

**Assessing Accountability in a Post-*Citizens United* Era:  
The Effects of Attack Ad Sponsorship by Unknown Independent Groups**

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ABSTRACT: Greatly increased advertising spending by independent groups represents one of the most dramatic recent changes in U.S. elections. This article moves forward our theoretical and empirical understanding of how the public responds to ads sponsored by candidates as compared to ads sponsored by unknown Super PACs and similar independent groups. In the theoretical section of the article, we establish why it is necessary to measure both backlash and ad persuasiveness to understand overall ad effectiveness and then we develop a series of hypotheses about the likely influence of ad sponsorship. In the empirical section, we undertake the first analysis to date of how the public responds to attack television ads sponsored by unknown independent groups. Using a large-N, geographically representative sample of U.S. adults, we conduct an experiment to assess how sponsorship influences ad effectiveness. We find that attack ads sponsored by unknown independent groups are more effective, on net, than ads sponsored by candidates.

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## **Assessing Accountability in a Post-*Citizens United* Era:**

### **The Effects of Attack Ad Sponsorship by Unknown Independent Groups**

The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 ushered a series of important changes into U.S. campaigns. Despite the elimination of party-based soft money, spending on campaign ads increased dramatically, especially for ads sponsored by independent groups. Now Super PACs, 527 groups, and 501(c)4 organizations with generically appealing names like “Restore our Future,” “Leaders for Families,” and “Red White and Blue Fund” regularly appear, seemingly overnight, to saturate the airwaves with advertising in favor of or against (though nearly always against) a particular candidate. The prevalence of independent group advertising is skyrocketing, and all signs are that it will continue to do so. Yet we know essentially nothing as a field about how ads sponsored by unknown independent groups are regarded by the public relative to ads sponsored by candidates.

The aim of this article is to move forward our theoretical and empirical understanding of this issue. In the first part of this article, we discuss the changing nature of independent group spending in campaigns and then establish the importance of the “Stand By Your Ad” disclosure requirements that were passed as part of the 2002 reform efforts. In the theoretical section of the article, we first establish why it is necessary to measure both backlash and ad persuasiveness to understand the effects of ad sponsorship. We then we develop a series of associated hypotheses around those theories. In the empirical section of the article, we undertake the first analysis to date of how the public responds to attack television ads sponsored by unknown independent groups. A few studies in the past have examined well-known groups with clear partisan affiliations (e.g., the Sierra Club, the National Conservative Political Action Committee)<sup>1</sup>; however, ads by such groups are less relevant today given the prevalence of ads by appealing-sounding, cue-free groups (e.g. “Citizens for a Working America”) on the airwaves in recent election cycles.<sup>2</sup> The only academic study to date that analyzes ads by unknown independent groups examines a small sample of undergraduate reactions to newspaper ads rather than television ads.<sup>3</sup> To study this topic in a manner that is relevant to the campaign world today, television advertising by unknown groups needs to be examined.

In our analysis, we test for the effects of advertising sponsorship using a survey-based experiment of a large-*N* sample of U.S. adults. This methodology was selected because it allows for effective analysis of this question using a geographically and demographically diverse sample; observational studies would not allow for the isolation of content versus sponsorship effects while field experiments on this topic would be illegal due to prohibitions on coordination between independent groups and campaigns. Our experiment focuses specifically on the particular kind of television negative ad that has tended to produce the greatest concern among the public, politicians, and many analysts: harsh, personally negative ads (which we refer to here as “attack ads”). The experiment examines the effectiveness of the same attack ad depending on the sponsorship information provided (none versus a candidate attribution versus an attribution to an appealing-sounding independent group). We then analyze which ad sponsor is most persuasive, whether voters disproportionately penalize candidates who sponsor attack ads, and which type of sponsor results in the greatest overall ad efficacy. We find that ads sponsored by unknown independent groups are more effective, on net, than ads sponsored by candidates. That attack ads by independent groups are more effective than their candidate-sponsored counterparts is likely a key contributor to their ever-growing prevalence on the airwaves.

### **Independent Group Advertising & “Stand By Your Ad” Reforms**

Independent group spending in U.S. campaigns is not new, but there is little question that independent groups are playing a more prominent role in campaign advertising than ever before. Beyond the barrage of headlines in the media (“Hate the Attacks, Blame the PACs,” “Super PACs are Changing the Game,” “The Power of Super PACs,” and so on), data confirm the dramatic increase of independent group ad spending in recent elections.

The 2012 presidential primaries could reasonably be called the cycle of the “Super PAC.” According to the Wesleyan Media Project, the 2012 presidential primaries featured a 1,600% increase in independent-group advertising relative to the same point in 2008 (Fowler 2012). By late January 2012, independent groups had run over 30,000 ads as compared to just over 39,000 by candidates. At the same point in 2008, independent groups had run just 1,763 ads for Republican candidates, while Republican candidates themselves had sponsored over

66,000. In the South Carolina 2012 presidential primaries, independent groups outspent candidates by a 2-to-1 ratio (Eggen 2012).

In 2010, over 150,000 ads were sponsored by independent groups on Senate and House races at an estimated cost of over \$111 million dollars (Fowler and Ridout 2010, 4). This represents a notable increase in the proportion of ads sponsored by independent groups relative to ads sponsored by other entities (candidates, parties, and coordinated expenditures) in comparison to 2008 (ibid), which itself represented an increase from earlier levels of independent group advertising.<sup>4</sup>

Spending by independent groups in the 2010 election is noteworthy not simply due to its incredibly high volume, but also because it ran lopsidedly in favor of Republicans (Franz 2010, 10-13). Because ads sponsored by independent groups are about 2.5 times more likely to be negative than ads sponsored by candidates, the increasing prevalence of independent group advertising has implications for the tone of campaigns (Fowler and Ridout 2010, 11). Moreover, the ability of the public to discover who sponsored these ads has declined dramatically: the percentage of outside groups that disclosed the names of their donors who funded political advertising declined from 97 percent in the 2006 elections, to 49 percent in 2008, to only approximately 32 percent in the current election (Public Citizen 2010, 1). As such, the rise in independent group advertising has important implications regarding accountability for campaign messages.

The changing nature of independent group involvement in the 2010 elections can be traced, in part, to the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* in January 2010, which abolished many previous restrictions on campaign advertising by outside groups in the weeks leading up to elections. Yet even before the *Citizens United* decision, advertising by unknown independent groups had already increased markedly in the 2000s due to the rapid growth of 527 and 501(c) groups in response to changes introduced by the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) in 2002. Among other changes, BCRA required interest groups, parties, and candidates to provide comprehensive written and oral sponsorship statements in radio and television ads called “Stand By Your Ad” provisions in order to qualify for the lowest available advertising rates. The act also eliminated party-based soft money. That change helped to contribute to the growth of advertising by a certain kind of independent group called “527 groups” (or simply “527s”) beginning with the 2004 election cycle (Franz, Rivlin and Goldstein 2006; Malbin 2006).<sup>5</sup> A notable feature of the post-

BCRA independent advertising landscape was the greatly increased prevalence of unknown independent groups; Weissman and Hassan term groups like these “First Timer” 527s, and estimate that they were responsible for more than twice as much ad spending (\$274 million) as “Repeater” groups in 2004 (2006, 82-83).

Ironically, although many legislators supported the Stand By Your Ad provisions in BCRA largely on the assumption that they would reduce negativity on the airwaves (Mark 2006, 152-153), the relative presence of messages with negative content on the air increased substantially after BCRA, in part due to the fact that independent groups are now far more likely than candidates to run negative ads. An analysis by Franz et. al. reveals that in 2004 just 20% of ads sponsored by candidates were exclusively negative as compared to 73% of ads sponsored by independent groups.<sup>6</sup> By 2010, the percentage of ads that were exclusively negative had increased to 36% for candidate-sponsored ads and 87% for independent-group sponsored ads (Fowler and Ridout 2010, 11). The fact that independent groups now focus so heavily on negative ads represents a marked reversal from previous eras: Ansolabehere and Iyengar show that during the 1984-1992 period, independent groups “spent approximately three dollars in support of candidates for every dollar they spent in opposition.”<sup>7</sup>

Of particular concern to many analysts and politicians is that the groups sponsoring these ads are often unaccountable to anyone but their own donors. Not only are the donors increasingly unrevealed, but many of these groups have chosen vaguely appealing, non-partisan names such as Make Us Great Again, Winning Our Future, Stronger America Now, , Texans for Truth, Safer Together, and Americans United for Change to deliberately mask their origins.<sup>8</sup> To add further confusion, these groups also sometimes undertake various actions to portray themselves as broad-based, grassroots organizations.<sup>9</sup> In a recent speech highlighting the significance of the unclear origins of groups funding political ads, President Obama stressed: “The American people deserve to know who’s trying to sway their elections....You don't know...It could be the oil industry; it could be the insurance industry; it could even be foreign-owned corporations. You don't know because they don't have to disclose. Now that's not just a threat to the Democrats; it's a threat to democracy” (*The New York Times*, October 10, 2010, A11).

