Confirmation and the Effects of Valenced Political Advertising: A Field Experiment

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There are ongoing questions in the literature and in the field about why, in spite of voter dislike, negative advertising continues to get widespread usage in politics. In a field experiment that assessed responses to actual ads shortly before the 2004 U.S. presidential election, we found that negative advertising produced more critical responses than positive advertising even for the voters' favored candidate. Yet, our findings suggest that the effects of negative advertising are multidimensional; four different effects—reinforcement, backlash, defensive reactance, and position change—were identified. We discuss the costs and potential returns from these effects and the limitations of this study, and we propose directions for future research.

V oters have consistently reported a strong dislike for negative political advertising. Several studies suggest that negative ads reflect poorly on the sponsor (Hill 1989; Merritt 1984), do little to add constructively to candidate assessments (Lau et al. 1999), and may even suppress voter turnout (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Simon 1999). Yet others argue that negative ads are useful, effective, and beneficial to society (Geer 2006) and may even stimulate voter turnout (Goldstein and Freedman 2002). In either case, negative political advertising continues to be used widely (West 2005). The goal of this article is to explore and characterize the potential effects of negative advertising in a political context.

The notion that negative information may be disliked yet influential in consumer judgment is paradoxical. Yet, in spite of the affective response it creates, negative information is believed to be more attention getting, vivid, and memorable than is positive information—an effect well explained by figure-ground perceptual reasoning (Fiske 1980) and the uniqueness of negative information. In psychology, there is a well-developed literature that addresses negative and positive framing of information (Levin, Schneider, and Gaeth 1998). Framing studies typically compare messages that present the positive consequences of engaging in behavior (e.g., quitting smoking) against messages that promote the negative consequences of the opposite behavior (e.g., continuing to smoke). Negative-framing effects have been observed in both health and consumer advertising contexts, particularly when subjects are motivated to process new information (Block and Keller 1995; Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy 1990; Rothman et al. 1993; Shiv, Edell, and Payne 1997). This literature has also generalized framing to a sponsor-positive versus competitor-negative advertising format (Shiv, Edell Britton, and Payne 2004). Shiv et al. (2004) find that the combination of low processing motivation and high processing opportunity produces superior effects of a positively framed message, due to an unfavorable halo for the negative framing. Yet—in spite of that underlying heuristic—these authors find negative framing to be more effective than positive framing in influencing consumer attitudes toward the brand in all other conditions, especially when processing motivation is high.
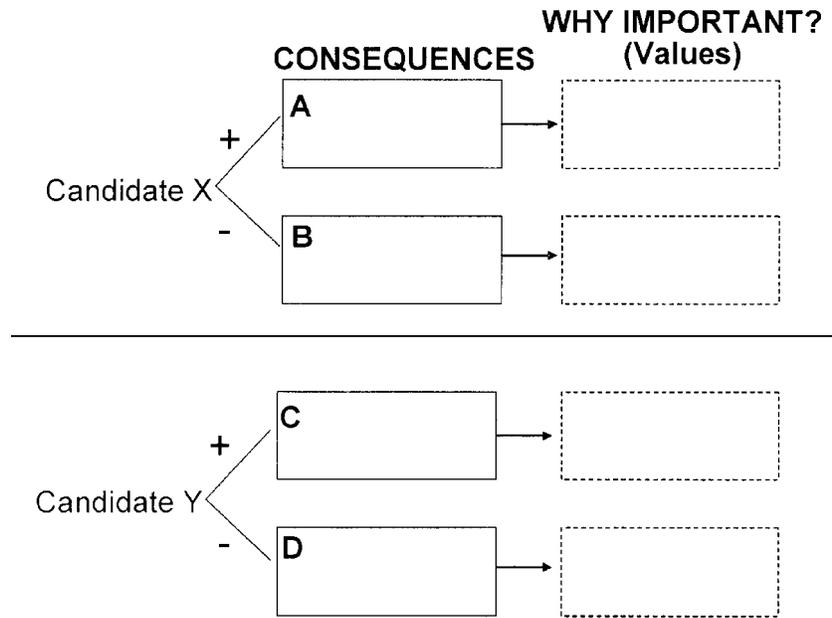
There is an interesting parallel in both the comparative advertising and the reference price literatures. Grewal et al.'s (1997) meta-analysis found that comparative ads are evaluated more negatively (as judged by attitude toward the ad) yet produce greater purchase intentions and actual purchase behavior relative to noncomparative ads. Research on reference price advertising similarly demonstrates that consumers may be quite skeptical of implausible comparative prices but

still use those reference prices to frame deal evaluations, search behavior, and choice (Compeau, Grewal, and Chandrashekaran 2002; Urbany, Bearden, and Weilbaker 1988). In sum, there appears to be firm ground for suggesting the possibility that advertising content can be disliked or disbelieved yet can still influence consumer attitudes and behavior.

In a political context, negative advertising involves one candidate criticizing another. A number of studies examine voter response to negative political ads experimentally (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991; Lau et al. 1999), demonstrating differential effects of positive and negative advertising but showing no definitive systematic effectiveness or ineffectiveness of negative advertising. Such mixed results could partly be a function of the interaction between advertising valence and prior candidate preferences, a point raised by Klein and Ahluwalia (2005). Specifically, their analyses of National Election Survey data suggest that negative ad effects may be limited to a "preaching to the choir" effect that simply reinforces the prior preferences of those who already dislike the candidate under attack.

This motivational perspective is important in understanding voters' response to negative advertising. It allows for a more complex view of balance or cognitive consistency in the assessment of new information, an issue of long conceptual and empirical importance (Hoch and Deighton 1989; Jonas et al. 2001; Nisbett and Ross 1980). Furthermore, unlike Klein and Ahluwalia (2005), the previous experimental studies of political advertising generally do not consider prior candidate preference (Chang 2003; Lau et al. 1999), nor do they examine conditions as highly involving

as a genuine presidential election is to registered voters. Here, we aim to fill this gap by obtaining detailed reactions to both positive and negative ads actually used in the 2004 U.S. presidential election from registered voters with clear prior preferences. The framework that follows suggests a variety of potential effects of both positive and negative advertising contingent upon whether the advertising confirms or disconfirms prior preferences.

