COMPARING HOW CITIZENS AND SCHOLARS PERCEIVE NEGATIVITY IN POLITICAL ADVERTISING*

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ABSTRACT: We compare citizen and scholar perceptions of advertising negativity by using original survey data from the 2012 presidential campaign. As part of the Vanderbilt/You Gov Ad Rating Project, more than 17,000 respondents evaluated the negativity of 29 Obama and Romney ads. A national sample of campaigns and elections scholars evaluated a selection of these ads as well. We find that citizen perceptions of negativity are profoundly affected by partisanship while scholar perceptions are not. As a result, citizen and scholar perceptions of negativity differ significantly.

Negative ads are becoming increasingly common. In 1968, less than 25% of televised advertising was negative. Forty years later, the proportion approached two-thirds (Geer 2012). In the recent 2012 presidential election, more than 70 percent of the ads aired were negative.[1] The frequency of advertising negativity has been amplified by the media's growing attention to it. A quick search of Associated Press stories reveals that the number of stories addressing "negative ads" steadily increased from 0 stories in 1980 to 30 stories in 2000 to 76 in 2012. This attention from the press comes on the heels of more than two decades of interest in negativity from scholars (e.g. Jamieson 1992; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Swint 1998; Lau and Pomper 2004; Geer 2006; Mark 2009). Yet despite all this attention, we do not have anywhere near a shared understanding of what constitutes a *negative* advertisement. This lack of clarity generates confusion and a good deal of talking past each other. This paper seeks to lessen the confusion. We do this by comparing how citizen and scholars perceive negativity in political advertising. We need to learn more about how people and academics think about the term; idle speculation is not likely to take us far. The results show that there is some overlap, but that partisanship shapes citizen views of negativity in profound and predictable ways. That partisanship matters hardly comes as a surprise. But we need to remember this connection as we make claims about particular ads being negative or not.

This discussion is important because we need to be clear about the definition of key concepts. The clarity is of particular importance in light of the tendency of pundits and observers to make hasty claims about whether some ad is or is not "negative." This imprecision cuts a number of ways. Politicians, for example, have an incentive to obscure what constitutes "negative," since they do not want to be tarred by the label of being a "negative" campaigner. So, Mary Matalin, for example, argued in 2004 that two Bush attack ads, which questioned Senator Kerry's views on taxes and defense, were not negative ads, but "ready-to-engage- on-the-issues ads."[2] Or Newt Gingrich in 2012 when asked about airing negative ads

[1] "Presidential Ads 70 Percent Negative in 2012, Up from 9 Percent in 2008," Wesleyan Media Project. Available at http://mediaproiect.wesleyan.edu/2012/05/02/iump-in-negativity/ [Accessed January 16, 2013]

[2] CNN.com, March 12, 2004, "Kerry strikes back at Bush on ads."

said: "We're not going to go out and run nasty ads.. ..But I do reserve the right to tell the truth. And if the truth seems negative, that may be more a comment on his record."[3] These kinds of statements muddy the water and make it harder to assess how negative a campaign might actually be. As Darrell West (2001, 64) comments, "critics have widely condemned the advertising style in recent elections, but few have defined what they mean by negativity. Observers often define negativity as anything they do not like about campaigns."[4] We will show that this tendency is also true of citizens who are motivated to process political information, including political advertising, in a partisan and biased manner (Stevens et al. 2008).

In addition to illuminating what citizens mean when they say an ad is "negative," we want to show the differences between the public's and scholars' perceptions of negativity. If the differences are substantial, it means, at best, that scholars have been talking past the public with their claims that negative ads benefits. At worst, it could mean that our studies of negative advertising effects have not been capturing the full effect those ads on the public. We would have essentially two options: 1) we could continue to define negativity as we have and simply be clear about our definitions; or 2) we could develop new ways of capturing citizen perceptions of negativity in our studies.

We begin by comparing how citizens and scholars evaluated four ads from the 2012 presidential campaign. These data come from the Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating project. In particular, we analyze the differences between the public's and scholars' assessments of these four ads. We expand our examination to judgments beyond just "negativity" to issues of fairness and truthfulness. In the second part of the paper, we move beyond these four ads to an examination of all 29 of the ads rated by citizens in the Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating project. Because the sample of scholars only rated four of the ads, for this part of the project we had a group of coders judge the negativity of all 29 ads using a "directional" definition of negativity, i.e. they assessed whether each ad criticizes an opponent, promotes the ad's

[3] http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/ballot-2012/2012/01/04/sharp-attacks-await-romney-in-new-hampshire
[4] William Mayer (1996) also argues that journalists and pundits rarely define negativity with any clarity.

sponsor, or does both. We then evaluate how well these ad codings predict citizen evaluations of the same ads. We show that partisanship significantly colors citizen perceptions of negativity and, as a result, the overlap between scholar codings using the directional definition of negativity and citizen perceptions of negativity is far from perfect.

How Citizens View Advertising Negativity

Despite much hand-wringing in the popular press about campaign negativity, studies have found that citizens have a more nuanced attitude toward it than one might expect. In general, voters are evenly split when they are asked about whether it is appropriate for candidates to criticize their opponents, with political sophisticates being more likely to tolerate such behavior (Lipsitz et al. 2005; Freedman et al. 1999). Several studies have attempted to probe deeper into what kinds of charges are deemed "fairer" by citizens. Freedman et al. 1999 found that voters viewed policy relevant charges to be fairer than charges involving personal behavior or family members. Stevens et al. 2008 built on this work by incorporating the fact that people are "motivated processors" (Kunda 1999; Lodge and Taber 2000; Redlawsk 2000) of campaign information into their study. Like the earlier work, Stevens and his colleagues asked a national sample of citizens whether it is fair or unfair to criticize an opponent in campaign ads about various types of issue positions and character traits. To assess how partisanship colors perceptions of what is fair, they gave examples of specific criticisms made by George W. Bush and Al Gore during the 2000 election. Based on their results, they conclude "Partisans apply generous bounds of fairness to charges from their own candidate but are highly sensitive to criticism leveled at their candidate" (Stevens et al. 2008, 528).

These studies asked voters to respond to campaign charges in the abstract, however. One can ask whether citizens actually distinguish campaign communications along dimensions such as "fair" "truthful" and "negative" when they encounter them in newspaper articles or television ads. As Sigelman and Kugler

(2003) point out, most Americans perceive campaigns only "dimly" (144), which leads them to doubt that citizens are parsing campaign information in such a fashion. Several studies, however, have shown that citizens' evaluations can be more nuanced. Kahn and Kenney (1999), found voters during a campaign were able to distinguish between, "legitimate and tempered criticisms" about an opponent's policy positions and qualifications and, "acrimonious and unjust criticisms" (884). In addition, Sides et al. (2010) demonstrated that people distinguish between how negative and informative campaign advertising is and that these two dimensions are unrelated to each other.

