An exploration of first-time partisan voters’ attitudes to image and issue attack advertising: Evidence from the 2005 British General Election

Abstract

This study examines the partisan attitudes of the three main parties (Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats) towards actual image and issue attack advertising used during the 2005 British General Election. In line with previous research, voter’s party orientation was found to determine their attitudes to the ads. Of particular note is the similarity of the responses of the third party voters to the voters of the party under attack which, in turn, were significantly different from the ad sponsor’s partisans. Overall, the partisans found the image attack advertising unacceptable with both negative cognitive and affective attitudes reported.
Introduction

This paper explores young (18-22 year old), first-time partisan voters’ attitudes towards image and issue attack advertising used during the 2005 British General Election. Two main parties, Labour and Conservative, contested the election although, importantly, a third party, the Liberal Democrats (LibDem), are considered as they usually poll a significant proportion of the overall votes but without gaining a similar benefit in seats in the House of Commons.

There is an extensive body of literature available on the topic of negative political campaign advertising and it has been suggested that even though negative ads and campaigns are more memorable and generate campaign knowledge, there is no agreement in the literature to what extent negative campaigning is effective (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007). Furthermore, there is evidence in the literature that young people specifically are becoming less interested in the political process and more distrusting of politics (Henn & Weinstein, 2006; Huggins, 2001; Kaid, Lee, Postelniciu, Landreville, Yun, & LeGrange, 2007). However, whether this view is shared by young first-time voters in the UK is not known. We have chosen partisanship rather than other approaches, such as social identity, to explore the impact of negative political campaign advertising within the UK where very little previous research exists. This paper is trying to close this gap by examining how young partisans respond to negative political attack advertising in a UK election. We propose that partisanship can lead to different responses to negative advertising messages and influence voter’s information processing. Somewhat uniquely, the views of the third party partisans were also identified in this research and they provide an additional perspective on the impact of the negative attack advertising used by both their rivals in the Election. A further contribution of our study is providing evidence collected during the 2005 UK election campaign, rather than basing the research on a scenario or retrospective recall used in many previous studies.

Partisanship and Negative Advertising

This section examines the specific aspect of partisan response to the use of negative advertising. Chang (2003, p.57) states that “One important individual difference well identified in political-behavior literature, but not as extensively examined in political-advertising research, is party identification”. Other research clearly shows that voters’ party orientations influenced their processing of campaign information including debates (Bothwell & Brigham, 1983) and campaign ads (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995). Certainly, partisans respond differently to the respective party advertising messages (Kaid, 1997; Kaid & Tedesco, 1999) and it has been found that a voter’s existing preference biases his or her response to political-advertising messages (Chang, 2003). The argument supporting this proposition derives from the selective-processing literature, which argues that processing bias is a function of message perceivers existing attitudes, whereby individuals seek to maintain their cognitive consistency (An, 2002; Frey, 1986; Sweeney & Gruber, 1984). Chang (2003, p. 64), whose research was carried out in Taipei, Taiwan, supported other western research and concluded that “… voters respond to ad information in a selective way, such that it reinforces their existing preferences”.

Goren (2002) explored partisanship and character weakness in Presidential elections and suggested that similar to previous research partisans would, via “motivated reasoning”, have a desire to reach particular conclusions and this would bias their information processing in a manner consistent with latent directional goals (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Fischle, 2000; Klein & Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 1990; Lodge & Taber, 2000; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). He goes on to quote Pyszczynski and Greenberg (1987, p. 302) who explain that people who are motivated to arrive at a particular conclusion about something (such as partisans) cannot believe whatever they want to about it because there are pressures to
maintain “an illusion of objectivity”. Thus, partisans have a strong motivation bias toward how they gather, evaluate and integrate information to make a summary judgement about, for example, a negative political advert (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Fischle, 2000; Klein & Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 1990; Stoker, 1993). Goren (2002, p. 639) concludes “… partisans are motivated to generate negative evaluations of opposition party candidates and look for cues that enable them to do so in a seemingly rational and objective manner”. This concurs with other research which supports the biasing nature of party identification in interpreting political advertising. Thus, when considering the Conservative and Labour partisan’s response to the negative advertising carried out by their respective parties, we hypothesize:

**H1:** Conservative partisans have significantly more positive attitudes towards the ad attacking the Labour Leader than the Labour partisans.