CONFIRMATION

The unique insight introduced by Klein and Ahluwalia (2005) is based upon a motivational perspective that holds that voters' prior candidate preferences will largely determine reactions to subsequent information, be it negative or positive. In fact, this decision tendency has a strong theoretical grounding in a generation of work in psychology and behavioral decision theory, which finds that people tend to be selective in their use of information and evaluations in decision making (Bazerman 1994; Darley and Gross 1983; Nisbett and Ross 1980). A specific widespread decision tendency is confirmation, which is the propensity to seek and interpret information in a manner that reinforces an existing position. One way to characterize a confirmation tendency is captured in figure 1, which depicts the candidates as choice options with each option having positive and negative consequences, or "poles." At higher levels of abstraction, each pole is connected to the personal values believed to drive choice (Gutman 1982). The essence of confirmation—driven by the desire to maintain cognitive consistency—is reflected in the allocation of attention to the pos-

TABLE 1

FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANIZING ADVERTISING BY CONFIRMATION AND VALENCE

	Positive valence	Negative valence
Confirmatory advertising: Ad confirms prior candidate preferences	1. Ad promoting the preferred candidate *a*) + *Reinforcement*—positive preaching to the choir (e.g., strengthen support for preferred candidate)	2. Ad criticizing the nonpreferred candidate *a*) + *Reinforcement*—negative preaching to the choir (e.g., strengthen support for preferred candidate) *b*) − *Backlash*—reactance, migration toward opposing candidate (e.g., weaken support for preferred candidate)
Disconfirmatory advertising: Ad disconfirms prior candidate preferences	3. Ad promoting the nonpreferred candidate *a*) − *Discounting*—counterargue, discount ad arguments (e.g., strengthen support for preferred candidate) *b*) + *Position change*—elaborate on positives over negatives of opposing candidate (e.g., weaken support for preferred candidate)	4. Ad criticizing the preferred candidate *a*) − *Defensive reactance*—draw up defenses, strengthen support for opposing candidate (e.g., strengthen support for preferred candidate) *b*) + *Position change*—identify/acknowledge negatives of preferred candidate (e.g., weaken support for preferred candidate)

itive pole of the preferred option and the negative pole of the less preferred option.

Seeking information to confirm rather than disconfirm a prior hypothesis (Chapman and Chapman 1967) and purposeful exposure to priors-supporting information and discussion (Jonas et al. 2001) illustrate the tendency to focus on the positive pole of the preferred candidate. Those predisposed to a candidate will also be attentive to negative information about the other candidate (Sweeney and Gruber 1984). In combination, the focus on these selected poles (fig. 1, boxes A and D, for a candidate X supporter) reflects the natural motivation to maintain cognitive consistency by jointly seeking to confirm the validity of a preferred position and to disconfirm the validity of the opposing position (Tabor and Lodge 2006). The missing piece however, is understanding how new advertising information interacts with prior preferences and such a confirmation process.

To this end, table 1 offers a simple 2 × 2 matrix that distinguishes ads based upon the degree to which they confirm or disconfirm the voter's prior preferences and the valence of the ad. Each cell provides a summary of the expectations regarding the advertisements, suggesting a general main effect of confirmation and then simple main effects of valence within each level of confirmation.[1] We elaborate on these expectations next.

Confirmatory versus Disconfirmatory Advertising

Confirmatory information comes both in the form of positive advertising for the preferred candidate (table 1, cell 1), which appeals to the positive pole for that candidate, and negative advertising critical of the opponent (table 1, cell 2), which seeks to highlight the negative pole for the non-

preferred candidate. Confirmatory information should be perceived as relevant, reliable, and accepted at face value (Ahluwalia 2002). Evidence on the attention to and assimilation of positive priors-confirming information is abundant (Chapman and Chapman 1967; Dawar and Pillutla 2000; Snyder and Swann 1978; Vallone, Ross, and Lepper 1985). Lord, Ross, and Lepper's (1979) finding of biased assimilation, for example, suggests reinforcement by way of the positive pole of the preferred choice option, indicating that priors-confirming information is perceived to be substantially more convincing and valid than is priors-disconfirming information. At the same time, the tendency to attend to and integrate information about the negative pole of the opponent is well illustrated by Sweeney and Gruber's (1984) finding in the 1972 U.S. presidential election that McGovern supporters tended to be much more likely than Nixon supporters to seek out, discuss, recall, and act on information about the Watergate scandal. The other side of biased assimilation is that disconfirmatory information is discounted or simply rejected (Dawar and Pillutla 2000). This conjecture is a cognitive consistency account in which people engage defense mechanisms (Ahluwalia 2002; Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001), particularly in a context as involving as presidential politics (Rothschild 1978). Consistent with this literature, we anticipate finding a significant main effect of confirmation such that confirmatory ads (table 1, cells 1 and 2) should evoke more support arguments and fewer counterarguments, evoke more positive evaluations, and more likely be integrated into decision making than advertising that disconfirms prior preferences (table 1, cells 3 and 4).

Effects of Positive and Negative Confirmatory Advertising

A wide empirical literature finds that compared with positive information, negative information is more influential

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[1]This framework is similar to one offered by Dawar and Pillutla (2000) in their study of the interaction between prior beliefs about a firm and the firm's response to a product crisis in determining brand equity.

in the initial formation of judgments and is more likely to change existing impressions (Lau 1982, 1985). Consistent with this, conventional thinking from political consultants holds that negative information is absorbed more deeply and retained better than is positive information (Pfau and Kenski 1990). Yet, it is not clear that there will be a difference in effect between negative and positive confirmatory advertising. On one hand, negative ads may more powerfully influence judgment and decision making when information is priors confirming (Klein and Ahluwalia 2005). On the other hand, processing that is motivated by the maintenance of prior beliefs may find an ad that highlights the preferred candidate's positives to be equally as influential as an ad pointing out the opponent's negatives since weighting is a function of the degree of confirmation (Darley and Gross 1983). That is, information that passes the test of confirmation, whether negative or positive, may be quickly assimilated into priors, independent of its valence. Therefore, for ads that confirm the voter's prior preferences, we predict that confirmation will tend to dominate valence in determining advertising response.

> **H1:** For ads that confirm the voter's prior preferences, valence will not influence how the ad is processed, evaluated, or integrated into decision making. This suggests no difference between cells 1 and 2 in table 1 on these measures.