An additional concern to many is the prospect that post-BCRA independent group ads may often be more uncivil and less truthful than negative ads produced by candidates because “independent groups can deliver messages that the campaigns don't want to touch themselves” (Overby 2008) since they “allow the candidates

some distance from what are often the most negative attack ads against their opponents” (*The Washington Post*, October 24, 2006). Perhaps the most prominent example along these lines is the controversial attack advertisements sponsored in 2004 by Swift Boat Veterans for Truth; although President Bush criticized these ads, he also benefitted from them. In the 2008 election, Barack Obama frequently and pointedly distanced himself from all ads run by independent groups on his behalf, which likely reduced the need to specifically emphasize his lack of involvement in any given independent ad which targeted his opponents, such as the graphic ad run by Defenders of Wildlife that linked Sarah Palin to the killing of wolves from airplanes.

From the standpoint of accountability, the underlying point is that when negative ads are run by groups unaffiliated with campaigns, it is harder for the public to judge the veracity of the ads or to blame anyone directly if they think the messages are problematic. In this respect, Vice President Biden emphasized in a recent interview that “there’s no accountability. When I say no accountability, we don’t know where it’s [the funding of ads] coming from. There’s no disclosure, so the folks watching the ad can’t make a judgment based upon motives when you say it’s paid for by so-and-so” (*The New York Times*, 22 October 2010). Looking beyond the public, the politicians who are targets of these ads also may have no recourse if they cannot identify who is attacking them.<sup>10</sup>

## **Theory and Hypotheses**

In considering the relationship between source information and the efficacy of negative ads, there are two different underlying mechanisms and each is individually important. The concepts of ad effectiveness and ad persuasiveness are essentially synonyms when analyzing positive ads, but they are quite distinct for negative ads. For negative ads, effectiveness is not simply persuasion. Rather, net effectiveness in a two-candidate race is persuasion (movement of the target downward in terms of favorability) minus backlash (movement of the beneficiary of the negative ad downward in terms of favorability). An ad is effective when it depresses support for the target more than it depresses support for the benefiting candidate. Thus, effectiveness and persuasion need to be analyzed separately to understand the relationship between ad sponsorship and efficacy.

### ***Backlash***

The overwhelming majority of the public dislikes negative campaigning and would like to see much less of it on the airwaves. A Gallup Poll conducted in 2000 found that only about one in five people agree that “negative advertisements have a place in campaigns”; another poll conducted by the Institute for Global Ethics in 2002 found that 8 in 10 believe that “negative, attack-oriented campaigning is unethical and damaging our democracy.” Many other polls have obtained similar results.<sup>11</sup> In an experiment, Brooks and Geer find that not all negative ads are equal in people’s minds: “civil” but opponent-focused messages are thought to substantially more “fair” than “uncivil” (i.e. especially harsh, mean-spirited) opponent-focused messages (Brooks and Geer 2007). So negativity itself may not be a critical problem in people’s minds, but tenor of that negativity may be.

The average citizen may well be misguided in being concerned about negative advertising: although specific defenses of uncivil campaigning are in short supply, many scholars have made compelling arguments that negative campaigning overall has inherent value to political dialogue with fewer societal costs than might be assumed (Geer 2006 most directly takes that position in *In Defense of Negativity*). The present study is neutral on that matter, however. The question at the core of this paper is whether harsh attack messages work better for some types of sponsors than for others. That is likely to hinge, in part, on whether people penalize candidates more than independent groups for sponsoring those messages, regardless of whether people are “right” or “wrong” in trying to apply penalties for attacks.

Many scholars have hypothesized that voters do penalize candidates for being too negative, with a dynamic known as “backlash effects” (also sometimes called “boomerang effects” or “unintended effects”). Backlash may result from an explicit attempt to send a signal to the sponsoring candidate that such messages are unacceptable. It may result from anger or frustration with the candidate only talking about his or her opponent (or for talking about the opponent in an unacceptably derogatory manner) rather than using a message to highlight his or her own plans and achievements. There may be a motivated reasoning dynamic, in which people who share the partisanship of the target of the ad are especially likely to penalize the ad sponsor because they feel protective of the target candidate or because they find it easier to denigrate the sponsor than to change their beliefs. A range of research has revealed that people penalize candidates for running negative ads (see, for example, Shultz and Pancer 1997; Carrano, Gawronski, and Luigi Castelli 2010, Kahn and Geer 1994); Lau,

Sigelman, and Rovner's 2007 meta-analysis shows (p. 1883) that 33 of 40 studies on the topic clearly confirm a backlash effect. This general line of research has been both less comprehensive and less conclusive as to whether the intended/persuasive effects of negative ads outweigh their unintended/backlash effects, with a fairly even mix of results on that particular question (see Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007 for a review of this literature). But the point here is that most people say they do not like attack ads, and there is considerable evidence that people attempt to assess blame on sponsoring candidates for running them.

With the exception of Garramone's research, the research that specifically addresses backlash effects has been conducted using only candidate-sponsored ads, and cannot therefore speak to the sponsorship issue that lies at the core of the present article. Garramone (1984, 1985) and Garramone and Smith (1984) looked explicitly at backlash depending on ad sponsorship by a known, explicitly partisan group versus a candidate and found that backlash against the benefiting candidate was substantially reduced among undergraduates when the sponsor was an independent group rather than the candidate himself. This makes sense intuitively. When an independent group runs an attack ad against a particular candidate, voters have little opportunity to hold anyone accountable for the message in a direct manner. The candidate can potentially be penalized for the decisions of unaffiliated groups that work to get that candidate elected, and some voters are likely to do that.<sup>12</sup> However, it is reasonable to assume that a fair portion of voters who would like to see negativity minimized will not be inclined to hold the candidate responsible for another group's decisions to run an attack ad.<sup>13</sup> Thus, affect for the benefiting candidate may fall somewhat when an independent group sponsors a message or when no sponsorship information is provided at all, but it is unlikely to fall to nearly the degree that it will when the benefiting candidate explicitly sponsors the message and can be directly penalized for going on the attack. Based on that logic, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H1:** *In terms of backlash, Candidate Ad > Independent Group Ad and No Sponsor Ad*

### ***Persuasion***

Ad persuasiveness is the second element to consider in the ad sponsorship/ad effectiveness relationship. To be persuasive, viewers need to believe the ad is truthful. However, given that many people are only marginally informed about politics, how can voters possibly determine the veracity of campaign claims while viewing an ad? For a given ad, source credibility is one of the only simple heuristics voters can use to determine whether the information contained in the ad can be trusted.

The significance of source credibility has been recognized for thousands of years; Aristotle, for example, argued persuasively in *Rhetoric* that people consider it when evaluating arguments: “It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses” (2156a10-15 in Barnes 1984). Along these lines, we would expect a source seen as “good” to be more credible than a source seen as “bad.” At the same time, Pornpitakpan’s recent review of five decades’ of research reveals that a more credible source will be more persuasive than a less credible one (see Pornpitakpan 2004). Trustworthiness is central to the concept of credibility and many have found that attitude change is greater when a source is viewed as trustworthy rather than untrustworthy (see, for example, Bauer 1967; Druckman 2001; Hovland and Mandell 1952; Hovland and Weiss 1951-52; Garramone 1985; Petty and Wegener 1998). The question is whether candidates or independent groups will be more trustworthy in the minds of voters. The answer is not entirely clear.

It is reasonable to expect that a message will be viewed as more trustworthy as the stakes of lying increase. For candidates the stakes of getting caught are potentially very high since it could affect their future in politics. The stakes for long-standing interest groups with national reputations are less than those for candidates (after all, the organization will likely still exist even if the average voter does not trust it), but the size of their membership base and their ability to credibly lobby legislators may be endangered if they are seen as untrustworthy; as such, many “Repeater” groups such as Sierra Club, AARP, EMILY’s List, or other known groups will face at least some incentives to be truthful. “First Timer” groups, however, rarely face those incentives. With generically appealing, non-partisan names, many “First Timer” independent groups are designed to sound vaguely compelling to voters without inciting skepticism. Little to nothing of value beyond money is at stake for newer independent groups: they are not running for office, they may be funded by just a

small handful of individuals, and they have no reputation to uphold. They will not be lobbying officials as a group after the election, and as such they do not need to uphold a credible reputation to that end. They have the freedom to disappear quickly and even reappear under a different name with a similar roster of donors if and when the need arises. Because the stakes of lying are far lower for unknown independent groups than they are for candidates, we should expect unknown independent group messages to be perceived as less truthful and credible, and less persuasive as a result.