How Scholars Define Advertising Negativity

The authors of a 1929 essay, "The Historical Trend of Negative Appeals in Advertising," begin their article by stating that the "controversy over the use of negative appeals in advertising is one of long standing" (Lucas and Benson 1929, 346), suggesting that concerns about negativity in advertising are hardly new. These scholars sought to sort out the relative effectiveness of "positive" and "negative" appeals. They were not, however, focused on political advertising, but product advertising. Lucas and Benson (1929, 347) employ a definition of negativity that reflects that focus:

> Any appeal to human motivation involves either a desire for attainment or an impulse to avoid. All appeals to attainment may be called positive, while appeals to avoidance are negative. A negative advertising appeal is then an attempt to stimulate the reader to the avoidance of a repulsive situation.

For them, a positive appeal in a political campaign would be "if you want jobs and a strong economy, vote for Mitt Romney." By contrast, a negative appeal would be "if you want to avoid another recession and high unemployment, vote for Mitt Romney." Negativity was not a direct attack on the competition. It involved how the appeal was framed.

For the most part, political scientists did not spend much time researching this topic until recently. Over the last 25 years, however, there has been a good deal of work on the subject. Along the way, many

scholars have noted with frustration the lack of consensus on what constitutes negativity in campaigns or political advertisements (West 2009; Richardson 2001; Mayer 1996). This has led a number of scholars to call for an abandonment of the term itself (Richardson 2001; Jamieson et al. 1998; Nugent 1987). Perhaps most notable is Kathleen Jamieson's suggestion that scholars and pundits talk about "attacks" or "contrast" rather than "negativity," since the latter is all too often associated with "dirty." While we agree with Jamieson and others that the concept of negativity is tainted in many quarters, we prefer not to jettison the term. It is a key part of the discourse used to assess political campaigns. If we introduce new terms and concepts, we may only be muddying the waters more.

Of late, scholars have sought to clarify these issues by focusing just on whether an advertisement or appeal focuses on the opposition or the candidate (Krupnikov 2011; Lipsitz 2011; Sides et al. 2009; Franz et. al. 2008; Geer 2006; Stevens 2005; Lau and Pomper 2001; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1996; Mayer 1996). For example, Mayer (1996, 440) simply states:"negative campaigning is campaigning that attacks or is critical of an opposing candidate." Lau and Pomper (2001, 48) claim they are coding campaigns based purely on "direction" so that "negative campaigning is talking about the opponent—his or her programs, accomplishments, qualifications, associates, and so on." Similarly, Geer (2006) defined negativity as, "any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign." After Geer's book was published, many scholars began to cite his simple definition (e.g. Krupnikov 2011; Lipsitz 2011; Sides et al. 2009). As Lau and Pomper point out, these definitions are based purely on direction with no "gray" area. An appeal in a campaign either raises doubts about the opposition (i.e. negative) or states why the candidate is worthy of your vote (i.e. positive); there is no middle category. Note that this definition does not speak to whether the criticism is about policy or about traits. Any type of criticism counts as negativity. This definition does not offer any evaluative judgment of the merits of an appeal. Perhaps because of its simplicity, especially with respect to coding advertising appeals, this definition of negativity has become the dominant definition among campaign and elections and political communication scholars

in recent years.[5] Other scholars have tried to divide ads or campaigns that are directionally negative (or, at least, predominantly negative) further. Studies have distinguished between negative appeals that are "issue-based" and "trait-based" (Kahn and Geer 1994) or, like Jamieson above, those that "contrast" the candidates in a legitimate manner and those that use a "harsh and strident tone" featuring, "little relationship to the state of affairs of a state or the nation" (Kahn and Kenney 1999, 881). Others have tried to judge whether the attack is fair or accurate (Allen and Stevens 2010; Freedman and Lawton 1999). Although scholars have tried to refine or redefine negativity in these ways, more scholars rely on the directional definition discussed above.

Do Citizen and Scholar Perceptions Overlap?

To date, no research has compared citizens' and scholars' perceptions of what constitutes a negative ad. Now, some research has investigated whether perceptions about the overall negativity of a campaign. Sigelman and Kugler used data from the 1998 American National Election Study Pilot Study to assess whether citizens' classification of the California, Georgia, and Illinois gubernatorial races as "very positive," "somewhat positive," "somewhat negative," and "very negative" matched scholar codings of the races based on newspaper coverage and television ads. They found "substantial slippage" between ordinary citizens' and social scientists' perceptions (154). Sigelman and Kugler conclude, ". . . the measures of campaign tone employed in prior studies fall short of capturing the way campaigns are seen by the citizens whose decision making we are trying to explain"(159). We will show that this general pattern holds true for evaluations of specific ads, not just the campaign in general.

[5] A systematic review of the literature would be necessary to confirm this claim.

Data and Methods

In the following analysis we use original data collected during the 2012 presidential campaign by the Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating Project.[6] The Ad Rating Project had 29 different samples of 600 liberals, conservatives, and independents evaluate 29 different ads within one to two weeks of the ad first being aired. YouGov randomly selected these individuals from its online panel of more than 1.2 million American respondents. Using proprietary algorithms, YouGov is able to construct national random samples from its panel.[7] For this project, four of the 29 ads were also rated by a sample of campaigns and elections scholars. These scholars were recruited through email using a list compiled by a marketing research firm for the publisher of a campaigns and elections textbook. In addition, we oversampled scholars working on campaign and advertising negativity by adding the emails of anyone who has published work in a political science journal on the topic since 2000. Over 225 scholars were contacted and

<insert Table 1 about here>

97 agreed to take part in the study. Table 1 provides summary statistics for various characteristics of the participants. The participants hailed from 27 different states, as well as Washington D.C. and British Columbia, with the average participant age being 45 years old. Seventy eight percent of the sample was male and 95 percent was white. In terms of institution type, 78 percent of the participants are employed by research universities, while the remainder works at smaller colleges or universities. None of the participants taught at a community college. We asked the participants to indicate their top two areas of research within political science. Fifty-seven percent chose voting behavior, 39 percent public opinion, and 31 percent political communication, 11 percent methodology, and 9 percent political psychology. Just 7 percent indicated that they conduct research on race and ethnicity, 5 percent on gender issues, and 3 percent on religion in politics. Half of the participants said they had published research addressing

[6] https://my.vanderbilt.edu/vanderbiltyougovadratingproject/
[7] For more information about YouGov's sampling methods, visit http://research.yougov.com/about/our-panel/

negativity in campaigns or political advertising, while 24 percent indicated that this was a primary area of research. In terms of political orientation, 80 percent of the participants indentified their partisan identification as "Democrat," 7 percent as "Republican," and 10 percent as "Independent." Ideology was slightly less skewed with 72 percent of the participants indicating that they are "liberal" or "very liberal," 18 percent indicating they are "moderate," and 7 percent indicating that they are "conservative" or "very conservative".