Effects of Positive and Negative Disconfirmatory Advertising

Similarly, we might conjecture that disconfirmatory advertising would be discounted or rejected, regardless of valence (Dawar and Pillutla 2000). However, there is perhaps a stronger case for expecting differential effects of negative and positive appeals for disconfirmatory ads for two reasons. First is consumers' (often intense) dislike of negative advertising; second is the degree of personal threat reflected in ads that criticize a preferred candidate. An ad that is pro-opponent praises the nonpreferred candidate, touting that candidate's positive qualities. Counterarguing a pro-opponent ad involves challenging the opponent. Such an ad might be considered uncongenial in the strict sense (Eagly et al. 2000) yet more passive in that the voters' values are not being attacked directly. In contrast, negative ads that criticize a voter's preferred candidate may be perceived as attacking the voter's value system, considering that candidate preference is determined at least partly by a felt match between personal ideology and identification with the party and the candidate (Alwitt, Deighton, and Grimm 1991). So, rather than simply being discounted and discarded from consideration, disconfirmatory negative ads may evoke deeper elaboration in the form of counterargumentation and defense than do disconfirmatory positive ads (Lord et al. 1979; Tabor and Lodge 2006).

> **H2:** Valence will matter for disconfirmatory advertising as a more intense reaction is expected for

negative over positive disconfirmatory ads in the form of greater counterargumentation (fewer support arguments), lower ad evaluations, and less integration into decision making. This suggests a difference between cells 3 and 4 in table 1 on these measures.

FIELD EXPERIMENT

Our preelection study was designed to investigate both the interpretations of advertising and the decision making of voters immediately prior to an election in which prior preferences were clearly formed. Two frequently debated issues surrounding U.S. presidential elections have been the use of negative ads and the potential impact of young (age 18–24) newly registered voters. Postelection analysis revealed the growing importance of this segment of the electorate. While voter turnout for the 2004 election was up 4% from 2000 overall, the jump for young voters aged 18–24 was 11% and represented 9.3% of the 125.7 million votes cast. In addition, turnout among young (age 18–24) college-educated voters (59%) was nearly twice that of their non-college-attending peers (33.7%; Lopez, Kirby, and Sagoff 2005). Furthermore, research by Lopez et al. (2005) and Niemi and Hanmer (2004) suggests that young voters were deeply engaged in the election; their national study found that 85% of college students avidly followed the campaign, 88% were registered, and 88% of the registered voters actually voted—that is, 77% of college-educated 18–24-year-olds who were registered cast a vote in the 2004 election, compared to 64% of registered voters as a whole. It is this segment, young college-educated voters, which serves as our sample.

Participants

One hundred sixty-eight marketing majors at the University of Notre Dame participated in this study from mid- to late October 2004. Seven of the 168 participants were non-U.S. citizens and ineligible to vote. Of the 161 U.S. citizens, 145 (90%) were registered and eligible to vote in the November 2004 election. Only these 145 registered voters are included in the following analysis. Our group of registered voters had a median age of 21 (range 19–23) and was 63% female. Fifty-one percent were from Blue states, and 49% from Red states; overall, they hailed from 33 states and two foreign countries. Ninety-three percent indicated a definite intention to vote. While a convenience sample in the traditional research sense, this sample is representative of an important voting segment.

Procedure

Participants registered online 1 week prior to the study. In addition to demographic and voter eligibility information, the form asked "What position on the scale below reflects your likelihood of support for the major party candidates in the

upcoming presidential election?" This conventional voting intention question used a seven-point scale with ordered response options that included definitely Bush, most likely Bush, leaning toward Bush, undecided, leaning toward Kerry, most likely Kerry, definitely Kerry. The order of candidates was random.

Participants first met in a large room for instructions. They were told that this was a study about decision making in the presidential election and were given an overview of the hour-long session. After instructions, participants were randomly assigned to one of four rooms to see either a negative or a positive ad for one of the two presidential candidates. Upon entering their assigned room, participants were given a questionnaire booklet, answered demographic questions, and were shown one of the four 30-second television ads. After viewing the ad, participants engaged in a thought-listing task and then answered several items that assessed their perception of the viewed ad. They then reassembled in the larger room for the decision-mapping task.

To provide detailed insight into participants' decision considerations, a simple sequential decision-making protocol was presented next. Protocol techniques, including thought listings, have long been used to gain insight into peoples' cognitive and decision-making processes. Several studies suggest that articulation of task-related thoughts does not change the accuracy of the performance for well-defined tasks (Ericsson and Simon 1993). The protocol technique used for this study was based upon laddering (Reynolds and Gutman 1988), a technique that has been used widely in marketing to understand both voter and consumer decision making (Reynolds and Phillips 2008). This protocol provided a five-step process for participants to elaborate on the factors that they considered in their decision and why those factors were important:

1. Determine choice options.
2. Make a list of all considerations in the choice.
3. From the list of considerations, select and record the outcomes for each option.
4. Record the reasons why the outcome for each is important to you or not.
5. Review the map and choose.

The map referred to a diagram that participants were instructed to fill in with their decision considerations. Following instruction, an illustrative application, and a practice decision, participants were then asked to apply the decision model to choose between the Republican incumbent, George W. Bush, and the Democratic challenger, John Kerry.

Once the participants had completed mapping their decisions, they selected the candidate for whom they intended to vote and listed their key decision driver. They subsequently responded to the same vote intention question that they had answered during registration, using the same seven-point scale. The order of the candidates was counterbalanced across participants throughout the questionnaire.

Design

There were two between-subject manipulations representing a 2 (ad valence: positive vs. negative) × 2 (confirmation: priors confirming vs. priors disconfirming) factorial design.

Ad Valence: Positive versus Negative. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of four candidate-sponsored television ads selected by an advertising expert who was blind to the hypotheses. All ads were paid for by the candidate and included the candidate saying, "I'm candidate X, and I approved this message." None of the ads was a third-party, or 527, ad. As these were actual ads, it was not possible to hold everything about each ad constant. Our primary objective was to ensure that dominant issues (i.e., terrorism and the Iraq War) and traits (i.e., leadership style) were similarly mentioned and balanced. Participants were also given a transcript of the ad. None of the ads was being broadcast at the time of the study. A pretest confirmed equality of the ads across candidates on valence: the two positive ads were found to be equally positive ($F(1,8) < 1$, $p = .49$), and the two negative ads were equally negative ($F(1,8) < 1$, $p = .65$). In addition, the positive ads scored higher on our bipolar valence items than did the negative ads ($F(1,18) > 62$, $p < .001$). We also confirmed the equivalence of ad strength between the positive and negative ads ($F(1,18) = 1.03$, $p = .32$) and that the ads within each valence condition were equally strong ($F(1,8) < 2.5$, $p = .15$).