On the basis that candidates should be viewed as more credible than unknown independent groups because they are more accountable to voters, we forward what we term the “Candidate Trust Hypothesis”:

**H2a:** *In terms of persuasiveness, Candidate Ad > Independent Group Ad and No Sponsor Ad*

Regarding persuasiveness, there are theoretical reasons to expect a countervailing force, however. Despite the stakes of dishonesty, there are reasons why candidates may not be perceived as reliable sources of information. A substantial literature suggests that less self-interested actors will be seen as more trustworthy than more self-interested actors (see for example, Smith, Lasswell, and Casey in 1946; Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953; Walster, Aronson, and Abrahams 1966; Andreoli and Worchel 1979, Hass and Grady 1975; Kiser and Kiesler 1964). While most political donors have an interest in the electoral outcome, they do not have the opportunity to enjoy the full trappings and power of holding office, as a candidate does. As such, it may be reasonable to assume that the public will view candidates as less than trustworthy sources (Garramone and Smith 1994). In this regard, Abraham Lincoln perhaps said it best when he claimed that politicians are “a set of men who have interests aside from the interests of the people and who, to say the most of them, are taken as a class, at least one long step removed from honest” (quoted in Current 1958, 197). Survey evidence also suggests that the public might be wary of trusting politicians. In response to the ANES question “Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked?” only about one in ten respondents in recent decades respond “hardly any of them” while somewhere between one-third to one-half of respondents give the most cynical answer of “quite a few of them.”<sup>14</sup>

If people do not trust candidates much, then an appealing-sounding independent group with a less obvious agenda may be seen as more trustworthy. Ads without sponsors should be expected to lack credibility as well; however, without an appealing name of the kind often chosen by 527 and equivalent groups, we would expect them to be less trusted than an independent group but more trusted than a candidate. These expectations form the basis of what we term the “Candidate Distrust Hypothesis”:

**H2b:** *In terms of persuasiveness, Independent Group Ad > No Sponsor Ad > Candidate Ad.*

It is possible that these two effects could cancel each other out: accountability could benefit the credibility of candidates while perceptions of trust could benefit the credibility of independent groups, yielding no net difference in credibility and, therefore, persuasiveness. Since it is very likely that both of these dynamics operate, we have strong reasons to expect that our “Countervailing Forces Hypothesis” will be confirmed:

**H2c:** *In terms of persuasiveness, Candidate Ad = Independent Group Ad = No Sponsor Ad.*

Partisanship could potentially affect credibility as well. Through a process of motivated reasoning, a candidate from one’s own partisan group could logically be viewed as being more credible than a candidate of the other party. However, it is possible that an independent group that is clearly trying to support a candidate of one’s own party will also benefit from the same kind of motivated reasoning regarding its credibility. Additionally, while people who share the partisanship of the benefiting candidate might be more inclined to believe a negative message about a target candidate of another party than individuals who share the partisanship of the target of the ad, it is also true that a target candidate’s partisans have farther to fall from their initial predispositions towards that candidate. As such, it is not clear that there would be strong partisan effects with respect to credibility.

### ***Effectiveness***

The relationship between backlash and ad persuasiveness for negative ads has been neglected within the literature overall, with a tendency for scholars to examine the existence of backlash and persuasiveness in separate studies.<sup>15</sup> The basis of the relationship is straightforward: the overall effectiveness of a negative ad will

consist of H1 (change in affect for the benefiting candidate) minus H2 (change in affect for the target). In other words, if persuasion is greater than backlash, there will be net positive effectiveness for the benefiting candidate. Assuming that H1 is correct (backlash will be stronger for candidate ads),<sup>16</sup> then there are three different H3 hypotheses depending on whether H2a, H2b, or H2c is confirmed.

If H2a is accurate and candidates are seen as more trustworthy and credible than unknown independent groups, greater backlash and greater credibility of candidate-sponsored ads should cancel each other out, and then we would expect the following:

**H3a:** *In terms of overall effectiveness, Candidate Ad = Independent Group Ad = No Sponsor Ad.*

If H2b is accurate, then reduced backlash effects and greater credibility effects for ads sponsored by independent groups as compared to ads sponsored by candidates would lead to the following hypothesis:

**H3b:** *In terms of overall effectiveness, Independent Group Ad > No Sponsor Ad > Candidate Ad.*

If H2c is accurate, then the combination of reduced backlash effects and similar credibility levels for independent group sponsored ads and candidate ads would lead to the following hypothesis:

**H3c:** *In terms of overall effectiveness, Independent Group Ad and No Sponsor Ad > Candidate Ad.*

**Table 1** provides a summary of our directional expectations for each type of ad for each hypothesis.

*[Insert **Table 1** around here]*

## **Study Design**

Advancing our understanding of ad effectiveness requires a design that contrasts three possibilities for a negative ad: no sponsorship, candidate sponsorship, and sponsorship by an unknown independent group. We designed an experiment that allows us to vary only the ad attribution, holding all other ad content constant. We needed to randomly assign viewers to each condition. Candidate partisanship also needed to be randomized to avoid partisan effects. Moreover, the relationship should ideally be tested with a large and representative national sample of adults. We accomplished these goals with an Internet experiment fielded by Polimetrix with a post-

election module added to the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Campaign Election study.<sup>17</sup> Our study had a sample of 1500 people (and an N size of approximately 1370 respondents for most of the core analyses<sup>18</sup>) who were sampled through a stratified procedure and weighted to approximate a geographically and demographically representative sample of U.S. adults.<sup>19</sup>

We created a fictional state assembly race between “Tim Clark” and “Michael Norris” to test our hypotheses. We utilized a fictional state-level race for several reasons. First and foremost, we wanted to be able to change the partisanship of the candidates to randomize any partisan effects, so we needed unknown candidates and messages without any identifiable partisanship. That required fictional candidates with no preexisting partisan associations. Moreover, to increase external validity, we wanted a race that many respondents would be inclined to think could occur in their area so that they might be more psychologically vested in it. State assembly races were ideal in that respect. An added benefit of using a state-level race is that while BCRA already governs ads for federal office, many states are actively considering changing their rules for state-level office to be more like those of BCRA. Focusing on that level of office thus has especially immediate policy relevance.

We utilized a pre-test/post-test design for this experiment. Repeated measures designs provide extremely powerful control over experimental treatments. Even when randomly assigned into different conditions, natural variation between individuals can produce noise in an analysis of treatment effects. Rather than assuming that pre-test results would have been comparable across groups (as one must do with a standard single-measurement) repeated measures designs explicitly factor in the exact starting point for each individual so that relative change regardless of starting point becomes the focus of the analysis. To give respondents a baseline on which to judge our fictional candidates, positive ads for Tim Clark and Michael Norris were first watched by respondents. The photos of our candidates were of actual state assemblymen from California and Iowa,<sup>20</sup> and showed them in standard political poses (interacting with constituents, sitting at desks, sitting in a legislative chamber, and the like). The ad messages are standard biographic positive messages emphasizing “proven leadership,” “knowledge and integrity,” “devoted father and husband,” “common sense approach,” “works tirelessly for people like you,” and other kinds of messages that lack geographic and partisan cues. They are representative of the standard name identification ads that often begin campaigns (see, for example, Powell

and Cowart 2003; Joslyn 1986; and Diamond and Bates 1992). Full ad transcripts and a description of the visual and audio cues can be found in **Appendix 1**.

The only experimental element of the positive ads was variation in candidate partisanship with three randomly assigned conditions: 1) no party cue mentioned at all; 2) Clark is a Democrat and Norris is a Republican; 3) Clark is a Republican and Norris is a Democrat. The results for our “no partisanship” condition are virtually identical to the results for our partisan candidate conditions and also for the combined sample (where there is a random mix of people exposed to the different partisanship cues in each condition). As such, we opted for the larger N analysis (all combined; all but one of our results is of similar magnitude and significance no matter how the analysis is conducted).<sup>21</sup> We also ran the results broken out by “partisan alignment” (that is, whether the sponsor or target of the ad shared partisanship with the respondent, or whether the respondent is an independent). That analysis does not change the main findings from this study; however, we allude to the main findings from that analysis below, and the results of the analyses are included as a web appendix for readers who would like to learn more about the underlying partisan dynamics.

After viewing the two positive ads, respondents were asked for whom they would lean towards voting “based on what they know about the candidates so far” on a 5-point scale and their favorability for each of the candidates on a 7-point scale (see **Appendix 2** for question wording). A photo of each candidate with his name listed was presented on pages with questions relevant to the candidates so that lack of name recognition would not create unnecessary noise in the results.

