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# HOW RELIGIOUS CONTENT IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGN ADVERTISING AFFECTS INTENTION TO VOTE

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**Abstract**

A review of the literature reveals that there is a gap in political advertising research that does not measure the effects of a person's level of religious involvement on his or her perceptions of religious content in campaign advertisements. This study hypothesizes that participants with a higher level of religious involvement will be more likely to view the candidate favorably and that participants who have a favorable view of the candidate will have a higher intention to vote for the candidate. The study surveys a sample of primarily undergraduate students at a mid-sized university in central Texas and subjects them to a political campaign video advertisement containing religious content. The survey measures respondents' attitude toward the advertisement, attitude toward the candidate, and intention to vote. It also captures their demographic information, including their religious affiliation and level of involvement. After analyzing the data, both hypotheses are supported. This report suggests direction for future research based on the study's findings.

## **Introduction**

### Research Problem

In the field of political campaign advertising, a great deal of research has been done to measure the effectiveness of one strategy over another. The literature review examined several studies which analyze the differences between positive and negative advertising (Jackson, Mondak, and Huckfeldt, 2009). Past research has analyzed the role of religion in advertising and messaging from the candidates, and some studies attempt to quantify religion and measure it in terms of influence during the 2004 Presidential election (Guth, Kellstedt, Smidt, and Green, 2006). However, little recent research was found examining the effects of a person's religious involvement on his or her perception of political campaign advertising and intention to vote, which would be of great interest to political candidates and their campaigns. This study serves to fill the gap in the research and measure the effect of religious content in political campaign advertisements in regard to intention to vote.

### Significance

There are many factors to consider when creating a political campaign advertisement. This study contributes to the existing literature to better equip political campaigns and advertising agencies to reach a religious demographic. This research will measure the effectiveness of political advertisements that incorporate religious content and will better identify which demographic responds positively or negatively to such advertising.

The purpose of this quantitative, experimental survey study is to use the principles of the theory of planned behavior to determine how the religious content in a televised political advertisement affects people's perceptions of a candidate and their intention to vote for the

candidate. We are controlling for the content of the advertisement that will be shown to students at a mid-sized university in central Texas. The independent variable of intent to vote refers to whether a participant would vote for the candidate based on the television advertisement. The dependent variable of religious content in a television advertisement will be defined as the candidates' explicit sharing of his religious beliefs. The intervening variable will be defined as the degree of likability of the candidate.

### **Literature Review**

A large quantity of data has been gathered regarding negative advertising vs. positive advertising in political campaigns, but the results have been conflicting (Stevens, 2008). This study does not attempt to examine this area, but it has been an increasing popular research topic in the field of political advertising.

While a variety of research has been conducted regarding campaign advertising and its effects, little research has been done to measure the impact that religious content within campaign television advertisements has on voter perceptions of a candidate. J.C. Green cites that while Europe has largely secular politics, the politics of the United States is largely rooted in religion (2009). Green suggests that the diversity of religious affiliation, belief, and practice may be highly important, and this research study moves to begin analyzing how religious practice may affect voter perceptions toward candidates.

There have been a few studies on presidential elections and the role religion plays in them. DiSalvo and Copulsky discuss the role of religion in the 2008 presidential primaries, analyzing how three different candidates included religion in the discussion of their political beliefs during their campaigns (2009). Furthermore, Contemporary Sociology published data

that was collected by the Henry Institute National Survey on Religion and Public Life and identified the “God gap” as being the tendency of the highly religious to vote Republican and the less religious to vote Democratic (2007).

Earlier studies that address the role of religion in presidential campaigns were conducted by Fox and Sandler about the 2004 presidential election and were trying to measure that the “level of religious commitment and activity [of a voter] was the primary indicator of voting behavior” (2003). Furthermore, Guth, Kellstedt, Smidt and Green conducted a similar study in their “Religious Influences in the 2004 Presidential Election” article and concluded that religion played a crucial role in swing states and contributed largely to the win of the Republican party’s candidate for Presidency (2006). Camp also conducted a study of how important of a role religion played in the 2004 presidential election (2008). He concluded that it is important for Republican candidates to appeal to religious conservatives while not alienating the less religious, and Democratic candidates need to appeal to the secular left but not alienate the more religious Democrats.”