Is this sample representative? That is difficult to say because our population of interest is a sub-population of political scientists: those who study campaigns and elections. Political scientists as a whole are approximately 76 percent male (Nelson and Brammer 2010; APSA Workshop 2005) and 93 percent white (Nelson and Brammer 2010), so the sample is very likely representative in terms of gender and race. In terms of partisanship, social scientists are heavily skewed towards being liberal. A study of political orientation among academics found that 69 percent of full-time faculty in the social sciences are "liberal" or "moderately liberal," 14 percent are "center" and 18 percent are "conservative" (Zipp and Fenwick 2006). As a result, it is possible that our sample is slightly less conservative than the larger population of campaign and elections scholars, but the skew of our sample towards the liberal end of the spectrum is not surprising.

These scholars were asked to evaluate four ads from the presidential campaign that were part of the Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating Project. All 97 rated the first ad, 88 rated the second, 78 rated the third, and 51 rated the final one. The decline in the response rate is unfortunate, but the campaign surely kept these particular scholars very busy as the campaign came to a close. Compared to the first sample (97 respondents), the final sample is significantly more male (94% vs. 78%), but it does not differ significantly in terms of age, race, partisan identification, ideology, whether one teaches at a research university, or whether one conducts research on negative campaigns.

Citizens and scholars were asked to rate two ads sponsored by Obama for America and two ads sponsored by Mitt Romney for President, Inc. The first ad favoring Obama, "Clear Choice" featured Bill Clinton discussing President Obama's plan for returning the country to full employment. He does not mention Romney in the ad, but he does criticize the "Republican Party" and its plan "to cut more taxes on upper income people and go back to deregulation." "That's what got us in trouble in the first place," he says. The remainder of the ad focuses on Obama's plan and ends with Clinton saying, "We need to keep going with his plan." The second Obama ad, "No Taxes," opens with grainy footage from a Romney reception for donors. A narrator says, "Romney attacked the 47 percent of Americans who paid no income taxes." The ad then criticizes Romney for paying just 14 percent in taxes last year, sheltering his money offshore, and not releasing his pre-2010 tax returns. Obama is not mentioned in the ad.

The first Romney ad, "Dear Daughter" focuses solely on Obama and features footage of an infant girl in her mother's arms with a woman's voice reading a letter. "Dear daughter" it begins, "Welcome to America." It then goes on to talk about her daughter's share of Obama's debt, as well as the poverty and unemployment rates under his administration. In the second ad, "Too Many Americans" Romney speaks into the camera the entire time. He begins by saying more people are living in poverty and on food stamps than when President Obama took office. He then says, "President Obama and I both care about poor and middle class families. The difference is my policies will make things better for them." The ad ends with him saying his plan will, "create 12 million jobs over the next four years" and that "we can't afford another four years like the last four years."

Citizen and scholars participating in this study were invited to view one of the above ads on-line. After confirming that that they could see and hear the ad clearly, they were asked a series of questions. All respondents were asked to evaluate on a 5-point scale how fair, truthful, and likeable the ad was. As mentioned earlier, several studies have asked respondents to evaluate how "fair" various campaign charges

are in the abstract so we wanted to be sure to include this measure. Although some scholars have argued that it is simply too difficult to establish the truth of advertising claims, the handful of scholars who have attempted to do so through either anecdotal or quantitative methods have found that negative ads are less accurate (Allen and Stevens 2010; Jamieson 1992). It is possible then, that when evaluating the negativity of an ad, voters are making judgments about the veracity of advertising claims. Finally, the main question for the purposes of this study asked all respondents, "Do you think this ad was positive or negative?" They could choose "very positive," "somewhat positive," "neither positive nor negative," "somewhat negative," and "very negative".

The survey also included a number of additional questions to capture the political and demographic characteristics of the respondents. The former included questions about partisan identification, ideology, how favorable the respondent felt towards each of the presidential candidates, and which one they preferred. Citizens were also queried about how interested they are in the news and public affairs more generally. In terms of demographic characteristics, all respondents were asked to provide information about their age, gender, race, and state of residence. In addition, citizens were asked about their income and education. Scholars were asked to indicate whether they work at a research university, their two main areas of research, whether they have conducted research on campaign or advertising negativity, and, if so, whether they would consider it to be a primary focus of their research.

RESULTS

In the following analysis, we evaluate the extent to which citizen and scholar perceptions of advertising negativity overlap and show that, although there is quite a bit of agreement, partisanship has a large effect on citizen evaluations, while scholar evaluations are unaffected, for the most part, by partisanship. We also show that citizen evaluations of fairness, truthfulness,

negativity, and ad likeability—unlike scholars' evaluations—are all highly correlated, suggesting that these different measures may be tapping into the same underlying construct. In the final section, we examine show that although scholar evaluations of ad negativity are strong predictors of citizen evaluations, the relationship is heavily moderated by whether an ad favors a respondent's preferred presidential candidate.

We begin our analysis by examining how citizens and scholars evaluate the four ads described earlier along the dimensions of fairness, truthfulness, and negativity. The correlation between fairness and truthfulness is quite high (.74 for citizens and .51 for scholars, $p<.001$, for all ads), which means the charts for these two measures look quite similar. As a result, we only discuss the chart for fairness in the text.[8]

Fairness

Since previous research suggests partisanship may play a role in how citizens evaluate advertising, we provide summary statistics for Republicans, Independents, and Democrats, as well citizens in general. Figure 1 compares evaluations of fairness with 1 indicating "very unfair," 2 "somewhat fair," 3 "neither fair nor unfair," 4 "somewhat fair," and 5 "very fair". The first bar for each ad shows the mean for scholars, while the second bar indicates the mean for citizens. Across the first three ads, we see that the two groups average a 1-point difference in their evaluations of fairness. Scholars thought the Obama ads "Clear Choice" and "No Taxes" were "somewhat fair," (4.21 and 4.15, respectively) while citizens viewed these ads as being "neither fair nor unfair" (3.18 and 2.90). In the case of the Romney's "Dear Daughter" ad, scholars viewed it as being "somewhat unfair" (2.18) while citizen evaluations again fell in the middle of the spectrum (2.91). On the final ad, scholars and citizens both rated the ad as being

[8] See the appendix for the chart showing the differences between citizen and scholar evaluations of truthfulness.