Confirmation. This factor is based upon a participant's response to the initial vote intention question. We distinguished between voters who saw ads that were priors confirming and those who saw ads that were priors disconfirming. Those reporting definitely, most likely, and leaning toward a candidate were counted as having a prior preference for that candidate. Nine undecided voters are not included in the analysis.

MEASURES

Advertising Reactions

Thought Listing. Participants listed an average of 4.89 reactions, and overall the number of thoughts listed did not differ by ad valence ($M_{Pos} = 4.93$ vs. $M_{Neg} = 4.85$; $F(1,143) < 1$, $p = .79$). Two coders, blind to the experimental conditions, independently coded thoughts as support arguments/source bolstering, counterarguments/source derogations, questioning, positive, negative, or neutral (Wright 1973). Coder agreement averaged 87% (reliability index $I_r = .92$; Perreault and Leigh 1989). Differences were resolved by discussion.

Ad Valence and Persuasion. After the thought-listing task, participants responded to items evaluating ad valence and persuasiveness, using seven-point bipolar scales. Principal components analysis confirmed two factors. The valence factor contained three items measuring how positive,

hopeful, and optimistic the ad was, and our ad valence measure was computed by averaging the scores for these items ($\alpha = .90$; 1 = negative and 7 = positive). The persuasion factor contained six items measuring how persuasive, strong, convincing, effective, accurate, and informative the ad was, and our persuasion measure was computed by averaging the scores for these items ($\alpha = .93$; 1 = unpersuasive and 7 = persuasive).

Perceived Influence of Advertising. Participants answered three questions about the degree of influence an ad similar to the one they just saw would have on them and on a typical voter's choice of candidate. As these items used different scale lengths, they were first standardized and then averaged ($\alpha = .75$).

Decision Making

Decision Driver Reflected in Ad. To examine the impact that the ad may have had on the voter's decision making, we compared the traits and issues presented in the viewed ad with the key decision driver the participant listed in the decision-making task. Four coders independently reviewed each of the four ads and identified all of the issues, traits, and values directly stated or implied in the visual content of each ad. After discussion, the coders prepared a comprehensive list of all issues, traits, and values that were stated or implied in each ad. Then two coders, blind to the hypotheses, determined whether the participant's key decision driver was stated or implied in the viewed ad. Coders agreed on 89% of the judgments; differences were resolved by discussion. Overall, 59.3% of the participants listed a decision driver that was reflected in the ad.

Candidate Choice. This variable captures the actual vote in the experimental context; it is a dichotomous measure taken at the conclusion of the decision-mapping task that represents whether the participant intended to vote for the candidate sponsoring the ad. Overall, 45.5% of our participants voted for the ad's sponsor; 53.1% voted for the other candidate.

Migration of Vote Intention. Using the seven-point scale (1 = definitely Bush; 7 = definitely Kerry), we measured participants' voting intention twice: (1) 1 week prior to the study at registration and (2) in the final section of the questionnaire following all the other tasks. Migration is a dichotomous indicator of whether participants changed their voting intention in the latter measure compared to the measure taken the week before. Twenty-four (16.6%) of the 145 registered voters had a vote intention that migrated. In addition, our directional measure distinguishes voters who (1) migrated against the ad (e.g., backlash-weakening support for Bush after viewing an anti-Kerry ad, or defensive reactance-strengthening support for Kerry after viewing an anti-Kerry ad), (2) migrated with the ad (e.g., reinforcement-strengthening support for Bush after viewing an anti-Kerry ad, or position change-weakening support for Kerry after viewing an anti-Kerry ad), or (3) did not migrate. Note that with

respect to negative ads, the costs of attacking occur when voters migrate against the ad (i.e., table 1, cells 2b and 4a); potential gains of attacking occur when voters migrate with the ad (i.e., table 1, cells 2a and 4b).

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

Ad Valence. Using the ad valence scale described above, we confirm the results of our pretest as the two positive ads were evaluated as being uniformly positive (1 = negative and 7 = positive; $M_{pro-B} = 5.39$ vs. $M_{pro-K} = 5.81$; $F(1, 70) = 2.02$, $p = .16$), and each positive ad significantly more positive than each negative ad ($F(1, 70) > 70.00$, $p < .001$). However, counter to our pretest results, Bush's anti-Kerry ad was perceived as being more negative ($M_{anti-B} = 3.05$ vs. $M_{anti-K} = 2.37$; $F(1, 71) = 8.59$, $p < .01$). We followed this test by examining the mean number of counterarguments/source derogations ($M_{anti-B} = 2.58$ vs. $M_{anti-K} = 3.31$; $F(1, 71) = 2.56$, $p = .11$) and negative statements ($M_{anti-B} = .21$ vs. $M_{anti-K} = .20$; $F(1, 71) < 1$, $p = .93$) made for each of the two negative ads and the mean number of support arguments/source bolstering ($M_{pro-B} = 1.41$ vs. $M_{pro-K} = 1.51$; $F(1, 70) < 1$, $p = .76$) and positive statements ($M_{pro-B} = .43$ vs. $M_{pro-K} = .23$; $F(1, 70) < 1$, $p = .35$) made for each of the two positive ads. None of these comparisons was significant. Also, the proportion of decision drivers that reflected ad content did not differ between the positive ads ($M_{pro-B} = 48.6\%$ vs. $M_{pro-K} = 40.0\%$; $z = .73$, $p = .46$) or between the negative ads ($M_{anti-B} = 76.3\%$ vs. $M_{anti-K} = 71.4\%$; $z = .48$, $p = .63$). As our analyses combine the ads for the two candidates into each of the valence conditions (i.e., the anti-Bush and anti-Kerry ads are combined to create the negative ad condition), we deem this manipulation acceptable.

Overall Election Results. While our participants favored Bush (60%) over Kerry (38.6%) by a wider margin than occurred in the general election, which held a 51% to 48% advantage for Bush, our results are in line with national percentages when additional demographic factors such as college major (i.e., business), race (i.e., white), parents' household income (i.e., high), and religion (i.e., Catholic/Christian with weekly church attendance) are considered as approximately 60% of voters within these groups favored Bush (CNN 2004; Niemi and Hanmer 2004).