In contrast to the studies mentioned above, Minkenberg summarizes that most research follows a line of argument based on secularization theory which states that the relevance of religion in the public sphere is declining (2010).

Other research has asked more generally what impact campaign TV spots have on an audience ( West, 1995). West concluded that the exact impact of ads depends on strategic decisions by the candidates and news media coverage of the advertisements. This study also deduced that voters make decisions based on the ‘likability’ of a candidate. West frames ads as an important tool for candidates, which gives them a great deal of influence over how citizens

view them. The study discussed in this paper elaborates on West's research to focus on what type of influence religious ads in particular have on an audience based on their background.

Airne and Benoit's study examines the effect of television ads for non-presidential campaigns, and analyzes content of these ads rather than the effect of a specific type of content on the audience (2005). Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy's quasi-experiment addresses viewers' ethical judgments of televised political commercials, but also does not focus in on one type of content within the ad (1994).

Past research confirms that four times as many voters obtain information from television spots than from the news (Patterson and McClure, 1976 and Kern, 1989). Wide viewership of political campaign ads means it is integral to a campaign to have an understanding of the effects of the content of their ads on their intended audience.

### **Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development**

This study uses the theory of planned behavior developed by Icek Ajzen (1991), which states that attitude toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control shape one's behavior. This study will measure how subjects' behavioral beliefs affect their attitude toward the candidate and therefore their voting behavior. This study proposes to measure three key behaviors and attitudes. First, the study will collect respondents' religious affiliation and their level of involvement (behavior) in their respective religion. Second, the study will measure both the respondents' attitudes toward the advertisement itself and the candidate. Finally, the study will measure the respondents' intention to vote (behavior).

Using the theory of planned behavior, we developed the following hypotheses regarding level of religious involvement, religious content in campaign advertising, and its effect on a person's intention to vote:

H1: Participants with a higher level of religious involvement will be more likely to view the candidate favorably.

H2: Participants who have a favorable view of the candidate will have a higher intention to vote for the candidate.

## **Research Design**

### Research Method

This quantitative study used a questionnaire to measure respondent's intention to vote in response to a political television advertisement containing religious content. Predetermined, close-ended questions were used to measure the respondents' perceptions about the advertisement, the candidate in the advertisement, and their intention to vote for the candidate. The questionnaire was administered in classrooms by the researchers. Respondents chosen to participate in the study were university students in mass communication courses at a mid-sized university in central Texas.

### Treatment

The treatment used was a 60-second political advertisement adapted from one of Judge Roy Moore's video advertisements for the 2010 Alabama gubernatorial election. The ad was chosen because its main content was faith-based in nature and because the majority of respondents would not be familiar with Judge Moore. The advertisement was tested for inter-

judge reliability. Five independent people who were blind to the purpose of the study answered two multiple choice questions: “What is this advertisement for?” and “What is the main content of this ad?” Both questions resulted in unanimously accurate answers. The storyboard for the advertisement can be found in Appendix I.

### Data Collection Method

College students were shown an adapted 60-second political video advertisement for a male candidate running for Governor of Alabama in 2010. The main content of the advertisement was faith-based in nature. After viewing the advertisement, respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire about their perceptions of the advertisement and candidate. The study was conducted in three mass communication classes with both graduate and undergraduate students. Participation was voluntary and students were asked not to discuss the advertisement with their classmates until all surveys had been collected.

### Sample Population

This study used a convenience sample of 113 students from three mass communication classes – two undergraduate and one a mix of graduate and undergraduate students – at a mid-sized university in central Texas. Participants were asked to select from five age ranges. Of the total sample, 31% were 18-20, 48% were 21-23, 13% were 24-26, 5% were 27-29, and 3% were over 30 years of age.