"neither fair nor unfair," but leaning towards "somewhat fair" (3.28 and 3.32, respectively). The differences between scholar and citizen evaluations across the first three ads are statistically significant at $p<.001$, while the difference for the final ad is not.

Based on this comparison, one might conclude that scholars are not doing too badly at capturing how citizens view the fairness of political ads with the difference in means averaging less than 1 point. When one breaks down "citizens" into Republicans, Independents, and Democrats, however, it becomes clear that scholar evaluations differ significantly from those of certain subgroups. In particular, scholar evaluations differ the most from those of Republicans who viewed the Obama 'Clear Choice" and "No Taxes" ads that scholars called "somewhat fair" as being "somewhat unfair" to "very unfair" (1.93 and 1.54, respectively). The absolute difference in means for scholars and Republicans was 2.28 for "Clear Choice" and 2.61—more than half the scale—for the "No Taxes" ad. The evaluations were reversed for Romney's "Dear Daughter" ad with Republicans calling the ad "somewhat fair" (4.26) and scholars calling it "somewhat unfair" (2.18). The difference in means was the smallest for the "Too Many Americans" ad, with Republicans giving it 4.46 compared to scholars 3.28.

Scholars fare better at capturing how Independents evaluate the ads, although there are still some significant differences. On average, the difference in means was .93, with the smallest difference being for "Too Many Americans". In general, Independents thought all of the ads were "neither fair nor unfair" with the last ad tending towards "somewhat fair." As mentioned above, scholars thought that the two Obama ads were "somewhat fair," Romney's "Dear Daughter" ad was "somewhat unfair" and his last ad was in the middle.

Of the three subgroups, scholar evaluations of ad fairness were the most similar to those of Democrats with an average difference in means of just .51 compared to 2.04 for Republicans, and .93

for Independents. Like scholars, Democrats thought the two Obama ads were somewhat fair and that Romney's Dear Daughter ad was somewhat unfair (1.62). They diverged in their assessment of the second Romney add with Democrats calling it somewhat unfair (2.11) and scholars categorizing it as neutral.

Overall, if one were to collapse the 5-point scale into a simple 3-point, fair (very fair and somewhat fair), neutral (neither fair nor unfair), and unfair (somewhat unfair, very fair), scholars would code three of the four ads correctly for Democrats, one of the ads correctly for Independents and none of the ads correctly for Republicans. We now consider whether scholars fare any better at capturing citizen perceptions of ad negativity.

Negativity

Figure 2 indicates how the average negativity rating of each group with 1 indicating "very positive," 2 "somewhat positive, 3 "neither negative nor positive," 4 "somewhat negative," and 5 "very negative". Scholars do indeed do a better job of capturing citizen perceptions of negativity with the average difference in means across the four ads being just .53 compared to .76 for perceptions of fairness. Scholars considered the "Clear Choice" ad to be somewhat positive (2.01), while citizen respondents felt it was more neutral (2.70, $p<.001$). Both groups thought Obama's "No Taxes" ad was negative, but scholars thought it was considerably more negative than citizens (4.62 vs. 4.07, $p<.001$). They also agreed that Romney's "Dear Daughter" spot was negative, but again, scholars thought it was more negative (4.47 vs. 3.77, $p<.001$). Romney's final ad was perceived as being neutral by both groups (2.98 vs. 2.78, n.s.).

Once again, in terms of their agreement with Republicans, Independents, and Democrats, scholars did the poorest job of capturing the former's perception of negativity. The average difference

in means across the four ads for scholars and Republicans was 1.19, while it was just .60 for Independents and .56 for Democrats. While both scholars and Republicans agreed that the "No Taxes" ad was very negative, they categorized the other three ads differently. Republicans viewed Obama's other ad as being "somewhat negative," "Dear Daughter" as neutral, and "Too Many Americans" as somewhat positive (recall that scholars categorized these ads as somewhat positive, somewhat negative, and neutral, respectively). Scholars and independents agreed in 3 of the four cases, with the one exception being "Clear Choice" which independents saw as being neutral rather than positive. Scholars and Democrats agreed that "Clear Choice" was a positive ad and that "Dear Daughter" was a negative ad, but Democrats categorized "No Taxes" as neutral (vs. very negative for scholars) and Romney's final ad as being somewhat negative (vs. neutral for scholars).

Is the Difference Due to the Fact that Political Scientists are a Bunch of Liberal Democrats?

As indicated earlier, the political orientation of our sample of campaign and election scholars skews heavily towards the left-end of the spectrum. This suggests that the explanation for why scholar ratings are closer to those of Democrats is simply because the scholars in our sample *are* Democrats, at least for the most part. Figures 3 and 4 address this question. We have broken down scholar ratings of fairness and negativity by party identification. Although we have relatively few independents and Republicans, the figures are still quite illustrative. Partisanship does appear to creep into scholarly assessments of fairness, but much less so for assessments of negativity. Democrats were more likely than Republicans and Independents to say Obama's ads were fair and less likely to say Romney's ads were fair. Independents and Republicans have virtually identical assessments of Romney's ads, but Republicans felt Obama's ads were less fair than Independents did. The differences across party are statistically significant for the "No Taxes" and "Dear Daughter" ads ($p<.05$), and marginally significant

for the other two ($p<.10$). Keep in mind that the differences between Democratic and Republican scholars are much smaller than they are for Democratic and Republican citizens, reflecting the stronger partisan lenses of the electorate. In terms of fairness, the average absolute difference in means for Democrats and Republicans across all ads was 1.06 for scholars and a stunning 2.51 for citizens.

Figure 4 illustrates that partisanship matters much less for scholarly assessments of negativity. Republicans and Democrats offer virtually the same ratings for three of the ads, agreeing that the "No Taxes" and "Dear Daughter" ads are somewhat negative to very negative and that "Too Many Americans" is neutral. Democrats view "Clear Choice" as being somewhat positive while Republicans felt it was more neutral. Independent scholars agreed with their partisan colleagues assessments of "No Taxes" and "Dear Daughter," but thought "Too Many Americans" was somewhat positive. They agreed with Democrats that "Clear Choice" was somewhat positive. In fact, "Clear Choice" was the only ad where we saw a marginal ($p<.10$) statistical difference across partisan identification for scholars.

These figures suggest that although partisanship might affect scholar assessments of ad fairness, it has a very small effect on perceptions of negativity. Moreover, the reason why scholar assessments of negativity differ the most from those of Republicans is not because scholars are partisan but because Republicans are.