At that juncture, we then showed the negative ad which included our experimental treatment. Aside from sponsorship information, that ad was identical for all respondents. After viewing that final ad, respondents then answered the same set of survey questions a second time.

We faced a choice as to which kind of negative ad to use since adding cells to test multiple kinds of ads would leave us unable to address null results convincingly due to power limitations. We designed a trait-based ad message about Tim Clark that includes accusations of absenteeism in previous office, investigations into tax evasion within a family business, and accusations of “bad debts and campaign violations” (see the third ad in **Appendix 1** for the negative ad text and description). It concludes with the message “Is Tim Clark really the kind of man you can trust to represent you?” complete with ominous music, a strong, deep voiceover, sound

effects, and black and white photos – all tricks of the trade that make an ad not just read negative, but *feel* emotionally negative (see, for example, Brader 2005; Mark 2006; Swint 2006).

This kind of ad – termed “attack ad” here – was specifically selected for examination for several reasons. First, it avoids simple practical difficulties the partisan and geographic cues that are inherent to the discussion of most issues. Second, it was also realistically the only option for studying these dynamics in conjunction while also varying candidate partisanship; if an issue-based negative ad was used, the issue content would realistically need to be varied depending on the partisanship of the target candidate. Varying the ad content in the treatment ad would eliminate the kind of control that is central to establishing causality in this type of study. In contrast, a negative trait-based ad allows us to vary only candidate partisanship and ad sponsorship, while keeping the ad content exactly the same in all of the experimental conditions.

Third, a frequently expressed concern about the rise of unknown independent groups on the advertising landscape is that these groups face no disincentives to delivering that kind of very hard-hitting, often controversial negative spots with which campaigns do not want to be associated. It is important to determine if that concern has any merit, in part because these kinds of ads are well positioned to cut through a cluttered media environment and thus may play an outsized role in setting the terms of a campaign. The kind of message we used is precisely the kind of negative ad that produces the most hand-wringing by pundits and politicians about the (assumed to be) detrimental effects of campaign advertising, with its unproven accusations (“investigations” and “charges”) and an emphasis on distrust and an impending sense of doom. Thus, although trait-based attack ads do not tend to dominate the airwaves, the kind of ad we examine here is characteristic of the type that tends to generate the most concern with respect to independent group advertising.<sup>22</sup>

The experimental treatment consisted of whether an attribution was provided for the attack ad and, if so, what type (the specific attributions are delineated in **Appendix 1**). One-fourth of respondents saw no attribution; the sponsorship of the ad was left unstated. For the ads sponsored by an independent group or a candidate, we fully complied with BCRA sponsorship requirements. To be BCRA-compliant, it is now impossible to hide the sponsor of an ad; this constitutes a marked contrast to the pre-BCRA era, in which advertisers often masterfully distracted viewers from noticing the minimal sponsorship information present in the most extremely negative ads. In keeping with those requirements, the attribution was both written and

spoken for both candidates and independent groups, and a photo of the candidate appears in the candidate-sponsored ad (sponsor-identifying photos are not required for independent group ads). One quarter of the sample saw the independent group attribution, while the remaining half of the sample saw ads sponsored by a candidate (Michael Norris).<sup>23</sup>

For our independent group sponsor, we selected a fictional name that has the generic, non-partisan, feel-good connotations shared by many of the recent “First Timer” 527 groups. “Citizens for a Better State Government” is quite similar to many of the 527 group names used in recent years (e.g. “Citizens for Strength and Security,” “Citizens for the Future,” “Citizens for Truth,” “Citizens for a Strong Senate,” etc.), yet was not the name of any existing group, so respondents would have no prior associations with that particular name. After the attack ad, respondents were asked the same questions they had been asked after the positive ads (see **Appendix 2** for question wording).

This design does not incorporate any potential additional effects of free media coverage on ad reception. Although it is possible that ads that garner intense media analysis and criticism could generate directionally-different effects than low-profile ads, it is not clear that would be the case. Analyses of so-called “ad watches” indicate that media scrutiny tends to amplify rather than minimize the intended effects of ads (Pfau and Loudon 1984; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995b; McKinnon and Kaid 1999; Iyengar and Simon 2000).

## **Findings**

With a pre/post design, we are able to compare the candidate scores a respondent provided after viewing the attack ad to the original benchmark score the respondent provided after viewing the two non-experimental ads. Specifically, with ANCOVA, we can predict the post-experiment score based on our experimental treatment (attack ad with no sponsorship information vs. independent group/Citizens for a Better State Government sponsorship vs. candidate/Norris sponsorship) while controlling for the pre-experiment score by including it as a covariate.<sup>24</sup> As compared to the approach of only administering a single test after the experimental intervention and comparing those scores across individuals (where random differences between individuals can cause variance and unnecessary noise) we hold the individual constant with a benchmark measurement prior to our experimental intervention.

In the first analysis, we examine the effects of ad sponsorship on candidate backlash. In H1, we hypothesized that candidate-sponsored messages would generate a substantial degree of backlash towards the candidate, whereas ads sponsored by independent groups and non-sponsored messages would generate relatively less backlash. For this measure, movement downward between the pre- and post-treatment measurements means that Norris's favorability fell after exposure to the attack ad, and the change is displayed by holding the pre-treatment measurement constant at 4.24. In this case, the effects of our experimental treatment are significant (see **Table 2A**) and are substantively large. The change in means on **Table 2A** shows that the candidate is penalized by .85 of a point on a 7-point scale for sponsoring an attack ad himself. Candidates are not entirely off the hook even when they do not sponsor the ad: voters still penalize the non-target candidate somewhat in the other conditions (the backlash effect is significantly greater than 0 in all three conditions), but the penalty is significantly lower than when the ad is sponsored by a candidate (see **Table 3A** for the significance of the group differences using Tukey-Kramer post-hoc testing). Thus, H1 is confirmed.

*[Insert **Table 3** around here]*

In the second analysis, we examine the effects of ad sponsorship on persuasion and confirm our H2c Countervailing Forces Hypothesis that messages do not vary in persuasiveness depending on the sponsor. **Table 2B** shows the favorability change from the pre- to post-experiment measurements, with the value of the post-treatment mean estimated by holding the pre-treatment covariate constant across individuals at its grand mean (4.04). A more persuasive attack ad will produce lower favorability towards Tim Clark and greater movement downward. Overall, our attack ad was quite persuasive; respondents in all conditions moved at least  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a point after viewing the attack against Tim Clark, a movement that represents a significant change. However, we see no differences in persuasion depending on the message sponsor. We are thus able to confirm H2c with the finding that the nature of the ad sponsor – even the presence of having an ad sponsor at all – does not affect the persuasiveness of the negative message.

With no differences in terms of persuasion between the three types of sponsors, but greater backlash towards the candidate when a candidate sponsors the ad, we would expect a confirmation of H3c (effectiveness will be higher when ads are sponsored by independent groups or contain no sponsorship information than when they are sponsored by candidates). This hypothesis was indeed confirmed by our findings (see **Table 2C** for the

model results and **Table 3C** for comparisons between the groups) using the net effectiveness of the ad.<sup>25</sup> To use candidate sponsorship as an example, affect for the target (Clark) drops by -.750 between the pre- and post-measures and also drops for the sponsor (Norris) by -.848 (using actual, not covariate-adjusted, means). Since everything is ultimately relative in a zero-sum two-candidate race, the relative effect on favorability is the change for Norris minus the change for Clark (-.11, which means that Norris ended up slightly worse off for having run the ad). In other words, we see no net benefit – instead, possibly a very slight cost, albeit one that is not statistically significant from zero – to relative candidate favorability when a candidate sponsors the ad.

There is a substantial net favorability benefit for Norris, however, when an ad either contains no sponsorship information or when an independent group sponsors the ad. Both produce a similar result: a net benefit of about half a favorability point in favor of Norris. As we noted before, both types of ads result in significant backlash towards Norris even though they are not technically sponsored by him, but the persuasive benefit of the ad offsets the backlash effect, thus benefiting Norris overall.

Favorability is an interesting variable because it allows us to observe the separate mechanisms of persuasion and backlash operating beneath the surface. For a race involving fictional candidates, we are probably safest focusing on a leading-indicator variable like favorability. But candidates ultimately try to improve favorability scores because they are commonly thought to be leading indicators of vote choice and so voting preference is also an outcome measure of importance. To address this question as a secondary confirmation of H3c, we also asked for vote preference on a 5-point scale for each candidate after the positive ads and again after the attack ads. The findings for vote preference conform to the findings from our analysis of favorability differences, albeit in a slightly less dramatic manner (see **Table 2D** for the results).