The breakdown of ethnicity was: 58.4% Anglo/Caucasian, 29.2% Latino/a, 5.3% African American, 1.8% Asian and 5.3% Other. The breakdown of sex of the sample was 63.7% female and 36.3% male. Of the sample, 74.3% indicated they are registered to vote in the U.S. and



43.4% of the total sample indicated that they voted in the last presidential election (See tables 1-4 in Appendix II).

Participants were asked to choose which political party they affiliate with. Of the five options, 31% indicated Democrat, 21% Independent, 29% Republican, 1% Third party, and 15% Other. If this study is replicated, the authors recommend removing the “Other” category. In addition, participants were asked to indicate with which faith background the most closely identified out of a list of ten choices. The breakdown was 6% Atheist, 1% Buddhist, 25% Catholic, 0% Hindu, 1% Jewish, 0% Mormon, 0% Muslim, 20% No religious affiliation, 45% Protestant Christian, and 4% Other.

### Instrument

This research project utilized an analytical questionnaire that consisted of 19 questions adopted from previously used scales and 10 questions regarding general information about voting behavior, religious attendance, and demographics of respondents. The 19 scale questions were broken into three sections: advertisement perceptions, candidate perceptions, and intention to vote. The scales used were adapted from two previously validated and developed scales in order to guarantee construct validity. Attitude toward the advertisement used a six-item scale, and attitude toward the candidate used a five-item scale. Both were measured using a five-point scale adapted from Batra (1986) and Machleit and Wilson (1988). Intention to vote for the candidate was measured using a five-item, five-point scale, adopted from a scale previously used to measure the “intention to purchase” by Lutz, MacKenzie and Belch (1994).

## Data Analysis

### Instrument Validation

A total of 113 surveys were completed, and 105 of those were valid and entered into SPSS. The Cronbach's alpha for the advertisement perception construct contained six of the original eight items with a five-point Likert scale and showed a reliability of 0.845. Two items were removed because factor analysis showed that the reliability was higher with those items deleted. The correlation of those two items to the overall measurement of perception was significantly lower (0.3) versus the other six items (0.4 to 0.7). A factor analysis was run that showed the total percentage of variance explained as 59%. It revealed that two of the questions in this construct were negative and had to be re-coded to align with the positive items. Another factor analysis was run to test again for levels of reliability of the remaining six items and revealed that none of the six remaining items in the scale would have made a significant difference if they were to be deleted. (Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.788 to 0.878.) (See Table 5 in Appendix II)

The candidate perception construct showed a Cronbach's alpha of 0.852. This construct also consisted of six items. All items were positive so the scale measurement was consistent. Factor analysis revealed that if any items were deleted, it would not make a significant difference (Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.797 to 0.947). Another factor analysis was run, which revealed the variance explained as 71.9% (Table 6). A correlation analysis showed that the perception of the ad was related to the perception of the candidate to the 0.01 level for 0.735 (2-tailed) (Table 7).

The intention to vote construct consisted of 5 items, but because one was negative, it was re-coded as positive so it would align with the scale. The item "intention to vote in the next

presidential election” was removed because it was not loading in the same factor. The reliability for the four remaining items within this construct was 0.940 and through running the factor analysis it revealed that none of the items made a significant change in reliability levels (Cronbach’s alpha ranged from 0.908 to 0.950). The total variance explained of the bivariate analysis came out as 85.3% (Table 8).

The correlation analysis of the perception of the ad, perception of the candidate, the intention to vote, and the frequency of participation in religious services show a significance at the 0.01 level (Table 9).

### Hypothesis Testing

H1 was tested and the results show that it is supported because of the 12 participants who indicated a high level of frequency in religious involvement, eight either agree or strongly agree that they like the candidate. Nineteen indicated that they are ‘often’ involved, 14 marked either indifferent, agree, or strongly agree as to whether they liked the candidate. The reverse is true for those who indicated that they are either ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ involved in religious services. Out of the 27 that selected that they are ‘rarely’ involved in religious services, 26 indicated that they either disagree, strongly disagree, or are indifferent to like the candidate. Out of the 19 that indicated that they ‘never’ are involved in any religious services, 15 ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ to like the candidate. (See Table 10)