Overall Analysis

Tables 2 and 3 present a summary of the overall experimental effects. The primary dependent variables are listed across the columns. Table 2 captures reactions to the advertising that participants saw, which were analyzed via ANOVA. These analyses were followed with additional tests of our planned contrasts. Table 3 reflects the categorical measures related to decision making; we used logit analysis to examine these effects. Because the contingency tables for

TABLE 2

EXPERIMENTAL EFFECTS: ANOVA

	Information processing				Evaluation			
	(1) Support arguments		(2) Counterarguments		(3) Ad persuasiveness		(4) Ad influence	
Measure	$F(1, 132)$	η^2	$F(1, 132)$	η^2	$F(1, 132)$	η^2	$F(1, 132)$	η^2
Ad valence (*V*)	24.40**	.16	18.60**	.12	12.73**	.09	2.78+	.02
Confirmation (*C*)	48.21**	.27	49.60**	.27	119.60**	.48	11.97**	.08
Interaction (*V* × *C*)	5.79*	.04	.04	.00	2.57	.02	5.75*	.04
Adjusted R^2	.33		.31		.48		.11	

+$p \leq .10$.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .001$.

TABLE 3

EXPERIMENTAL EFFECTS: LOGIT ANALYSIS

	Decision making							
	(1) Decision driver reflects ad content		(2) Migration (Δ vote intention)		(3) Migrated with the ad[a]		(4) Migrated against the ad[a]	
Measure	β	e^{β}	β	e^{β}	β	e^{β}	β	e^{β}
Intercept	2.56*** (.73)	12.94	−3.13*** (.62)	.04	−3.60*** (.83)	.03	−4.58*** (1.15)	.01
Ad valence (*negative*)	−.99 (.86)	.37	1.29** (.56)	3.63	1.84** (.81)	6.30	.90 (.77)	2.46
Confirmation (*disconfirmatory*)	−4.76*** (.90)	.01	.88+ (.54)	2.41	.31 (.66)	1.36	2.10* (1.09)	8.17
Interaction (*negative* × *disconfirmatory*)	3.75*** (1.07)	42.52	NS		NS		NS	

NOTE.—SEs are in parentheses; e^{β} = odds.
[a]Reference category: did not migrate.
+$p \leq .10$.
*$p < .055$.
**$p < .05$.
***$p < .001$.

the candidate choice and the three migration models each had a zero cell (e.g., no voters migrated in the confirmatory positive ad condition), a small constant (.5) was added to fit the saturated model (Agresti 1990, 249–50). The interaction was not significant in any of these saturated models, and these findings were not sensitive to the size of the constant. Therefore, we report the results of the unsaturated models for these dependent variables in table 3. Table 4 presents the means for our dependent variables by experimental condition.

Hypothesis Tests

Confirmatory versus Disconfirmatory Advertising. Our results are consistent with the confirmation literature as tables 2 and 3 show main effects of confirmation on nearly every dependent variable. Participants who saw an ad that confirmed their prior vote intention generated more support arguments ($M_{Con} = 1.71$ vs. $M_{Dis} = .48$; $F(1, 134) = 34.71$, $p < .001$) and fewer counterarguments ($M_{Con} = 1.52$ vs. $M_{Dis} = 3.37$; $F(1, 134) = 39.12$, $p < .001$) and gave higher ad evaluations (M's perceived persuasion, $M_{Con} = 4.48$ vs. $M_{Dis} = 2.63$; $F(1, 134) =$

103.00, $p < .001$; M's perceived influence, $M_{Con} = .23$ vs. $M_{Dis} = -.21$; $F(1, 134) = 10.35$, $p < .01$) than did those who saw a disconfirmatory ad. Similarly, participants' priors dominated candidate choice. Participants decided upon the candidate in the forced choice in a manner entirely consistent with their earlier expressed voting intention. This reflects the strength of those prior preferences shortly before the election. Regarding the other measures of decision making (table 3), participants seeing a confirmatory ad were much more likely to report a decision driver that was reflected in the ad ($M_{Con} = 87.3\%$ vs. $M_{Dis} = 34.2\%$; $z = 6.27$, $p < .001$) and were significantly less likely to weaken their support for their candidate by migrating against the ad ($M_{Con} = 1.7\%$ vs. $M_{Dis} = 10.4\%$; $z = 1.99$, $p = .02$). In sum, these results support the expectation that relative to disconfirmatory ads, confirmatory ads are processed differently (i.e., less counterargumentation), are evaluated more positively, and are more likely to be integrated into decision making.

Hypothesis 1: Effect of Valence when Advertising Confirms Priors. Since confirmatory ads validate priors regardless of valence, we hypothesized that confirmation

TABLE 4

EXPERIMENTAL MEANS

Measure	Priors confirming advertising		Priors disconfirming advertising	
	Positive ad (n = 28)	Negative ad (n = 35)	Positive ad (n = 40)	Negative ad (n = 33)
No. of support arguments	2.50^A	1.09^{B*}	.70^{B*}	.21^C
No. of counterarguments	.82^A	2.09^B	2.85^C	4.00^D
Ad persuasion scale	4.98^A	4.08^B	2.79^{C,D*}	2.44^{D*}
Ad influence scale	.53^A	−.02^{B*}	−.26^{B*}	−.16^B
Candidate choice (% choosing ad sponsor)	100.0^A	100.0^A	.0^B	.0^B
Decision driver reflects ad content (%)	92.9^A	82.9^A	10.0^B	63.6^C
Migration of voting intention (%)	.0^A	17.1^B	12.5^{B*}	24.2^{B*}
Positive migration with ad (%)	.0^A	14.7^B	5.4^{A,B}	13.8^B
Negative migration against ad (%)	.0^{A*}	3.3^{A,B*}	7.9^{A*}	13.8^{B*}

NOTE.—Reading across the rows, means with the same superscript are not significantly different.
*$p < .10$, one-tailed; otherwise differences are significant at $p < .05$.

would trump valence and that there should be little difference in voter processing of and reaction to positive and negative ads that confirm prior preferences. As noted above, this hypothesis holds true at the extreme for candidate choice as 100% of those seeing an ad for their preferred candidate voted for that candidate regardless of valence. Contrary to our hypothesis, however, valence does seem to affect how ads that confirm prior preferences are processed and evaluated. Confirmatory positive ads generated more support arguments ($M_{ConPos} = 2.50$ vs. $M_{ConNeg} = 1.09$; $F(1,61) = 15.09$, $p < .001$) and fewer counterarguments ($M_{ConPos} = .82$ vs. $M_{ConNeg} = 2.09$; $F(1,61) = 13.21$, $p < .001$) than did confirmatory negative ads. Positive ads that confirmed prior preferences were also evaluated more highly; they were perceived to be both more persuasive ($M_{ConPos} = 4.98$ vs. $M_{ConNeg} = 4.08$; $F(1,61) = 11.20$, $p < .001$) and more influential ($M_{ConPos} = .53$ vs. $M_{ConNeg} = -.02$; $F(1,61) = 6.47$, $p = .01$) than were the confirmatory negative ads.