As mentioned earlier, we also ran the results depending on whether the respondent shared partisanship with the ad sponsor or ad target. The results are presented in the web appendix. The bottom line of that analysis, however, is that the presence of partisan alignment in the model does not change any of the core findings from this study: overall, ads sponsored by independent groups are more effective than candidate-sponsored ads. Persuasiveness (and, by extension, credibility and trustworthiness) does not appear to be particularly conditional on partisan alignment: the sponsor has relatively little effect on whether partisans who share the party of the target candidate or who share the party of the sponsoring candidate are persuaded by the

content of the negative ad. There are more differences for backlash: as expected, respondents who share the partisanship of the target candidate are more likely to penalize the sponsoring candidate for going negative. With reference to net effectiveness, ads sponsored by independent groups are moderately more effective than candidate-sponsored ads regardless of whether the respondents share or oppose the partisanship of the candidate who benefits from the ad; however, the difference is somewhat more dramatic for partisans who share the party of the target of the ad. With reference to vote preference, sponsorship by independent groups rather than candidates is especially effective for moving respondents of the opposite party over to the side of the benefiting candidate.

For independents, the attack ad has essentially a neutral effect on them, regardless of who sponsors it. However, digging beneath the surface it is clear that independents are affected by ad sponsorship: they have stronger reactions to candidate-sponsored ads than ads sponsored by independent groups. However, the stronger backlash and stronger persuasion that is produced by candidate-sponsored ads rather than ads sponsored by independent groups still combines to produce essentially zero net effectiveness, so the difference for independents in reactions to sponsorship is ultimately inconsequential.

## **Conclusion**

The primary finding from this analysis is that a trait-based attack ad sponsored by an unknown independent group is more effective than an identical ad sponsored by a candidate in the eyes of the public overall. While our experiment allows us to carefully address the effects of the kinds of ads that have generated the most concern among pundits and the public, many of the negative ads on the airwaves are not as harshly negative or as personally negative as the ad utilized in this experiment. What might this experiment have to say about responses to other kinds of opponent-focused ads? This study shows that it is largely differences in backlash, not persuasion, which produce sponsorship effects. As long as an ad produces backlash, there is little theoretical reason to think that the tenor of a negative ad would affect the relative difference in candidate backlash associated with candidate-sponsored versus independent-group sponsored ads. Kahn and Kenney 2004 find that while “mudslinging” (extremely negative campaigning, as defined by campaign managers) generates a

particularly high degree of backlash for incumbents, other negative ads produced significant backlash as well.<sup>26</sup> In sum, there are reasons to expect that these findings are likely to be generally applicable, although the differences between sponsorship conditions may become more modest for less negative ads.

Of course, negative ads and campaigns come in many different flavors. Even the seemingly clean distinction between an issue-based ad and one that focuses on traits is, in reality, often very blurry. Some issue-based ads focus on issues pure and simple, but many of them do not: the underlying purpose seems to not be to discuss issues per se, but rather for voters to regard the target of the ad as having personal characteristics unfit for the office in question. The infamous independent ad featuring Willie Horton is an example of how this can be done implicitly; the text of the ad focuses completely on issues and no direct effort is made to portray the target of the ad (Michael Dukakis) as being someone who lacks appropriate personal characteristics for the Presidency, yet it clearly seemed to coincide with – and reinforce – the general effort to portray him as being “not tough enough.” Using an ad that centers on issues to raise questions about a candidate’s personal characteristics can also be done explicitly: for example, the text of the controversial independent ad linking Sarah Palin with aerial wolf hunting is almost completely focused on a discussion of policy issues, but the last sentence of the ad – “Do we really want a vice president who champions such savagery?” – seems to indicate that the true purpose of the ad is really to undermine her on a personal level. The bottom line is that although the present study is the first one to analyze how the public responds to attack television ads by unknown independent groups, it should not be the last: to fully confirm whether the theory delineated in this study as well as its specific findings apply generally, scholars in the future should examine how sponsorship influences the public response to the entire spectrum of negative ads and campaign situations. Scholars should examine the role of rebuttals, and one-sided versus two-sided information flows; races with known incumbents versus open-seat races; races at lower levels of office versus races at higher levels of office; and so on.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, examining the length of time that these differences in effectiveness might persist for individuals could also be an interesting avenue for future research. Examining such a wide range of campaign scenarios will be very resource-intensive, but is worthwhile given how important independent groups have now become in American politics today. If such an effort is undertaken, my predication is that the underlying theories presented here will hold for most of the

negative ads on the airwaves and across many different campaign contexts, but we can only know for sure once a range of different campaign and message dimensions have been specifically tested.

What are the wider implications of the specific findings from this study for American politics? The particular kind of attack ads examined here clearly have the potential to have a significant influence on the dynamics of elections in part because, to the extent that they may generate controversy, they may garner free media coverage which can extend their reach well beyond actual ad expenditures. The advertisements sponsored in 2004 by Swift Boat Veterans for Truth are the most memorable example along these lines. This study indicates that candidates have every reason to hope for an unofficial division of labor, in which independent groups that are unaccountable to voters will do the dirty work of running these kinds of harsh attack ads that the candidates would rather not do themselves. To the extent that these kinds of ads can be outsourced to independent groups, candidates can best put themselves in a position to gain the benefits associated with this kind of harsh negative advertising while avoiding the costs.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, outsourcing the harshest kinds of ads to independent groups could be a problematic strategy if the groups themselves have clearly identifiable origins, such that voters would be more easily able to link the activities of such groups to particular candidates or to parties more generally. Yet as was noted previously, the percentage of outside groups who disclosed the names of their donors has fallen to only 32 percent in 2010 and, moreover, such groups frequently choose generic names to obscure their origins. The fact that the public cannot identify the contributors to so many of these groups thus makes it easier for these groups to go on the attack, and thus helps to explain why negative ads by these groups are now so much more prevalent than in previous eras. In this regard, it is telling that in their prominent 1995 book arguing that negative ads are concerning for American democracy, Ansolabehere and Iyengar did not see independent group advertisements as a cause for anxiety principally because the ads sponsored by these groups were overwhelmingly positive at the time they were writing.<sup>29</sup>

In turn, outsourcing these kinds of ads to independent groups would be hard to pull off if campaigns and independent groups were truly “independent” of each other in their advertising decisions. Yet although independent groups are explicitly barred from coordinating and communicating with campaigns and parties, staffers and consultants often cycle between working for independent groups and campaigns. While such

movement has generally been found by the FEC to be legal, there is legitimate concern about how independent many of the groups really are from the campaigns they benefit. The Willie Horton ad is one example in this regard: the ad was funded by a group that was independent of the George H.W. Bush campaign -- the National Security Political Action Committee (NSPAC) -- but the media consultant who created the ad, Larry McCarthy, had previously been a senior Vice President of the Ailes Communications, the main media group for the Bush campaign. McCarthy later admitted during an FEC investigation that he had been in contact with Ailes at various points during the campaign (the FEC split 3-3 on whether such coordination was illegal). Swift Boat Veterans for Truth is another prominent illustration of this dynamic. In August 2004, the lead election lawyer for the Bush campaign team resigned once it was made public that Swift Boat was one of his clients. A member of the steering committee for veterans' issues on the Bush campaign also resigned after appearing in one of the Swift Boat ads and Jeb Bush sent a letter of thanks to the largest donor to the Swift Boat 527 for his "willingness to stand up against John Kerry." Although these activities were not deemed by the FEC to constitute illegal coordination, they are of course highly questionable from the standpoint of accountability; in public, President Bush distanced himself from the group by strongly criticizing the initial ad run it ran, albeit a week after it stopped running. The overall findings from the present study provide further indication that there are considerable incentives for questionable coordination between campaigns and independent groups.

Moreover, independent groups need not be independent of one another, and recent elections have seen systematic coordination efforts between groups who share similar ideological goals. During the 2010 election cycle, for example, *The New York Times* reports that conservative groups participated in regular strategy sessions to divvy up races in order to avoid duplicating their efforts (October 25, 2010). The strategy sessions were coordinated by several independent groups which shared office space and were founded, in part, with Karl Rove's assistance (ibid). Through such efforts, like-minded independent groups can maximize their power within individual campaigns and within elections more generally.

To be sure, outsourcing attack ads to independent groups is not cost free for candidates. With no control over the content of such ads, it can make it harder for a candidate to stay "on message" and control the campaign dialogue.<sup>30</sup> However, candidate control of the campaign dialogue is often an elusive goal anyway. Ceding some control over the message may seem to be a small price for candidates, nearly all of whom would

like to have more ads on the air than they can afford to run and would likely prefer to be in a position to distance themselves from the harshest negative messages.