**H2:** Labour partisans have significantly more positive attitudes towards the ad attacking the Conservative health issue than the Conservative partisans.

Similarly, as the third party voters in the election, the LibDems, may not share the attitudes of the two main parties in relation to the ads presented, two further hypotheses are tentatively proposed:

**H3:** Conservative partisans have significantly more positive attitudes towards the ad attacking the Labour leader than the LibDem partisans.

**H4:** Labour partisans have significantly more positive attitudes towards the ad attacking the Conservative health issue than the LibDem partisans.

In 1960, the authors of The American Voter placed emphasis on “the role of enduring partisan commitment in shaping attitudes toward political objects” (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960, p. 135). Later on Bartels (2002, p. 138) concluded “that partisanship is not merely a running tally of political assessments, but a pervasive dynamic force shaping citizens’ perspectives of, and reactions to, the political world”. Taber and Lodge (2006), in line with a number of other authors as identified above, explain this through their theory of affect-driven motivated reasoning whereby they identify three mechanisms of partisan or biased processing. Prior attitude effect suggests that where people feel strongly (e.g. partisan voters), they will evaluate supportive arguments much more strongly than opposing arguments. Secondly, disconfirmation bias in which people will spend more time and cognitive resources denigrating and counterarguing attitudinally incongruent than congruent arguments. Finally, confirmation bias explains that when people are free to choose they will seek out confirming rather than disconfirming arguments. They also note that people are often largely unaware of the strength of their prior attitudes and will feel they are trying hard to be fair-minded which, as Pyszczynski and Greenberg (1987) observe, preserves the “illusion of objectivity”.

More recent research by Westen et al. (2006) used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology to show that when partisans were presented with information threatening their beliefs about their preferred candidate or an opposition candidate, they reached biased conclusions. The fMRI analysis reflected their effort to reach an “emotionally stable judgement” through confirmation bias which was primarily involved with the part of the brain associated with processing emotions. This insight supports other recent theoretical work on affective components in political choice (Brader, 2006; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). In addition, Stevens et al. (2008) argue that partisans usually consider attacks on an opponent by their candidate as expected and confirmatory which they are less likely to scrutinise closely. This conclusion prompted Stevens et al. (2008, p. 529) to pose the question “How might motivated information processing affect partisan responses to negative advertising?”. They hypothesise that partisans will vary in their reactions in distinct and predictable ways depending on whether a partisan’s own candidate is targeted and whether the claims are seen as fair or not.
Arcuri et al. (2008) support Stevens et al. (2008) in calling for greater attention to be devoted to the affective responses, particularly amongst partisans. On the basis of previous research, Arcuri et al. (2008, p. 372) conclude that “… if the emotions elicited by the new information are coherent with previous evaluations stored in memory and automatically activated, the new information is acquired, accepted and stored. In contrast, new information that contradicts current spontaneous evaluation is denied, challenged, or simply ignored.” Importantly for partisans, research has demonstrated that activation of consistent responses and the inhibition of inconsistent responses were more powerful for participants with more polarised attitudes and with more sophisticated political ideas (Burdein, Lodge, & Taber, 2006; Louro, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2005). Whilst the focus of the Arcuri et al. (2008) research was around exploring the “hot” cognition concept they investigated “decided” or partisan voters as part of their sample and their results are supportive of previous arguments identified above. They conclude that voters are not passive recipients of information, but are actively involved in information selection and processing, including interpretation and counter arguing (Meffert, Chung, Joiner, Waks, & Garst, 2006; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Thus, selected information is transformed and remembered according to the voter’s motivations and pre-existing preferences, therefore partisans can become more polarised, and biased in their information processing, unless as Stevens et al. (2008) suggest anxiety can be raised in partisans’ mind which can then influence information interpretation and voting choice. Thus, linking this partisan study with the previous negative advertising research of, for example, Robideaux (2002) and Pinkleton (2002), it can be seen that both the affective and cognitive responses of partisans to negative advertising requires further research and to this end, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H5:** Affective evaluations of image attack ad will be significantly more negative than cognitive evaluations.

**H6:** Affective evaluations of issue attack ad will be significantly more negative than cognitive evaluations.

**H7:** Overall, the attitude towards negative image attack ad is significantly more negative than towards the negative issue attack ad.