Despite the more negative assessment of the negative ads in the information processing and ad evaluation measures, ad valence generally did not affect decision making when the ad was confirmatory. As noted, all of the respondents who saw confirmatory ads chose the candidate sponsoring the ad in the forced choice. Further, the percentage of participants who reported a decision driver that appeared in their ad did not differ for positive and negative ads ($M_{ConPos} = 92.9\%$ vs. $M_{ConNeg} = 82.9\%$; $z = 1.19$, $p = .24$). Yet, our final measure does show an interesting main effect of ad valence on migration. Specifically, we found that confirmatory negative advertising led a significantly higher percentage of voters to migrate than did confirmatory positive advertising ($M_{ConNeg} = 17.1\%$ vs. $M_{ConPos} = 0\%$; $z = 2.30$, $p = .02$).

In sum, participants were less favorably disposed toward negative advertising, even when it came from their preferred candidate. The positive and negative ads were processed and evaluated very differently, with negative advertising getting greater scrutiny and being perceived as less effective. At the same time, these more negative evaluations did not

hinder participants from voting for the preferred candidate as prior preferences dominated candidate choice regardless of valence. Yet confirmatory negative ads produced greater migration of voting intentions than did confirmatory positive ads. We elaborate on this result in the section below, as additional insight emerges from drilling down into the directions that participants migrated.

Hypothesis 2: Effect of Valence when Advertising Disconfirms Priors. For ads that disconfirmed prior preferences, we hypothesized that valence would matter since a more intense reaction is likely for a negative ad that criticizes a candidate with whom the voter shares beliefs, as opposed to advertising that promotes the nonpreferred candidate's positives. As with the confirmatory ads, valence did affect how the disconfirmatory ad was processed. Negative ads that disconfirmed prior candidate preferences generated more counterarguments ($M_{DisNeg} = 4.00$ vs. $M_{DisPos} = 2.85$; $F(1,71) = 7.35$, $p < .01$) and fewer support arguments ($M_{DisNeg} = .21$ vs. $M_{DisPos} = .70$; $F(1,71) = 8.06$, $p < .01$) than did the positive ads. In addition, disconfirmatory negative ads were perceived as somewhat less persuasive than their positive counterparts ($M_{DisNeg} = 2.44$ vs. $M_{DisPos} = 2.79$; $F(1,71) = 2.31$, $p < .07$, one-tailed test). Interestingly, however, it appears that disconfirmation wiped out any effects of valence on perceived ad influence ($M_{DisNeg} = -.16$ vs. $M_{DisPos} = -.26$; $F(1,71) < 1$, $p = .56$), suggesting that participants felt the ad for the nonpreferred candidate had little influence (likely a floor effect), regardless of valence.

Consistent with earlier results, disconfirmation dominated valence in the forced choice vote, as no one who saw an ad sponsored by the nonpreferred candidate voted for that candidate, regardless of valence. However, we do find that valence does affect other decision-making measures. Content from disconfirmatory negative ads was substantially more likely to be reflected in the voter's decision driver than was content from disconfirmatory positive ads ($M_{DisNeg} = 63.6\%$ vs. $M_{DisPos} = 10.0\%$; $z = 4.80$, $p < .001$). In addition, consistent with the overall main effect of valence, there

FIGURE 2

MIGRATION OF VOTE INTENTION

Panel A. Confirmatory ad

Panel B. Disconfirmatory ad
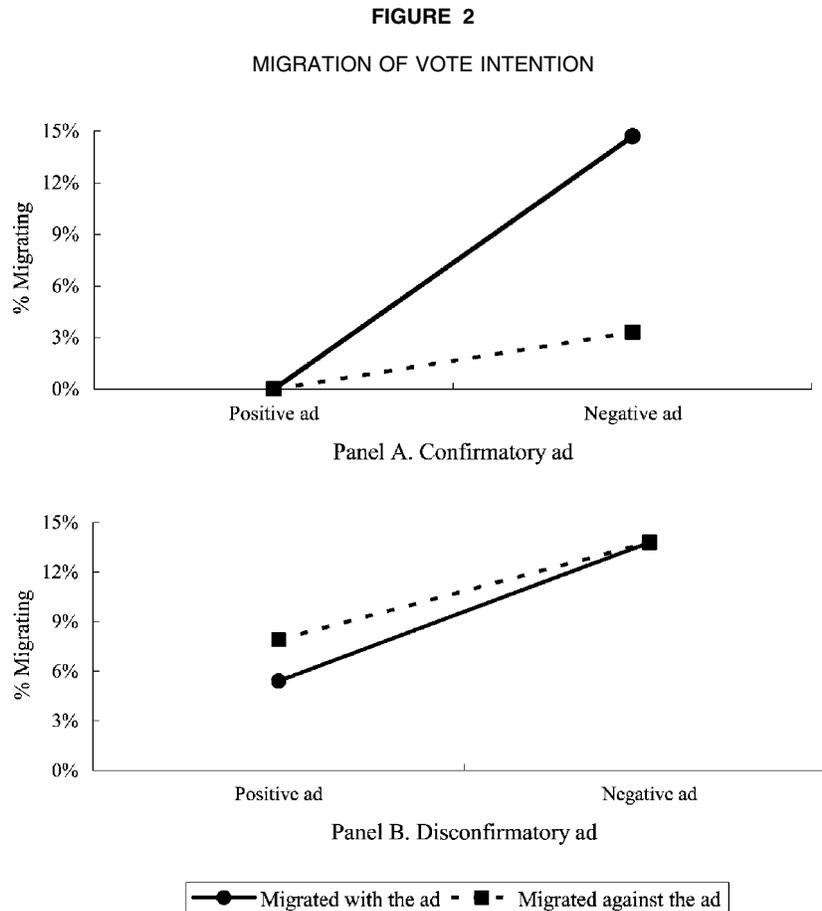
was marginally more migration in response to the disconfirmatory negative ad than for the disconfirmatory positive ad ($M_{DisNeg} = 24.2\%$ vs. $M_{DisPos} = 12.5\%$; $z = 1.30$, $p < .10$, one-tailed test). We elaborate on these findings next.