How Negativity, Fairness, and Truthfulness Perceptions are Related

Before considering what drives perceptions of advertising negativity, we need to ask whether evaluations of an ad's fairness and truthfulness can be said to drive negativity. After all, perceptions of negativity or positivity might drive perceptions of how truthful or fair an ad is. This might not have been the case three decades ago, before the term "negative ad" entered the lexicon. Now, however, as

suggested above, the term is widely used in the media by pundits, journalists, politicians, and most citizens have a sense of what a negative ad is. We would also be concerned if citizens did not make distinctions along these different dimensions, despite what researchers have said about their ability to do so, and all of these measures simply tapped into some general construct that captures whether they like an ad or not. In either case, we would want to avoid including these measures in our models explaining perceptions of negativity. Of course, we need to be careful about drawing hasty conclusions. If ads that are generally viewed as being more negative are in fact less fair and truthful than those that are generally viewed as being more positive, as some scholars contend (Allen and Stevens 2010; West), then a high correlation among these measures would be expected. If this were the case, however, we would expect to see similarly high correlations among both citizens and scholars,

<insert Table 2 about here>

which we do not. A simple way to evaluate the relationships among these variables is to examine their correlation matrix, which we provide in Table 2 separately for citizens and scholars. Here we have calculated correlation coefficients only for the four ads viewed by both citizens and scholars.[9] In addition to evaluating each ad's negativity, fairness, and truthfulness, we also asked both groups to simply state whether they liked the ad or not. We have included this measure in the correlation matrices. For citizens, perceptions of negativity are highly and negatively correlated with perceptions of whether an ad is fair, truthful, and likeable. The correlation coefficients are -.65, -.55, and -.71, respectively (all $p<.001$). In fact, if we were to combine these three items with the negativity measure into a scale, the Cronbach's alpha would be a respectable .90.

One would hope that scholars do a better job of distinguishing the ads along these different dimensions, and fortunately, they do. Although all of the measures are still significantly correlated, the

[9] See Table A1 in the Appendix for the correlation matrix for these measures of all of the ads viewed by citizens. It is quite similar and the Cronbach's alpha is virtually identical at .89.

correlation coefficients are much smaller, and in a number of cases, the signs are even reversed from what they are for citizens. For scholars, the correlation coefficient for "fair" is half the size it was for citizens (-.38 vs. -.65), while the coefficient for "truthful" is closer to a third the size (-.20 vs. -.55). Interestingly, liking an ad is *positively* associated with judging it to be negative among scholars (.42). A closer inspection reveals that their favorite ad of the four was in fact Romney's "Dear Daughter" ad, which they gave a 3.94 on a likeability scale of 1 to 5. Their least favorite ad was Obama's "Clear Choice" ad featuring Bill Clinton, which they gave 1.87. Citizens rated the Clinton ad and "Too Many Americans" the highest (3.01 and 3.00, respectively) and liked Obama's "No Taxes" ad the least (2.52).

Based on this analysis, it would be unwise to include the measures of fairness and truthfulness (and especially likeability) in the models explaining citizen perceptions of negativity. The correlation matrix suggests that citizen perceptions of negativity, truth, and fairness largely capture whether or not they like an ad and, as we discuss in the next section, liking an ad very likely depends on whether the ad is sponsored by a favored or disfavored candidate.

How Well Do Scholar Perceptions of Negativity Predict Citizen Perceptions?

Thus far, we have shown that scholar and citizen perceptions of negativity differ in large part because of the strong partisan lens through which citizens view ads. This conclusion was based on how citizens and our sample of scholars rated just four ads. There were 29 different ads in this study, however, and we have respondents' evaluations of each ad's negativity. Since we have shown that scholars do a fairly good job of keeping partisanship out of their assessments of negativity and there is much less variation in how they rate ads, we had a group of researchers code each of the 29 ads using John Geer's (2006) definition of negativity.[10] Our unit of analysis, however, is not the appeal, but the

[10] Intercoder reliability using this definition was .91 using Krippendorff's alpha.

entire advertisement. If a candidate's ad mentions only himself, it is coded as "positive," if it mentions only the opponent, it is "negative," and if it mentions both himself and his opponent, it is a "contrast" ad.[11] We then included our coding of the ad in models explaining respondents' perceptions of negativity. In addition, these models controlled for the age, gender, race, education, and income of residents. We also included measures of ideology, political interest, strength of partisanship, and a dummy variable capturing whether the respondent lives in a battleground state. The variables of interest are dummy variables indicating whether the ad was coded as negative, positive, or contrast (the excluded category is positive) and whether the advertisement favored the preferred candidate's opponent. The question we used to create this measure asked respondents which candidate they currently preferred. In our sample, 41 percent or the respondents indicated they preferred Obama, 40 percent preferred Romney, 7 percent indicated some other candidate, and 13 percent said they did not know. The current analysis is restricted to those who indicated that they preferred one of the two major party candidates. To understand how the candidate favored in an ad moderates the relationship between scholar and citizen ratings of ads, we included an interaction term for the measures.

The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3. In the first column, we have estimated an ordered logit model for all respondents who indicated a preference for Obama or Romney, irrespective of party or lack of party affiliation. The next three columns present ordered logit models for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans, respectively. In the first model, we see that older respondents are less likely to say that an ad is "negative" (-.004, $p<.01$) but the other three models reveal that this effect is strongest among independents (-.01, $p<.001$) and just misses achieving statistical significance among Republicans (-.004). Although the -.002 coefficient for Democrats is in

[11] An additional check was to compare our coding of the four ads rated by our group of scholars to theirs. They were identical. In other words, we coded the "Clear Choice" ad as positive, the "No Taxes" ad as "negative", the "Dear Daughter" ad as "negative" and "Too Many Americans" as a contrast ad. It is possible that the "Clear Choice" ad could be considered a "contrast" ad because it mentions "the Republican Party". Since it does not mention Romney specifically, however, we coded it as positive.

the same direction, it is not significant. Perceptions of ad negativity are, perhaps surprisingly, unaffected by gender, but they are affected by race with whites being significantly more likely to say ads are negative. This is true of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. Education also seems to increase the likelihood that a respondent indicates that an ad is negative, although this effect seems to be strongest among Republicans. Living in a battleground state also increases the likelihood that Independents and Republicans will say an ad is negative.

In the full sample model, strength of partisanship appears to be a strong predictor of rating an ad as negative, but the other three models reveal that this holds only for Republicans. Strong Republican partisans are significantly less likely to call any ad negative. At first glance, holding a more conservative ideology appears to make one less likely to say an ad is negative, but this affect seems to hold primarily among Democrats, meaning that moderate Democrats are the ones who are less likely to say an is negative. In fact, ideology seems to work the other way among Republicans, with moderate Republicans being slightly more likely to say an ad is negative, although the coefficient just misses statistical significant. Finally, Democrats who are more interested in news and public affairs are less likely to say an ad is negative.