H2 was tested and the results show that it is supported as well, because out of the five who indicated ‘strongly agree’ to liking the candidate, all five ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ to probably vote for him. Eighteen indicated they ‘agree’ to like the candidate and 11 of them indicated they ‘agree’ to probably vote for the candidate. The reverse is also true for the 44

participants who indicated they either 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' to like the candidate. Thirty-eight of them indicated that they 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' to probably vote for the candidate. (See Table 11)

### **Results / Findings**

Both hypotheses are supported. The results from testing H1 showed that 71% of participants who are either often or very frequently involved in religious services agree, are indifferent, or strongly agree to like the candidate. The less a participant was involved in a religious service, the less they like the candidate. The results from testing H2 indicated that of those participants who indicated they agree or strongly agree to liking the candidate, 70% of them either agree or strongly agree that they would probably vote for this candidate.

### **Managerial Implications**

This study provides insight into religion's role in political campaign television advertisements, and may prove useful for advertising agencies, politicians, and campaign managers. The results of this study will help these groups to better understand the way a demographic with high religious involvement might respond to religious content, allowing them to better target that demographic. In addition, this study is a good foundation for additional research in the field of political campaign advertising and religion.

### **Limitations**

Out of the 113 surveys completed, 8 were invalid due to missing data, which lowers the overall participation rate. In addition, participants did not answer the religious affiliation

questions consistently, even though the categories were mutually exclusive and were clearly labeled. It appeared that several participants did not understand the definition for ‘Protestant Christian’ and instead selected ‘Other’ and wrote in their respective Protestant Christian denomination. Any written answer that clearly fell into one of the provided categories was counted in that respective category. Future studies should define protestant to avoid this issue.

In addition, this study used a non-random convenience sample of primarily undergraduate college students at a mid-sized university in central Texas. The responses collected in this study will only reflect the perspectives of college students, which may be different from working adults or the retired elderly. In addition, it would be valuable to replicate this study in other geographical regions as religious involvement and types of religious groups vary by location.

The candidate used in the treatment video would most likely be identified as a Protestant Christian. While the results of this study are still significant, their application is limited to candidates who are portraying similar values or beliefs in their advertisements. The hypothesis may not hold true if the political advertisement focused on drastically different faith values.

A final limitation was the sample size. Even though the minimum requirement of a sample size for a scientific study was fulfilled, a larger sample size would have yielded a higher reliability score. In other words, the sample size does not reflect the larger population, since only young adults were included and research indicates that people become more religious as they age (Smith, 2010).

### **Conclusions and direction for future research**

Based on the results, this study’s hypotheses were supported and prove that higher religious involvement generally leads to a more favorable perception of a candidate who shares

his or her religious beliefs. These results prove helpful in giving a basic understanding of the perceptions that different demographics would have of a religious-themed campaign advertisement. This study also paves the ways for future research in the realm of political advertising and religion.

Future research on this topic could further determine the level of influence of religion by identifying respondents' denomination within their respective religion – especially for the Christian faith, which has a multitude of different denominations which all fall under the umbrella 'Protestant'. For example, there may be a significant difference between the responses of a person who identifies as Baptist versus Lutheran. Also, future studies could use a treatment which more specifically identifies the candidate's religion to see if it has an effect on voter attitude. The 2012 Presidential election will feature a Christian incumbent and a Mormon challenger. As the United States political system grows in religious diversity, it will be increasingly important for campaigns to understand how to best advertise to voters when their candidate is not of the historically traditional Christian faith.

Lastly, future research would benefit from using a more diverse sample of respondents. This can be achieved by surveying respondents in different courses and majors, at different sized colleges or universities, or at universities in locations outside of central Texas.

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Appendix I

Storyboard

([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-sZGMsbW\\_Y&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-sZGMsbW_Y&feature=youtu.be))



1	2	3
(with music) It's no wonder people are tired of politics as usual.	We need to go back to principles.	And I'm seeing in our state and in our nation



4	5	6
a turning back to the principles of the constitution.	We've got to get back to fiscal responsibility, to personal accountability,	to limited government.