Exploring Decision Making

Decision Driver Reflects Ad Content. This measure captures the predominant top-of-mind factor that participants provided in explaining their decision and whether this factor reflected arguments raised in the ad. As expected and noted above, confirmatory ads are far more likely than disconfirmatory ads to motivate mention of factors that were reflected in the ad the voter saw as 87.3% of those seeing a confirmatory ad reported a decision driver that reflected ad content. We expected and observed a far lower incidence for the disconfirmatory ads (34.2%), and indeed, the incidence drops to 10% for the disconfirmatory positive ad. Interestingly, though, almost two-thirds (63.6%) of participants who saw a disconfirmatory negative ad reported a decision driver that was reflected in the ad content. A deeper review of the open ends for these voters revealed substantial counterarguing that involved defending the preferred candidate against claims in the negative ad. For example, an ad that challenged one candidate's leadership ability prompted

a voter who preferred that candidate to elaborate specifically on why that candidate was a strong leader. Many of these comments also appeared ego defensive as participants defended personal beliefs or party doctrine. Hence, it was clear that negative ads challenging a preferred candidate have the potential to strengthen the voter's resolve for that candidate (table 1, cell 4a, defensive reactance; Tabor and Lodge 2006).

Migration. Overall, negative ads were significantly more likely to generate migration of vote intention than were positive ads—independent of confirmation (table 3, col. 2). However, this result cannot be fully understood without exploring the direction of migration. We should note that movement of voters' intentions even a single point is considered to be important over time (Kalwani and Silk 1982) and that the candidate sponsoring the ad seeks to motivate voters to move toward supporting his/her candidacy, rather than away.

To explore the directional results of migration (table 3, cols. 3 and 4), we depict the percentages for each experimental condition in figure 2. Panel A demonstrates that when ads confirmed priors, the effect of a negative valence was largely to strengthen voters' resolve for the candidate. Interestingly, the confirmatory positive ads produced no mi-

gration, while the confirmatory negative ads led a significant proportion, 14.7% ($z = 2.42$, $p = .02$), to strengthen support by migrating with the ad. This is consistent with a reinforcement effect (table 1, cell 1a). A nonsignificant proportion (3.3%; $z = 1.02$, $p = .31$), apparently reacting to their preferred candidate's negative ad, migrated against the ad, thereby weakening their support. This is consistent with a backlash effect (table 1, cell 2b).

For the disconfirmatory ads (fig. 2, panel B), we find that negative ads produced marginally more migration than positive ads. Overall, disconfirmatory positive ads resulted in only weak migration effects. A small, but nonsignificant, proportion (5.4%; $z = 1.44$, $p = .15$) seemed to respond to the positive claims in the nonpreferred candidate's ad and weakened their support for their preferred candidate. This is consistent with a position change effect (table 1, cell 3b). In contrast, we observed a marginally significant discounting effect (table 1, cell 3a; 7.9%; $z = 1.80$, $p = .07$). Apparently, these voters counterargued and discounted the positive claims made in the nonpreferred candidate's ad and strengthened their support for their preferred candidate.

In regard to disconfirmatory negative ads, as we might anticipate from the earlier results on participants counterarguing these ads, we find that a significant proportion, 13.8% ($z = 2.13$, $p = .03$), migrated against such ads, strengthening their support for their preferred candidate under attack (table 1, cell 4a, defensive reactance). Yet, what distinguishes these results is that the same significant percentage (13.8%; $z = 2.13$, $p = .03$) of voters seeing the disconfirmatory negative ad actually migrated with the ad (table 1, cell 4b, position change). Somewhat unexpectedly, some voters seemed to acknowledge negatives about their preferred candidate and actually migrated their voting intentions in the direction of a negative ad that criticized their preferred candidate. Note that for confirmatory ads (fig. 2, panel A) the effect of the negative ads was almost entirely priors strengthening (rather than priors weakening). In contrast, when the ad is disconfirmatory (fig. 2, panel B) the negative ad produces priors strengthening and priors weakening in equal measure (13.8%).

DISCUSSION

In this field study of young college-educated registered voters, the negative and positive ads seemed to evoke very different reactions independent of prior preferences, suggesting a general disdain for negative advertising. Even for a candidate's supporters, a negative or anti-opponent ad was more likely to be counterargued and deemed less persuasive and influential than was a positive procandidate version. Yet overall, negative advertising seemed to prompt more migration of vote intention, surprisingly both counter to and in the direction of the ad. Our design allowed for the disaggregation of these effects—reinforcement, backlash, defensive reactance, position change—thereby providing insight into how voters may integrate negative advertising with their prior preferences. These findings allow for a preliminary

assessment of the costs of and potential returns from negative advertising organized around the table 1 framework.

The Costs of Negative Advertising

The effect of negative advertising is neither simple nor unidimensional. The downsides are two: first, it may lead to backlash among current supporters, who, perhaps based on principle, personal distaste for negative advertising, or both, may revise their opinions of the preferred candidate (table 1, cell 2b). Second, it may lead voters in the other camp to draw up defenses and strengthen their positions (table 1, cell 4a, defensive reactance)—perhaps rendering these voters less likely to be changed or won over by the sponsor's future ads. Although theoretically expected, this strengthening (i.e., attitude polarization) has generally been elusive as few studies have sufficiently aroused partisan motivation, created stimuli that elicited strong responses, or both (Tabor and Lodge 2006). While defensive reactance was the more common effect here, it may be a less serious cost as it simply reflects a strengthening in position of voters who were likely lost to the opponent anyway. Alternatively, if such defensive reactance influences voter turnout, the costs to the sponsor could be more significant. That is, anger generated by negative ads might mobilize the opponent's supporters to turn out in larger numbers than they might have had their preferred candidate not been attacked or criticized (Goldstein and Freedman 2002). In contrast, the backlash effect is potentially a very significant cost, as it could reflect the loss of established votes (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991). Theory would hold that this effect would be based upon some inferential or attributional mechanism, although its precipitators (e.g., consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency; Kelley 1973) need further study.