As we move down the models, we see that scholar ad codings strongly predict how citizens code ads but this relationship is moderated in an equally strong fashion by whether the ad favors the respondent's preferred candidate or not. Since it is difficult to make sense of ordered logit coefficients, we have created Figure 5 to show the predicted probability of a respondent rating an ad as "somewhat" or "very" negative depending on whether the ad was coded positive or negative by scholars and whether it favored their preferred candidate or not.[12] We also show the predicted probabilities for all respondents, Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. The first graph shows the predicted

[12] The models included a dummy for whether it was coded as a contrast ad so the predicted probabilities show the results for negative vs. positive ads.

probability of a respondent saying an ad was "somewhat" or "very" negative for ads that were classified as negative by the coders. All that varies is whether the ad favored their preferred candidate. Looking first at the results for the full sample, we see that the predicted probability of a citizen rating an ad favoring their preferred candidate as negative is .61, while it is .93 if it favors the opponent, a large and statistically significant .32 difference. This pattern holds for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans, but we see that the difference in predicted probabilities varies; it is .25 for Democrats, .32 for Independents, and .46 for Republicans. So while all respondents are more likely to view ads that are coded as negative by scholars as being in fact negative, Republicans are more likely than Democrats or Independents to give their favored candidate a "pass".

The chart in Figure 5 shows the predicted probability of a respondent giving a "somewhat" or "very" negative rating to an ad that the group of coders considered to be positive. Here we see even larger differences in predicted probabilities between ads favoring a preferred candidate and those favoring his opponent. For the full sample, the predicted probability is .05 if the ad favors one's own candidate and .52 if it favors his opponent. In other words, for ads favoring a preferred candidate's opponent that were coded as positive by researchers, respondents were as likely to say the ad was positive as they were to say it was negative. This holds for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. One interesting finding to note is the predicted probability of a Republican saying that an unfavored candidate's scholar-rated positive ad is negative is higher (.55) than for them describing their own candidate's scholar-rated negative ad as negative (.46). This is not the case for Democrats or Independents. It appears then, that the partisan lenses of Republicans have a slightly stronger effect on their perceptions of negativity.

CONCLUSION

In their 2003 article, Lee Sigelman and Mark Kugler argue that their findings do not imply that, "that reality should be banished from research on the effects of negative campaigning" (158). We feel the same way about what we have discovered in this paper. We cannot simply promise to be clearer about our definitions in the future and to note that they might differ from how the public definition. Instead we must strive to capture reality better. Yet, the findings of this paper do suggest scholars are on safer ground when they use the directional definition of negativity; bias is much more likely to creep into our assessments of fairness and truthfulness. So the literature on negative advertising must either figure out how to incorporate the actual perceptions of citizens into their studies or they must find creative ways to estimate those perceptions by taking partisanship into account. One possibility would be to continue and expand efforts such as the Vanderbilt/Ad Rating Project but such data collection enterprises are expensive and would likely focus just on presidential ads. Thus, it will be especially important for us to develop new methods of estimating partisan bias in our models.

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Table 1: Demographic and Political Characteristics of Scholar Sample

Variable	Sample
Average Age	45
Male	78%
Female	21%
White	95%
Black	2%
Hispanic	1%
Asian	1%
Other	1%
Number of States	27 (plus DC & BC)
Baccalaureate College	9%
M.A. College or Univ.	10%
Research University	78%
Voting Behavior	57%
Public Opinion	39%
Political Communication	31%
Political Methodology	11%
Political Psychology	9%
Race & Ethnicity	7%
Women & Politics	5%
Religion	3%
Research on Negativity	50%
Is Primary Interest	24%
Republican	7%
Democrat	80%
Independent	10%
Other	2%
Very Liberal	27%
Liberal	45%
Moderate	18%
Conservative	6%
Very Conservative	1%

Table 2: Correlation Matrices for Measures of Negativity, Fairness, Truthfulness, and Likeability for Citizens and Scholars

	Negative	Fair	Truthful	Likeable
Citizens				
Negative	1.00			
Fair	-.65***	1.00		
Truthful	-.55***	.74***	1.00	
Likeable	.71***	.77***	.73***	1.00
Scholars				
Negative	1.00			
Fair	-.38***	1.00		
Truthful	-.20***	.50***	1.00	
Likeable	.42***	-.69***	-.40***	1.00

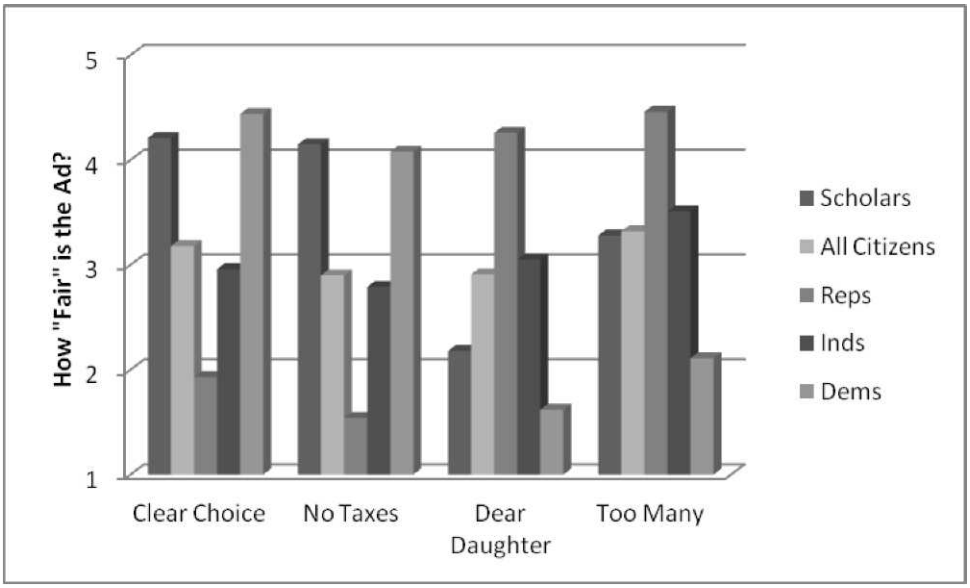
Table 3: Using Scholar Coding of Negativity to Predict Citizen Perceptions