**H8:** All three partisan groups are significantly more negative towards negative image attack advertising than negative issue attack advertising.

**H9:** All three partisan groups find negative image attack less acceptable than negative issue attack advertising.

**METHOD**

The study was conducted during the three week period immediately following the UK General Election held in May 2005. A quasi-random sampling approach was used to conduct a national survey within England using an interviewer-administered questionnaire (available upon request). Doctoral students based in a number of UK universities were used as interviewers. Attitudes to two poster ads were sought which comprised one image attack ad (refer to Ad1) by the Conservative party and one issue attack ad (refer to Ad2) by the Labour party (see appendix). This is an accepted methodological approach used in a number of previous studies of negative political advertising (e.g. Pinkleton, 2002; Robideaux, 1998, 2002).

The questionnaire was fully piloted and revised prior to the survey commencing. Filter questions were used to ensure that only those respondents who were British citizens aged between 18-22 years old, thus eligible to vote for the first time, were interviewed. 1,500 questionnaires were distributed and 1,134 usable questionnaires were returned. From the total of 1,134 respondents, initial analysis identified 627 partisans of which Conservatives were 170 (27%), Labour 257 (41%) and LibDem 200 (32%). The average age of the respondents is
20.56 years old with men accounting for 51% and women 49%. Of the 627 partisans, 59% were students, 36% were in employment and 5% neither working nor a student.

**DISCUSSION**

The specific results of the hypotheses are reported in Table 1 (please refer to appendix 1), a discussion of these results in light of the literature will now follow. Previous research on partisan attitudes to advertising is fairly consistent in suggesting that partisan bias exists and that partisans via “motivated reasoning” bias their information processing in a selective way to maintain “an illusion of objectivity” or reach an “emotionally stable judgement” (An, 2002; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Bothwell & Brigham, 1983; Chang, 2003; Goren, 2002; Stevens, et al., 2008; Westen, et al., 2006). This study supports those findings insofar as voters’ party orientations determined their responses to the messages contained in the attack ads used from the 2005 British General Election. Thus, Conservative partisans have significantly more positive attitudes to their image attack ad accusing the Labour party leader of being a liar, than the Labour partisans. Similarly, Labour partisans have significantly more positive attitudes to their issue attack ad suggesting the Conservative party would start charging for the ‘free NHS’, than the Conservative partisans.

This study, importantly, reports on a third party’s voters, namely the LibDem partisans, and interestingly the results show that their attitudes to attack ads essentially coincide with the partisans of the party under attack. Thus, they would respond similarly to the Labour partisans when considering the Conservative’s image attack ad and likewise with the Conservative partisans when considering the Labour’s issue attack ad. Limited previous research has considered three candidate contests in terms of the use of negative advertising (Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995) - Chang (2003) used two groups of partisans and a group of independents. Our study goes further and examines third party voter responses to the image and issue attack advertising used by the two main challenging parties.

In terms of overall attitudes to attack ads, previous research (Meirick, 2002; Pinkleton, et al., 2002; Robideaux, 1998, 2002, 2004) suggests that the response to image attack ads is more negative than responses to issue attack ads. This study agrees with the previous research. The results clearly show that partisans have significantly more negative attitudes to the image attack ad, where the leader of the Labour party is accused of being a liar, than the issue attack ad concerning the future of the NHS in Conservative hands. As Brooks (2006, p. 694) states “It is natural to expect that criticising an opponent’s stand on a policy (issue)-related matter might be fundamentally different than criticising an opponent’s honesty or personal values”.

Furthermore, in relation to the acceptability of image and issue attack advertising, previous research has concluded that issue attack advertising is more acceptable and image attack is largely unacceptable. Stevens et al. (2008, p. 531) state that “issue-based criticism [was] appraised as much fairer than criticism about a candidate’s personal life.” Kates (1998, p. 1879) concurs and states “Consistent with prior research, negative advertising which attacks upon personal characteristics was judged by the participants as unacceptable, unethical and unfair play”. Our research supports these findings with over 90% of partisans finding ads which attack issues as acceptable, whereas nearly 60% of partisans finding ads that attack the politician personally (Blair as a liar) unacceptable. However, it is important to note that this relatively ‘low’ level of acceptability is largely explained by 68% of Conservative partisans, from the party who sponsored the ad finding the ad acceptable. As Stevens et al. (2008) suggest, this certainly supports the idea of ‘motivated processing’ by the Conservative partisans.