For those concerned about the accountability issues raised by independent group advertising, the future does not look promising: in the wake of the *Citizens United* decision, corporations and unions can now contribute to independent groups in order to air campaign-related ads and they will generally have substantial incentives to hide their identities from the public in order to avoid alienating consumers, shareholders, and membership bases. While IRS regulations require regular public disclosure of the donors to 527 groups, the IRS is expressly prohibited from releasing the identities of donors to 501(c) nonprofit groups, thereby preventing the press and voters from identifying who paid for those ads.<sup>31</sup> Largely in response to more active enforcement of 527 group donor-disclosure requirements, donations to 501(c) groups tripled in 2008 relative to 2004 levels and there is strong reason to expect that this trend will continue (Campaign Finance Institute Report, February 25, 2009).

Some Members of Congress consider those kinds of donor disclosure loopholes to be a problem and have proposed bills like the “DISCLOSE Act” which, among other things, required that the biggest donors to independent groups be identified specifically within advertisements sponsored by those groups.<sup>32</sup> Under conditions of clear donor disclosure, corporate and union sponsors with membership, shareholder, and/or customer bases they cannot afford to alienate would presumably be more likely to shy away from the most negative and controversial ads. Yet many Republican leaders strenuously object to this legislation and its passage in a filibuster-prone Senate anytime soon seems extremely unlikely (Franz 2010, 19). Moreover, even if the legislation did pass, many individuals, some groups would be largely unaffected by disclosure. The present study shows that the variation in net ad effectiveness between sponsors is due to differences in backlash rather than differences in persuasive power. As such, even increased disclosure will not change the fact that harsh attack ads sponsored by outside entities will tend to be more effective than comparable ads sponsored by candidates, and that will tend to enhance the relative power of ads sponsored by independent groups on the airwaves.

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Table 1  
Hypotheses

|                      |                           | Candidate Trust Hypothesis   |                             |                    |                      |  |
|----------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--|
|                      |                           | H1                           | H2a                         | H3a                |                      |  |
| Candidate ad         | has <b>MORE</b> backlash  | has <b>MORE</b> credibility  | is <b>EQUALLY</b> effective | <i>compared to</i> | Independent Group ad |  |
| Candidate ad         | has <b>MORE</b> backlash  | has <b>MORE</b> credibility  | is <b>EQUALLY</b> effective | <i>compared to</i> | No Sponsor ad        |  |
| Independent Group ad | has <b>EQUAL</b> backlash | has <b>EQUAL</b> credibility | is <b>EQUALLY</b> effective | <i>compared to</i> | No Sponsor ad        |  |

|                      |                           | Candidate Distrust Hypothesis |                              |                    |                      |  |
|----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--|
|                      |                           | H1                            | H2b                          | H3b                |                      |  |
| Candidate ad         | has <b>MORE</b> backlash  | has <b>LESS</b> credibility   | is <b>FAR LESS</b> effective | <i>compared to</i> | Independent Group ad |  |
| Candidate ad         | has <b>MORE</b> backlash  | has <b>LESS</b> credibility   | is <b>FAR LESS</b> effective | <i>compared to</i> | No Sponsor ad        |  |
| Independent Group ad | has <b>EQUAL</b> backlash | has <b>MORE</b> credibility   | is <b>MORE</b> effective     | <i>compared to</i> | No Sponsor ad        |  |

|                      |                           | Countervailing Forces Hypothesis |                             |                    |                      |  |
|----------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--|
|                      |                           | H1                               | H2c                         | H3c                |                      |  |
| Candidate ad         | has <b>MORE</b> backlash  | has <b>EQUAL</b> credibility     | is <b>LESS</b> effective    | <i>compared to</i> | Independent Group ad |  |
| Candidate ad         | has <b>MORE</b> backlash  | has <b>EQUAL</b> credibility     | is <b>LESS</b> effective    | <i>compared to</i> | No Sponsor ad        |  |
| Independent Group ad | has <b>EQUAL</b> backlash | has <b>EQUAL</b> credibility     | is <b>EQUALLY</b> effective | <i>compared to</i> | No Sponsor ad        |  |

**Table 2**

ANCOVA results  
 Effect of Sponsorship of an Anti-Tim Clark Ad  
 on Backlash, Persuasiveness, Effectiveness, and Vote Preference

|           | D.V.  | df         | F<br>(of<br>Sponsor) | Sig (of<br>Sponsor) (at<br>.05, 2-tailed) | Groups               | Adjusted<br>Pre-test<br>Mean<br>(grand<br>mean for<br>all groups) | Estimated<br>Post-Test<br>Mean<br>(adjusted for<br>constant<br>covariate<br>value) | Change<br>from<br>Time A to<br>Time B | Sig of<br>change(<br>at .05) | N   |
|-----------|---|------------|----------------------|---|----------------------|---|--|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----|
| <b>2A</b> | Norris<br>Favorability<br>("BACKLASH")                        | 2,<br>1372 | 31.72                | 0.00 *                                    | No Attribution       | 4.24  | 3.86   | <b>0.38</b> *                         |                              | 341 |
|           |   |            |                      |   | Independent Group Ad | 4.24  | 3.97   | <b>0.27</b> *                         |                              | 330 |
|           |   |            |                      |   | Candidate            | 4.24  | 3.39   | <b>0.85</b> *                         |                              | 701 |
| <b>2B</b> | Clark<br>Favorability<br>("PERSUASIVE-<br>NESS")              | 2,<br>1373 | 0.28                 | 0.76                                      | No Attribution       | 4.04  | 3.24   | <b>0.80</b> *                         |                              | 342 |
|           |   |            |                      |   | Independent Group Ad | 4.04  | 3.23   | <b>0.81</b> *                         |                              | 331 |
|           |   |            |                      |   | Candidate            | 4.04  | 3.28   | <b>0.76</b> *                         |                              | 700 |
| <b>2C</b> | Norris<br>Favorability<br>Advantage<br>("EFFECTIVE-<br>NESS") | 2,<br>1361 | 18.66                | 0.00 *                                    | No Attribution       | 0.19  | 0.67   | <b>-0.48</b> *                        |                              | 339 |
|           |   |            |                      |   | Independent Group Ad | 0.19  | 0.70   | <b>-0.51</b> *                        |                              | 327 |
|           |   |            |                      |   | Candidate            | 0.19  | 0.11   | <b>0.08</b>                           |                              | 695 |
| <b>2D</b> | Vote Difference<br>("VOTE<br>PREFERENCE")                     | 2,<br>1387 | 4.79                 | 0.01 *                                    | No Attribution       | 3.08  | 3.28   | <b>-0.20</b> *                        |                              | 346 |
|           |   |            |                      |   | Independent Group Ad | 3.08  | 3.30   | <b>-0.21</b> *                        |                              | 339 |
|           |   |            |                      |   | Candidate            | 3.08  | 3.17   | <b>-0.08</b> *                        |                              | 702 |

**Table 3**

Post-Hoc Comparisons Between the Experimental Conditions

|           | D.V.  | Tukey-Kramer Post-Hoc Comparisons  | Difference in Estimated Means for Post-Test | Sig (at .05, 2-tailed) |
|-----------|---|------------------------------------|---|------------------------|
| <b>3A</b> | Norris Favorability ("BACKLASH")                | Candidate vs. No Attrib            | <b>-0.47</b>                                | <b>*</b>               |
|           |   | Candidate vs. Independent Group    | <b>-0.58</b>                                | <b>*</b>               |
|           |   | Independent Group vs. No Attrib    | <b>0.11</b>                                 |                        |
| <b>3B</b> | Clark Favorability ("PERSUASIVENESS")           | Candidate vs. No Attrib            | <b>0.04</b>                                 |                        |
|           |   | Candidate vs. Independent Group    | <b>0.05</b>                                 |                        |
|           |   | Independent Group Ad vs. No Attrib | <b>-0.01</b>                                |                        |
| <b>3C</b> | Norris Favorability Advantage ("EFFECTIVENESS") | Candidate vs. No Attrib            | <b>-0.57</b>                                | <b>*</b>               |
|           |   | Candidate vs. Independent Group    | <b>-0.59</b>                                | <b>*</b>               |
|           |   | Independent Group vs. No Attrib    | <b>0.03</b>                                 |                        |
| <b>3D</b> | Vote Difference ("VOTE PREFERENCE")             | Candidate vs. No Attrib            | <b>-0.11</b>                                |                        |
|           |   | Candidate vs. Independent Group    | <b>-0.13</b>                                | <b>*</b>               |
|           |   | Independent Group vs. No Attrib    | <b>0.02</b>                                 |                        |