	All	Dem	Ind	Rep
Age	-.004*	-.002	-.01**	-.004
	(.002)	(.005)	(.003)	(.003)
Male	.04	.02	.03	.06
	(.04)	(.07)	(.07)	(.08)
White	.30***	.34***	.42***	.27*
	(.05)	(.08)	(.09)	(.13)
Education	.05**	.04	.03	.07*
	(.02)	(.03)	(.02)	(.03)
Income	.01	-.002	.03*	-.003
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)
Battleground State	.06	-.08	.12#	.15#
	(.05)	(.08)	(.07)	(.09)
Strength of Partisanship	-.04*	.01	-.01	-.29**
	(.02)	(.09)	(.06)	(.10)
Ideology (Conservative)	-.08***	-.08#	-.05	.10
	(.02)	(.05)	(.04)	(.07)
Interest in Public Affairs	-.02	-.11*	.08	.02
	(.03)	(.05)	(.05)	(.06)
Scholar-Negative	3.37***	3.55***	3.44***	2.87***
	(.10)	(.16)	(.17)	(.27)
Scholar-Contrast	1.60***	1.55***	1.47***	1.76***
	(.10)	(.17)	(.17)	(.25)
Sponsor-Opponent	2.99***	2.76***	2.83***	3.25***
	(.12)	(.20)	(.18)	(.27)
Sch Neg*Spon Opp	-.83***	-.81***	-.70***	-.57#
	(.13)	(.24)	(.21)	(.30)
Sch Cont*Spon Opp	.17	.73**	.36#	-.45
	(.14)	(.24)	(.22)	(.30)
N	11,504	3,672	4,931	2,770
Log Likelihood	-14309.73	-4499.72	-5965.18	-3316.76
Pseudo R2	.20	.19	.20	.20

*** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; * p<0.05; # p<0.1; two tailed

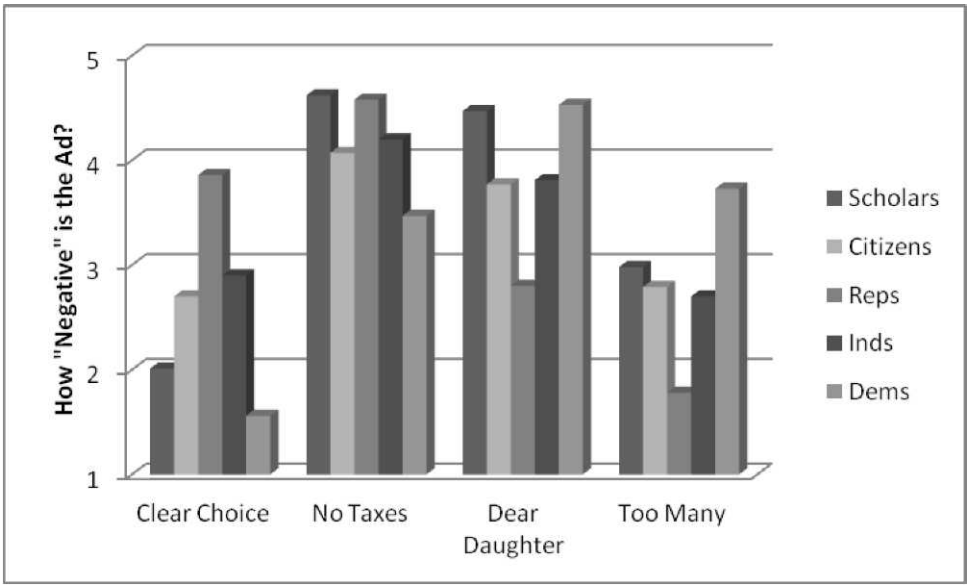
Source: 2012 Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating Project. Independents over-sampled. Weighted.

Figure 1: Scholar and Citizen Perceptions of Fairness



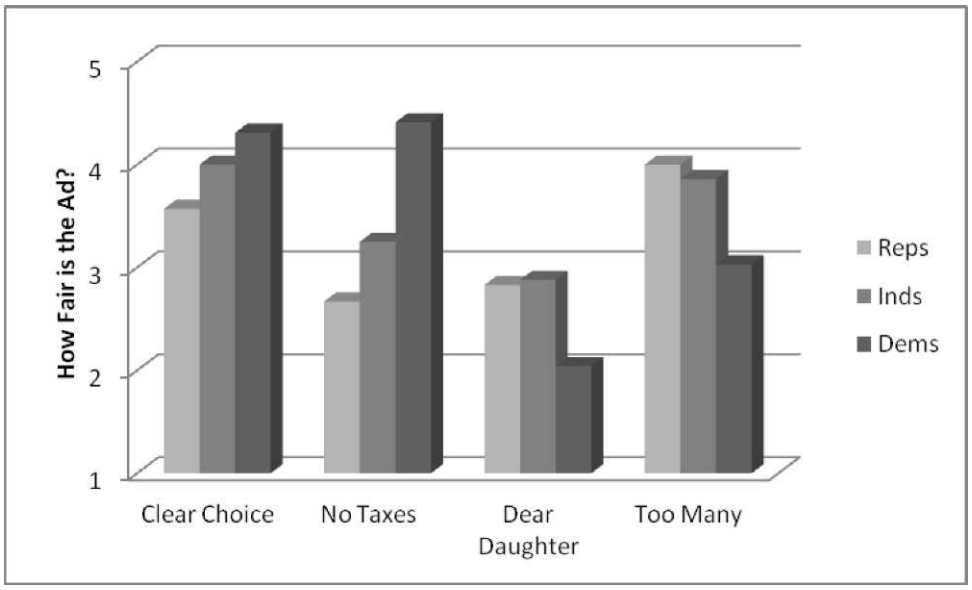
Source: 2012 Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating Project. A 1 indicates "Very unfair." 2 "Somewhat fair," 3 "Neither fair nor unfair," 4 "Somewhat fair," and 5 "Very fair".

