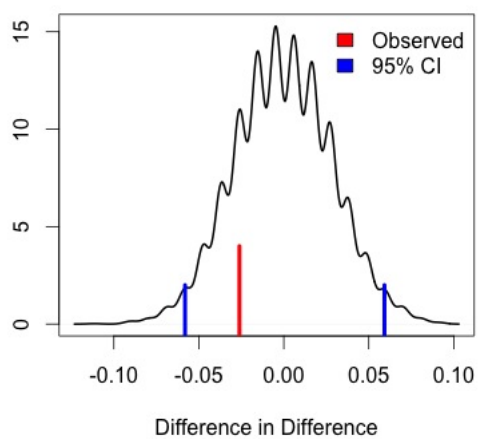
Permutation Test: Kilmer (Sponsor)



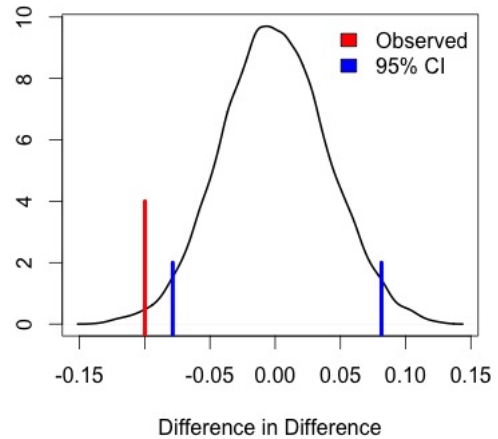
Permutation Test: Esch (Target)



Permutation Test: Neither



Permutation Test: Not Sure



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