*Note: The Tukey-Kramer test adjusts for the family-wise error rate in assessing the significance of differences between groups.*

## Appendix 1

### Ad Scripts

| <b>POSITIVE AD for MICHAEL NORRIS</b>   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>VERBAL SCRIPT</b>  | <b>VISUAL &amp; AUDIO CUES</b>   |
| There's a different kind of candidate ready to serve in the State Assembly; (RANDOM ROTATION: Democrat / Republican / No Party Cue) Michael Norris. | Photo of Norris shaking the hand of a constituent. TEXT: "Michael Norris" flashes on the screen. Happy music plays throughout the ad.        |
| Michael Norris is a proven leader, with years of experience standing up for our community.  | Photo of Norris talking animatedly about an issue.   |
| Michael Norris is respected for his knowledge, integrity, and leadership  | Photo of Norris writing at his desk with a flag in the background. The words "Knowledge", "Integrity," and "Leadership" flash on the screen. |
| He's a devoted father and husband. His strong principals and sound beliefs mean that he will...   | Video of a child playing happily at a playground   |
| ...continue to fight for regular people, working hard to keep jobs in our community   | Video of workers working in a factory setting  |
| Michael Norris for State Assembly. Proven leadership that works.  | A close up Norris smiling directly at the camera. TEXT: "Michael Norris -- State Assembly."  |

| <b>POSITIVE AD for TIM CLARK</b>  |   |
|---|---|
| <b>VERBAL SCRIPT</b>  | <b>VISUAL &amp; AUDIO CUES</b>  |
| Our State Assembly needs a committed leader who can...  | Video of a flag waving. Happy music plays in the background throughout the ad.  |
| ...work effectively to solve our community's problems.  | Close up of Tim Clark smiling.  |
| (PARTY CUE which complements the cue provided in the Norris ad: Democrat / Republican / No Party Cue) Tim Clark's common sense approach to solving the toughest problems has produced a track record of strong results. | Photo of Tim Clark talking with staff members in an office, with a flag in the background. TEXT: "Strong Results" flashes on screen over photo. |
| Clark will bring that experience to the Capitol and work hard to tackle our state's most difficult issues quickly.  | Photo of two documents (entitled "Tim Clark's Plan for a Better Economy" and "Tim Clark's Plan for a Safer Community.")                         |
| Tim Clark is a family man whose dedication has never been questioned. He works tirelessly for people like you in order to improve our state.  | Camera moves in on photos of Tim Clark talking with appreciative constituents   |
| Vote for Tim Clark. A strong leader who will make a difference.   | Photo of Tim Clark in a formal legislative setting. The photo is bordered by a flag. TEXT: "A strong leader who will make a difference."        |

| <b>NEGATIVE AD against TIM CLARK</b>  |  |
|---|--|
| <b>VERBAL SCRIPT</b>  | <b>VISUAL &amp; AUDIO CUES</b>   |
| What do you <i>really</i> know about Tim Clark?   | Close up of Tim Clark smiling (same photo as from the Clark positive ad). Fades from color to black and white. Ominous music and occasional low-note sound effects play in the background throughout the ad. |
| Did you know that while Tim Clark served on City Council he was absent for over 30% of the votes? | Black and white photo of Tim Clark grimacing while in a formal legislative setting. TEXT "Missed Votes" flashes on screen.   |
| And when Tim Clark was head of his family's construction company...                               | Camera moving in on an expensive looking house.  |
| ...the IRS investigated it for tax evasion multiple times while he looked the other way?          | An IRS 1040 form moving across the screen. TEXT: "Tax Evasion" flashes up on the screen.   |
| Did you know that Tim Clark has faced numerous charges of bad debts and campaign violations?      | Black and white photo an annoyed-looking Tim Clark talking to a man. TEXT: "Bad Debts."  |
| Is Tim Clark <i>really</i> the kind of man you can trust to represent <i>you</i> ?                | END PHOTO - Black and white photo of Tim Clark laughing in a vaguely evil-looking manner   |

| <b>SPONSORSHIP SCREENS</b>  |   |
|---|---|
| <b>VERBAL SCRIPT</b>  | <b>VISUAL &amp; AUDIO CUES</b>  |
| NO SPONSORSHIP CONDITION: No sponsorship information is provided.   | End photo (see above) with no cues provided   |
| CITIZENS FOR A BETTER STATE GOVERNMENT CONDITION (END): "Citizens for a Better State Government is responsible for the contents of this advertisement." | End photo switching to a black screen with written script: "Paid for by Citizens for a Better State Government and not authorized by any candidate or candidate's committee. www.citizensforstategovernment.org. Citizens for a Better State Government is responsible for the contents of this advertisement." |
| CANDIDATE CONDITION 1 (START): "I'm Michael Norris and I approved this message."  | START OF AD: Photo of smiling Norris for 2 seconds, with voiceover. END OF AD: End photo shown for 4 seconds with a written statement ("Approved by Michael Norris and paid for by Norris for Assembly")  |
| CANDIDATE CONDITION 2 (END): "I'm Michael Norris and I approved this message."  | END OF AD: End photo shown for 2 seconds with a written statement ("Approved by Michael Norris and paid for by Norris for Assembly"). The written statement remains on the screen while the photo faded to a smiling Norris photo and the candidate's voiceover.  |

## Appendix 2

### Survey Questions

**Pre-test:** Asked after the respondent views the positive ads but before showing negative ad. Asked with candidates' pictures and names on screen:

- On a scale of 1-7, where “7” is extremely favorable and “1” is extremely unfavorable, how favorable do you currently feel toward Michael Norris based on what you know at this point? (Scale 1-7)
- On a scale of 1-7, where “7” is extremely favorable and “1” is extremely unfavorable, how favorable do you currently feel toward Tim Clark based on what you know at this point? (Scale 1-7)
- Based on what you currently know about the candidates so far, would you probably...(1. strongly lean towards voting for Tim Clark; 2. slightly lean towards voting for Tim Clark; 3. be completely undecided between Michael Norris and Tim Clark; 4. slightly lean towards voting for Michael Norris; 5. strongly lean towards voting for Michael Norris)

**Post-test:** Asked after the respondent views the negative ad. Asked with candidates' pictures and associated names on screen:

- On a scale of 1-7, where “7” extremely favorable and “1” is extremely unfavorable, how favorable do you currently feel toward Michael Norris based on what you know at this point? (Scale 1-7)
- On a scale of 1-7, where “7” extremely favorable and “1” is extremely unfavorable, how favorable do you currently feel toward Tim Clark based on what you know at this point? (Scale 1-7)
- Based on what you currently know about the candidates so far, would you probably...(1. strongly lean towards voting for Tim Clark; 2. slightly lean towards voting for Tim Clark; 3. be completely undecided between Michael Norris and Tim Clark; 4. slightly lean towards voting for Michael Norris; 5. strongly lean towards voting for Michael Norris)

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<sup>1</sup> Garramone 1984; Garramone and Smith 1984; Garramone 1985; Pfau et al. 2001; Pfau et al. 2002; Groenendyk and Valentino 2002 all studied known groups with clear partisan affiliations.

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes an unknown group will explicitly cue partisanship or ideology (“Conservatives for Patients’ Rights,” “United Progressives for Victory,” etc.) but “Citizens for” and “Voters for” kinds of names – along with

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“Change to Win,” “Economic Freedom Fund,” etc. – that are designed to avoid appearance of any kind of ideological or partisan bias are very common. The present study is focused on the latter type of group rather than the former.

<sup>3</sup> Shen and Wu (2002) had an analysis of 150 undergraduates split into six different conditions involving newspaper article treatments. In an era of rapidly declining significance of printed newspapers, it is crucial to evaluate the effects of television ads; the processing of sponsorship information may be very different in printed form (where it is always in front of the respondent) than in television advertising (where it only appears for a small fraction of the advertising time). Moreover, undergraduates may respond to attack ads differently than the general public.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in 2010, the proportion of independent ads relative to ads with other types of sponsors increased by nearly 50% in the House and Senate combined as compared to 2008.

<sup>5</sup> 527s are tax-exempt groups organized under section 527 of the IRS code that can collect unrestricted donations as long as they do not coordinate with candidates or campaigns. 527 groups face minimal regulation by the FEC, although they are required to disclose donors to the IRS at regular intervals.

<sup>6</sup> This finding is based on an expansive analysis of the tone of all ads broadcast in the 100 largest media markets in the U.S. in 2004 (Franz et. al. 2008, 62). A recalculation of the Franz et. al. data shows that the percentage of negative ads from all sources as a percentage of total political ads on the airwaves rose from 32% in 2000 to 38% in 2004 (and with an N of 666,120 ads in 2000 and 1,220,046 ads in 2004, that represents both a significant difference and a substantial increase in the absolute number of negative ads on the airwaves). With respect to independent groups, the Franz et al. data indicate that the total percentage of exclusively negative ads increased only slightly between 2000 and 2004 (from 70% to 73%) but there was a substantial shift from positive ads to comparative ads (in 2000, 25% of independent group ads were positive while in 2004 that number dropped to just 13%).