Figure 2: Scholar and Citizen Perceptions of Negativity



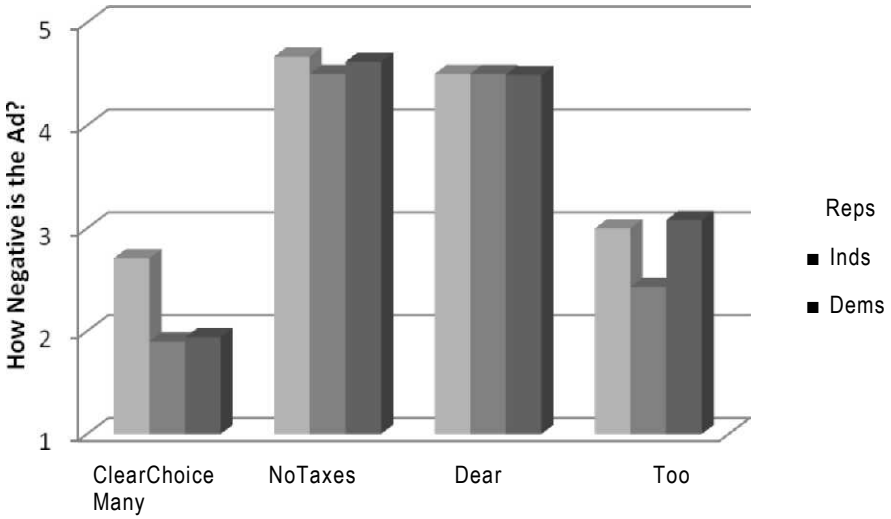
Source: 2012 Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating Project. A 1 indicates "Very positive." 2 "Somewhat positive," 3 "Neither negative nor positive," 4 "Somewhat negative," and 5 "Very negative".

Figure 3: Assessments of Fairness by Republican, Independent, and Democratic Scholars



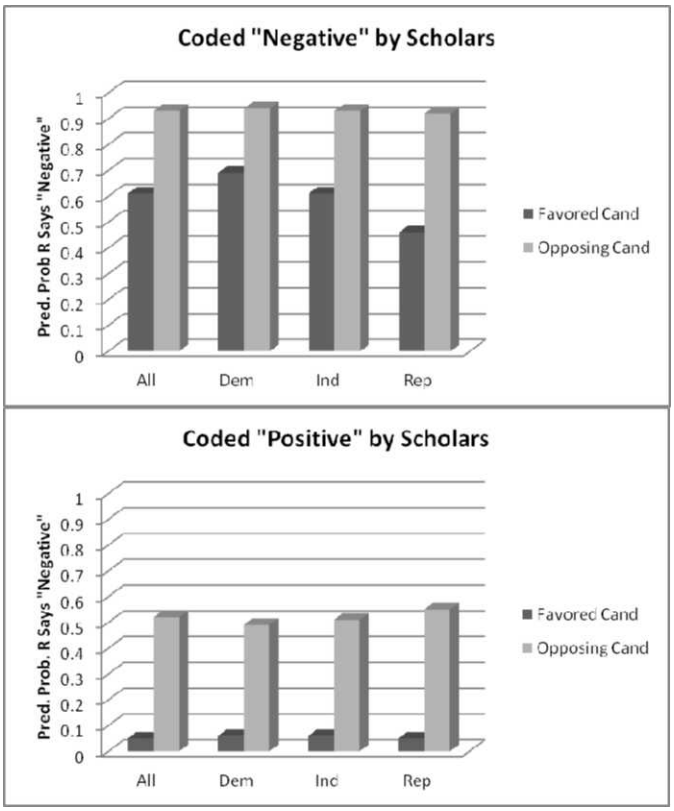
Source: 2012 Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating Project. A 1 indicates "Very unfair." 2 "Somewhat fair," 3 "Neither fair nor unfair," 4 "Somewhat fair," and 5 "Very fair".

Figure 4: Assessments of Negativity by Republican, Independent, and Democratic Scholars



Source: 2012 Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating Project. A 1 indicates "Very positive." 2 "Somewhat positive," 3 "Neither negative nor positive," 4 "Somewhat negative," and 5 "Very negative". The differences across partisanship are marginally significant ($p<.10$) for the "Clear Choice" ad but insignificant for the rest.

Figure 5: How Scholar Coding Predicts Citizen Perceptions of Negativity as Moderated by the Candidate Favored in the Ad



Source: 2012 Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating Project. Graphs report the predicted probably that a respondent says the ad is "somewhat negative" or "very negative". The first chart reports these predicted probabilities for ads that scholars coded as "negative," while the second chart reports them for ads the scholars coded as "positive". "Favored Cand" means that the ad supports the respondents preferred candidate. "Opposing Cand" means the ad supports the preferred candidate's opponent. The sample of ads includes all 28 used in the Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating Project. Predicted probabilities were calculated using Clarify.

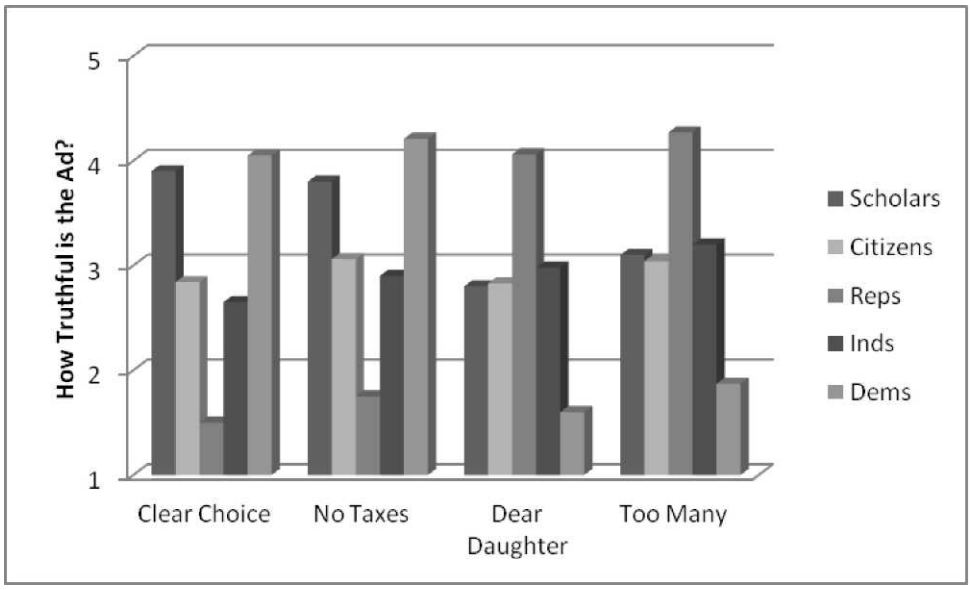
APPENDIX

Table A1: Correlation Coefficients for Negativity, Fairness, Truthfulness, and Likeability Measures for All Ads Viewed By Citizens

	Negative	Fair	Truthful	Likeable
Citizens				
Negative	1.00			
Fair	-.62***	1.00		
Truthful	-.51***	.73***	1.00	
Likeable	-.68***	.78***	.70***	1.00

Source: 2012 Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating Project.

Figure A1: Scholar and Citizen Perceptions of Truthfulness



Source: 2012 Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating Project. A 1 indicates "Very untruthful." 2 "Somewhat untruthful," 3 "Neither truthful nor untruthful," 4 "Somewhat truthful," and 5 "Very truthful".