When considering the affective and cognitive responses by the partisans to the image and issue attack ads, a number of findings are of interest. In terms of the affective response to
the image attack ad, previous research (Pinkleton, et al., 2002; Robideaux, 1998, 2002, 2004) generally concludes that respondents have a strongly negative attitudinal response. This study supports these findings. The affective response to the issue attack ad is expected to be different to the image ad and, indeed, this is the case in our study. Thus, partisans, whilst finding image attack ads unacceptable hold strongly negative affective attitudes towards them, issue attack ads are viewed far more positively.

In relation to the cognitive response to the image and issue attack ads, the partisans were more mixed in their response. For the issue attack ad, the Labour party partisans (whose party sponsored the ad) were significantly more positive than both the Conservative partisans (party under attack) and the LibDem partisans who both remained fairly neutral in their attitudes. However, when considering the cognitive response to the image attack ad, both the Labour party partisans (party under attack) and the third party (LibDem) partisans were strongly negative in their attitudes. Thus, suggesting both sets of partisans found the ad to be informative, unbelievable, untrustworthy, dishonest, and unhelpful. The Conservative partisans, on the other hand, had overall positive attitudes towards the ad in stark contrast to the two other partisan groups. This agrees with the findings of Robideaux (1998, p. 7) when he states “…while negative ads are associated with negative attitude-affects towards those ads, they are also associated with a higher, more positive degree of cognition credibility”. In line with other researchers the higher cognitive dimension of attack advertising found in our study may be partly due to the degree of cynicism towards politicians (Merritt, 1984), or at least the cynicism of younger voters – the sample for this research (Yoon, 1995). It has already been reported that cynicism levels in both the US and Europe have increased (Kaid et al., 2004; Henn & Weinstein, 2006; Fieldhouse et al., 2007) so “voters may be more willing to believe the bad, while being skeptical about the good” (Robideaux, 1998, p. 8). In contrast to this viewpoint, Robideaux (2004) reported on a later study which found “…a shift from positive to negative on the cognitive construct for negative advertisements may be the most important change”. This change was accounted for by females going more negative, whilst males remained positive. This study of partisans did not find a gender difference, however, it was clear that while both the partisans under attack and the third party partisans had strong negative responses to the cognitive construct for Ad1, the Conservative partisans had a positive response. This confirms support for the motivated processing of information concept and suggests that the role of image attack advertising may be useful in convincing existing voters to stay loyal (Fletcher, 2001). Other impacts of negative advertising, such as swaying undecided voters, backlash, source derogation and sleeper effects were not the subject of this study. It is the case, however, that the leadership of Tony Blair proved to be problematic for the Labour party over the following years and a number of commentators both for and against the Labour party identified his leadership image, especially around the Iraq War, as a reason for Labour losing the 2010 election even though a new leader had taken over (Dermody & Hanmer-Lloyd, 2005, 2010; Kavanagh & Cowley, 2010).

**Conclusion**

Whilst there is a substantial American literature on the impact of negative political advertising with a considerably smaller literature on partisan responses to this form of advertising, we are not aware of any literature that specifically examines British (or European) partisan responses to image and issue attack advertising. Our results are generally in line with previous research, thus supporting the concept of motivated reasoning in explaining partisan attitudes to image and issue attack ads. Partisans find image attack ads broadly unacceptable whereas a clear majority consider issue attack ads to be perfectly acceptable. Thus, the use of image attack advertising, whilst politically pragmatic, must be questioned given its low acceptability by an already cynical, distrustful and, importantly,
non-voting young electorate. The task for politicians is to engage young people not alienate them. In addition, our research also examined partisans from a third party and found their attitudes to be very similar to those partisans whose party was being attacked. Finally, we hope that the results of this first British (European) research into the attitudes of partisans towards image and issue attack advertising will encourage others to follow suit and thus challenge or support both our research findings and methodological approach (e.g. would social identity provide an interesting perspective?).
## Appendix 1