<sup>7</sup> Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995, 129-130.

<sup>8</sup> See Falk, Grizard, and McDonald 2005, 17-20 for a discussion of how many groups deliberately obscure their origins and intentions with ambiguous group names.

<sup>9</sup> An example of this dynamic is “Americans for Prosperity” – a group that is largely funded by Charles and David Koch, two billionaires who are longtime libertarians. In one recent ad funded by American of Prosperity

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that sought to galvanize support for the Tea Party movement, the announcer noted “Today, the voices of average Americans are being drowned out by lobbyists and special interests...But you can do something about it” (*The New Yorker*, August 30 2010).

<sup>10</sup> In this regard, one Democratic Representative targeted by what he deemed to be unfair attack ads funded by an anonymous group recently discovered he had no one to complain to: when he visited the official address of the group in question to protest the ads, he found only a rented mailbox (*The New York Times*, 12 October 2010).

<sup>11</sup> For a good summary of evidence on this point, see Geer 2006, 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Magleby, for example, found that even among survey respondents who correctly identified a non-candidate entity as the sponsor of an ad, the majority still held the candidate responsible to at least some degree (2004, 99).

<sup>13</sup> This should especially be true given that the sponsorship disclaimer required by BCRA for independent groups explicitly states that there is no connection between the candidate and the group sponsoring the ad.

<sup>14</sup> The percentage of people answering “hardly any” ranges from 9%-14% from 1972-2004. During that same time period, 32%-52% of respondents answered “quite a few of them.” Results are available from the ANES website at [http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab5a\\_4.htm](http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab5a_4.htm)

<sup>15</sup> According to Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner, “evidence bearing directly on the question of whether attacks undermine affect for their targets more than for the attackers themselves is in surprisingly short supply” and they also find in their meta-analysis that the evidence in the literature for net effectiveness is inconclusive on the matter (2007, 1182-1183).

<sup>16</sup> As will be reported later in this paper, our expectation for H1 is, in fact, confirmed by the data: backlash is stronger for candidate ads.

<sup>17</sup> This study was in the field from November 8- 22, 2006. The CCES was a cooperative venture of 39 universities and over 100 political scientists and consisted of a survey of 38,443 Americans conducted in 2006. Each CCES team then drafted its own unique content that followed the common content. The 1500 respondents for our study were drawn randomly from the total pool of 38,443 post-election CCES respondents. Our study had an AAPOR response rate of 64.8%. The CCES was completed online and fielded by the survey

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research firm Polimetrix, Inc., located in Palo Alto, CA. Steve Ansolabehere was the Principal Investigator of the project.

<sup>18</sup> The N sizes for most of the core analyses were in the 1362-1387 range depending on the “Don’t Know” and skip rates for each question. Our “Don’t Know” rate for our core questions was approximately 6% per question (which results in a missing rate of approximately 8.5% for analyses that depend upon responses to two questions).

<sup>19</sup> Polimetrix approximates a random sample of the United States through a process called "sample matching" (see Rivers 2006 for a full description of Polimetrix’s Sample Matching process). Polimetrix recruits Internet users to participate in their Internet panel by providing modest compensation and incentives for participation. This very large panel (Polimetrix claims to have interviewed over 2 million respondents in the U.S. since 2004) is then used as a population from which random samples can be drawn. Polimetrix then uses a "target matrix" to match the characteristics of a random sample to characteristics held by members of their panel in order to approximate a random sample.

<sup>20</sup> Recognition of state assembly representatives is presumably quite low and assembly districts are very small so it is unlikely that anyone in our sample would have recognized these candidates; however, to be exceedingly cautious, we excluded people from the sample frame with zip codes located in the real candidates’ actual assembly districts.

<sup>21</sup> The only exception is the finding that candidate-sponsored vs. independent group ads are not significantly different for the vote preference dependent variable (although they are directionally consistent) when the sample is restricted just to the one-third of respondents who received no party cue.

<sup>22</sup> Franz et. al., find that in 2004, 59% of all negative ads were centered on policy issues, while 39% focused mainly or partly on candidate characteristics (2008, 121). It should be noted that classifying whether an ad is best seen as being issue-based or trait-based is often not easy in part because ads that center on issues frequently seek to raise questions in the minds of voters about whether the personal characteristics of the targeted candidates makes them unfit for office (“only an extreme candidate would support such a policy...” seems to be the underlying takeaway of many ads where the text of the commercial is issue-focused).

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<sup>23</sup> BCRA requirements provide some flexibility for the placement of candidate sponsorship information; as such, we randomly varied the disclosure between the start and end of the ad (Appendix 1 describes the script and placement differences). Sponsorship placement does not affect our results. There is also flexibility as to whether candidates add extra information to the sponsorship disclaimer. Campaigns have been playing with those kinds of variants over the years, but the minimum disclaimer (“I am Michael Norris and I sponsored this message”) was most common by far in recent ads. This would be an interesting area for further research, however.

<sup>24</sup> Repeated-measures ANOVA and gains/change-score analysis using ANOVA are also commonly used with repeated measures designs, although ANCOVA is a common choice for the special case of pre/post experimental designs because it most efficiently controls for random variation between groups in the initial measurement. While ANCOVA is utilized throughout this paper, all of the results are equivalent regardless of the analytical technique utilized.

<sup>25</sup> The calculation is (Norris Post Favorability – Clark Post Favorability) – (Norris Pre Favorability – Clark Pre Favorability).

<sup>26</sup> Kahn and Kenney’s results for challengers were directionally consistent but less conclusive. Note also that 33 (of 40 total) studies identified by the Lau et al. 2007 meta-analysis as finding a significant backlash effect, and those studies utilized a broad range of different definitions for negativity.

<sup>27</sup> One logical question is whether independent groups simply arise on both sides of a race, thus effectively cancelling one other out. While symmetry in spending may sometimes occur, there are also many examples where substantial imbalances have been in place. For example, according to Paul Wilson, a Republican media consultant and CEO of Wilson-Grand Communications, “In the 2010 election cycle there were a number of races that we were a part of or observed where independent expenditure committees alone or in combination with other independent expenditure committees created a marked imbalance in advertising for a candidate when compared to the opponent’s independent expenditure committees. Candidates receiving the help were gleeful and one on the short end was resigned and depressed about the onslaught.” (from an interview conducted with Deborah Jordan Brooks on May 6, 2011).

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<sup>28</sup> That being said, the 2010 election cycle certainly included more than a few exceptions to the idea that candidates are especially concerned about avoiding backlash from the attacks they sponsor. The “Aqua Buddha” ad – called “repulsive,” “dangerous,” “desperate” by various sources– was sponsored by a Democratic candidate and is just one of many examples where accuracy and/or appropriateness did not appear to be of great concern to congressional-candidate sponsors (*The Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 24, 2010). Of course, candidates who directly sponsor such ads may well pay a substantial political price. For example, Elizabeth Dole sponsored a harsh ad in 2008 that sought to link her opponent to a group called “Godless Americans;” backlash from the ad is regarded as having greatly undermined Dole, who decisively lost the race (*The Washington Post*, October 18, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> See Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 127-133. As they conclude (p. 129): “independent money isn’t bad for elections, since it goes overwhelmingly to produce positive messages.” It should be noted that many scholars have convincingly argued that negative messages are a critical aspect of campaign discourse. In particular, John Geer is a prominent proponent of the merits of negativity and makes a convincing theoretical argument that it helps voters hold candidates accountable for their actions (2006). In his empirical work on the topic, Geer finds that negative ads are superior to positive ads in many different respects; most critically, he finds that negative ads are more likely to mention a source than positive ads and are more likely to focus on issues that are important to the public. Geer explicitly exempts ads sponsored by independent groups from his analysis, however: his focus is exclusively on ads sponsored by presidential candidates and they may be motivated to produce higher quality negative ads at least partially in order to avoid voter backlash.

<sup>30</sup> See Cassata 1998 for a discussion of how advertising sponsored by independent groups can pose challenges for the message strategies used by campaigns.

<sup>31</sup> Cases that challenge the constitutionality of disclosure requirements for 527s are currently working their way through the courts.

<sup>32</sup> “DISCLOSE” is short for “Democracy Is Strengthened by Casting Light on Spending in Elections”. It was introduced on April 29, 2010 by Senator Chuck Schumer and Representative Chris Van Hollen.