The Potential Returns from Negative Advertising

Potential gains from using negative ads are reflected in the positive slopes in the figure 2 graphs that represent migration with the ad. There are two separate effects conditioned on prior preferences. Negative ads had a significant advantage over positive ads in reinforcing and increasing the commitment of voters who support the candidate sponsoring the ad (table 1, cell 2a vs. 1a). As Klein and Ahluwalia (2005, 140) note, this may be a less effective use of advertising dollars as it simply reflects the reinforcement of a position already established; however, as presidential coattail effects frequently benefit same-party candidates running for lower office (Campbell 1991), the gain to the party from such a reinforcement effect may actually be more widespread. At the same time, negative ads had a position change effect for some who initially opposed the candidate (table 1, cell 4b; fig. 2, panel B). This is perhaps the most interesting result of the study as the size of this effect is essentially the same as the reinforcement effect (13.8% vs. 14.7%; $z = .10$, $p = .92$).

There are likely a variety of drivers of position change, and we would expect those drivers to be more at work during

a time when voters' opinions are less well formed than so close to the election. This makes the effect we observe here, given that prior preferences were well established, all the more interesting. Our data do not allow us to speak to the precipitating circumstances of such drivers, but we might project that there is some threshold level of uncertainty experienced by voters who migrate in the direction of an ad that criticizes their preferred candidate. Alternatively, the advertising may represent new information to voters, highlighting an issue of substantial interest to them (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991).

One interpretation of the figure 2, panel B, result is that the net effect of the disconfirmatory negative ads is zero since there are equal proportions (13.8%) that move with the ad as move against the ad. Yet the distinction between these two proportions is important strategically as they may not be weighted equally by the advertising candidate. For example, the effect of migrating against the opponent's negative ad (defensive reactance) reflects a cost of attacking. That is, if candidate X chooses to attack candidate Y, X can count on some voters already in the Y camp becoming even more vociferous in their support for Y. Unless disconfirmatory negative ads significantly stimulate voter turnout, this probably has little effect on the election, as it simply means the attack ad gives greater resolve to those who were going to vote for the opponent anyway. But if even a small proportion of those in the Y camp shift toward the attacking candidate X, this migrating with effect (position change) reflects a gain of attacking because a change of vote intention in the direction toward the attacking candidate by even a single point is considered a big win (Kalwani and Silk 1982). The latter effect lays the foundation for building a strategy of attempting to soften and switch some voters as even a minimal level of switching can have a substantial impact on an election—particularly if the election is tight and the strength of each candidate's support is not equal.

Motivation and Judgment

Comparative advertising research in marketing has generally not used brands for which consumers had strong preferences, and these lower levels of involvement and motivation may explain the divergent findings with regard to the effects of positive and negative message framing (Shiv et al. 2004). Presidential elections are unique in the level of involvement that they generate among voters and thus provide an apt domain in which to study reactions to valenced advertising among those with strong intentions to choose between competing options. Consistent with the motivational perspective proposed by Klein and Ahluwalia (2005), prior preferences seemed to determine voters' reactions to valenced political advertising in our experiment. The central insight of figure 1 is that the natural confirmatory evaluation/decision pattern is to focus on the positive pole for one's preferred candidate and the negative pole for the opponent. Negative advertising may in fact interrupt this classic confirmatory pattern by highlighting the negatives of one's own candidate. If powerful enough, we wonder whether negative

advertising can turn the evaluation into a negative versus negative, with the possibility that some voters leaning toward one candidate may migrate to a more uncertain position, perhaps even reducing the likelihood that they will vote (Ansolabehere et al. 1999). Alternatively, negative political advertising may also stimulate voter turnout (Goldstein and Freedman 2002), which is of particular importance in close elections.

Our findings are also consistent with Grewal et al. (1997) and Shiv et al. (2004) in that negative ads produced more migration of vote intention despite being clearly disliked. Indeed, our results seem to support the long-standing notion that negative advertising will produce more attention and information processing, even among those who appear to have largely already made their decisions. However, we do not reach a definitive conclusion that negative advertising always works relative to positive advertising, nor do we conclude that position change effects (table 1, cell 3b) are not possible with positive advertising. Despite the fact that a position change resulting from positive advertising in this study was not statistically significant, we do not make the claim that positive political ads are not effective or that negative advertising should be used instead of positive advertising. Rather, our focus is on pointing out that the potential effects of negative advertising have several dimensions: reinforcement, backlash, defensive reactance, and position change. The net returns to an advertiser will be a function of the size of each of these effects—determined in part by the distribution of voters' or consumers' prior preferences—and how they are weighted and combined by the advertiser.

Further, the effect of valenced political advertising likely depends upon a number of contextual factors inherent to any given election (e.g., whether the candidate is an incumbent or a challenger, the relative baseline popularity of the candidate and relative strength of support, time until election day). In addition, negative political ads have generally not been a simple reframing of positive appeals, and they often serve very different strategic objectives (Geer 2006).[2] In the end, the point is that there do appear to be legitimate routes to persuasion for negative advertising, enlightened by considering voters' prior preferences (cf. table 1) and an understanding of the campaigns' objectives.

Limitations and Future Research

While our sample of young college-educated voters is an important segment of the electorate, their responses to valenced political advertising may not be representative of the electorate as a whole. In addition, our conclusions are limited by the fact that the current study focused exclusively on voters with relatively strong priors. An important next

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[2]A recent content analysis of political advertising in U.S. presidential elections found negative appeals to be more issue oriented than positive appeals, while positive ads are more likely to focus on values (e.g., security and freedom) than are negative ads (Geer 2006, 60–61). In addition, negative ads are often first used by challengers to challenge, with facts, the more abstract positive claims made by the incumbent.

step is to conceptualize and explore how negative advertising might influence the preference formation of those with less certain priors (i.e., undecided or swing voters). Furthermore, our laddering-based decision-mapping protocol may have resulted in deeper elaboration of the voting decision than would have occurred naturally. Another limitation is that our field study design necessitated a trade-off between precise content equivalence of the ads and ecological validity. That is, it was not possible to hold everything about each ad constant, and we were constrained in selecting from just the candidates' actual ads. Indeed, many contextual factors inherent within elections (e.g., incumbency effects, relative popular support, relative strength of support) are not equivalent. Such factors may pose threats to internal validity, and our findings should be tempered accordingly.

The paragraphs immediately above suggest some specific directions for research, particularly in the exploration of inferential/attributional mechanisms for the backlash effect and of the drivers of attitude change that may occur for those whose view of their preferred candidate is changed by negative advertising. Further, the degree to which negative advertising touches issues and values important to voters will likely be an important moderator of its effects. There are costs and gains that need to be disaggregated to be fully understood. The framework we offer here is a first step in pursuing that analysis.

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