7	8	9
Most of the problems in our state can be solved by taking government out of the problem.	If you think you're going to elect a governor that's going to change your state, you're lookin' in the wrong place.	Our nation will change when God's hand is placed back upon it.





10	11	12
So many people do not understand the intricate relationship between God and our Constitution.	We can't fail to recognize that God's hand has been on this nation.	And our hope is really because it's in God.



13	14	15
I think He is counting on us. And I'm counting on you.	(music fades out)	

Appendix II

Data Analysis Tables

**Table 1: ethnicgroup**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid anglo/christian	66	58.4	58.4	58.4
african american	6	5.3	5.3	63.7
latino/a	33	29.2	29.2	92.9
asian	2	1.8	1.8	94.7
other	6	5.3	5.3	100.0
Total	113	100.0	100.0	

**Table 2: sex**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid male	41	36.3	36.3	36.3
female	72	63.7	63.7	100.0
Total	113	100.0	100.0	

**Table 3: registeredvoter**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid yes	84	74.3	74.3	74.3
no	29	25.7	25.7	100.0
Total	113	100.0	100.0	

**Table 4: voteinlastpreselec**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid yes	49	43.4	43.4	43.4
no	64	56.6	56.6	100.0
Total	113	100.0	100.0	

**Table 5: Item-Total Statistics**

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.845	6

  

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
adinform	15.1250	18.002	.758	.794
likead	15.3214	18.004	.654	.814
knowcandidate	15.6875	20.559	.350	.878
positivead	16.0893	19.956	.628	.821
learnednew	15.0268	19.197	.660	.814
adwasuninformative	15.2500	17.523	.780	.788

**Table 6: Item-Total Statistics**

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.852	6

  

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
likedcandidate	15.7257	26.415	.861	.797
candidateimportant	16.1327	27.616	.770	.813
candidateuseful	15.9469	26.622	.829	.802
fondofcandidate	15.7257	27.040	.811	.806
candidatesharesbeliefs	15.8053	26.051	.728	.812
beneficialtocountry	15.7965	24.628	.350	.947

**Table 7: Correlations**

		perceptiontad	perceptiontcandidate
perceptiontad	Pearson Correlation	1	.735**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	112	112
perceptiontcandidate	Pearson Correlation	.735**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	112	113

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table8: Item-Total Statistics**

Reliability Statistics					
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items				
.940	4				
	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted	
probablyvote	10.0708	11.299	.902	.909	
notconsidervoting	10.5044	11.163	.778	.950	
likelytovote	10.2124	11.633	.864	.921	
possibletovote	10.2832	10.901	.902	.908	

**Table 9: Correlations**

		perceptiontad	perceptiontcan didate	intentiontovote	participationreli giousservice
perceptiontad	Pearson Correlation	1	.735**	.741**	.435**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	112	112	112	108
perceptiontcandidate	Pearson Correlation	.735**	1	.874**	.572**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	112	113	113	109
intentiontovote	Pearson Correlation	.741**	.874**	1	.526**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	112	113	113	109
participationreligiousservice	Pearson Correlation	.435**	.572**	.526**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	108	109	109	109

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 10: participationreligiousservice \* likedcandidate Crosstabulation**

Count		likedcandidate					Total
		Strongly agree	Agree	indifferent	disagree	strongly disagree	
participationreligiousservice	Very frequently	3	5	3	1	0	12
	often	1	3	9	5	1	19
	sometimes	1	6	15	6	3	31
	rarely	0	1	15	7	4	27
	never	0	0	4	6	9	19
	8.00	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total		5	15	46	25	18	109

**Table 11: likedcandidate \* probablyvote Crosstabulation**

Count

		probablyvote					Total
		Strongly agree	Agree	indifferent	disagree	strongly disagree	
likedcandidate	Strongly agree	4	1	0	0	0	5
	Agree	0	11	7	0	0	18
	indifferent	0	5	19	18	4	46
	disagree	0	0	3	13	10	26
	strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	18	18
Total		4	17	29	31	32	113