### Table 1: Hypothesis testing summary*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>H1</strong>: Conservative partisans have significantly more positive attitudes towards the ad attacking the Labour Leader than the Labour partisans.</td>
<td>Confirmed (MANOVA results show significant differences, i.e. F(4,1248)=19.109, p&lt;.001, Pillai’s trace=.115, where Conservative partisans: M=2.65 (cognitive) and M=3.31 (affective), p&lt;.001; Labour partisans: M=3.42 (cognitive) and M=3.83 (affective), p&lt;.001)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>H2</strong>: Labour partisans have significantly more positive attitudes towards the ad attacking the Conservative health issue than the Conservative partisans.</td>
<td>Confirmed (MANOVA results show significant differences i.e. F(4,1248)=21.451, p&lt;.001, Pillai’s trace=.129, where Labour: M=2.33 (cognitive) and M=2.36 (affective); Conservative: M=2.97 and M=2.74, respectively; Bonferroni, p&lt;.001)</td>
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<td><strong>H3</strong>: Conservative partisans have significantly more positive attitudes towards the ad attacking the Labour leader than the LibDem partisans.</td>
<td>Confirmed (MANOVA results show support to this hypothesis (Bonferroni, p&lt;.001, LibDem: M=3.21 (cognitive) and M=3.57 (affective) respectively; Conservative: M=2.65 and M=3.31 respectively)</td>
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<td><strong>H4</strong>: Labour partisans have significantly more positive attitudes towards the ad attacking the Conservative health issue than the LibDem partisans.</td>
<td>Confirmed (MANOVA results show support to this hypothesis. LibDem: M=2.83 (cognitive) and M=2.61 (affective); Labour: M=2.33 and M=2.36 respectively, Bonferroni, p&lt;.001)</td>
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<td><strong>H5</strong>: Affective evaluations of image attack ad will be significantly more negative than cognitive evaluations.</td>
<td>Confirmed (M=3.61 (affective) and M=3.15 (cognitive) respectively, t=-16.264, df=626, p&lt;.001)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>H6</strong>: Affective evaluations of issue attack ad will be significantly more negative than cognitive evaluations.</td>
<td>Not confirmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H7</strong>: Overall, the attitude towards negative image attack ad is significantly more negative than towards the negative issue attack ad.</td>
<td>Confirmed (t=23.74, df=626, p&lt;.001 for the affective factors; t=9.60, df=626, p&lt;.001 for the cognitive factors)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
| **H8**: All three partisan groups are significantly more negative towards negative image attack advertising than negative issue attack advertising. | Partially confirmed (For Ad1, the means of the cognitive factor are $M_{\text{Conservative}}=2.65$, $M_{\text{Labour}}=3.42$ and $M_{\text{LibDem}}=3.21$; the means of the affective factor are $M_{\text{Conservative}}=3.31$, $M_{\text{Labour}}=3.83$ and $M_{\text{LibDem}}=3.57$ respectively! For Ad2, the means of the cognitive
factor are $M_{\text{Conservative}}=2.97$, $M_{\text{Labour}}=2.33$ and $M_{\text{LibDem}}=2.83$; the means of the affective factor are $M_{\text{Conservative}}=2.74$, $M_{\text{Labour}}=2.36$ and $M_{\text{LibDem}}=2.61$ respectively. The means for affective factors are significantly higher than the cognitive factors for both ads and the main contribution of these is derived from Labour and LibDem partisans.)

| $H9$: All three partisan groups find negative image attack less acceptable than negative issue attack advertising. | Confirmed (Chi-Square=59.009, df=2, $p<.001$ for Ad1; Chi-Square=7.596, df=2, $p=.022$ for Ad2. A statistically significant proportion of all Conservative voters find the image attack ad more acceptable than Labour or LibDem voters (67.5% versus 31% and 33.1% respectively). For the issue attack ad, the LibDem partisans find it significantly more unacceptable in contrast to the Labour and Conservative voters (13.9% versus 6.1% and 9.6% respectively)). |

Note: 10 items were measured on a scale from 1 (e.g. Informative, believable) to 5 (e.g. Uninformative, Unbelievable). A higher mean indicates a more negative attitude towards that particular ad.
Appendix 2

Ad1: Image-attack ad

(Used with permission)

Ad2: Issue-attack ad

(Used with permission)
References


