

An Experimental Study of the Effectiveness of Negative Campaign Messaging: Will Outcome Framing Work for Partisans in Polarised Politics?

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Abstract

The current study focuses on the use of outcome framing as a strategic negative message tactic and its impact on partisans. Specifically, this study theorises that the impact of partisan cues such as party affiliation is moderated by differently framed claims in negative political advertising. Participants viewed a negative ad, varying in outcome framing (negative ramifications of electing the targeted candidate versus positive consequences of defeating the target) and partisan matching (in-party versus out-party). Participants were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Experiment 1 ($N = 96$), where a Republican candidate was the target of a negative ad, revealed that the persuasiveness of a loss-framed negative ad significantly increased in the out-party versus in-party condition. Experiment 2 ($N = 123$), where a Democratic candidate was the target of a negative ad, found that a loss framed-negative ad was significantly more influential than a gain-framed negative ad in both in-party and out-party conditions. Implications exist for design and practice of negative campaign messaging.

Keywords

Partisan cues, outcome framing, negative advertising, party bias

Party-line voting is not uncommon in the US politics (Darr et al., 2018). Recent reports show that political polarisation among Americans continues to grow and runs deeper (see Dimock & Wike, 2020). Research suggests that polarisation is likely to elicit motivated political reasoning and influence the ways citizens perceive election campaigns and evaluate candidates (Druckman et al., 2013). Although polarising cues such as party label are influential, citizens are affected at least as much by exposure to campaign messages (Bullock, 2011; Foos & Rooij, 2017). Prior work suggests that voters react differently to negative advertising claims, depending on their party affiliation (Chang, 2003; Kaid & Boydston, 1987).

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The present study poses the question: How should negative campaign messages be structured and presented to partisan individuals in culture with a two-party system?

Research suggests that the ways arguments are presented are a major component of creative communication in business and politics (see Blankson & Kalafatis, 1999; Kim, 2020). The current study focuses on the use of outcome framing as a strategic message tactic and its impact on partisans. Research suggests that issue framing has effects on evaluations of campaign messages when rival groups vie for support (see Slothuus & De Vreese, 2010). Considering that negative campaigns inherently involve explicit or implicit conflicts between parties or candidates, it is expected that partisans respond to a negative ad differently depending on how the criticism is framed. The current study theorises that the impact of party affiliation on partisans is moderated by whether a negative ad is phrased in terms of either loss or gain outcomes (i.e., negative ramifications of electing the targeted candidate versus positive consequences of defeating the target).

Although there has been a great deal of research about various strategic negative messages in the field of political advertising, including comparative messages (Meirick, 2002), issue versus image strategies (Thorson et al., 1991), and technically distorted visual images (Kaid, 2001), little research has reported how a loss versus gain outcome (i.e., the classic decision frames) strategically placed in a negative ad works for partisan voters. In light of the fact that negative advertising continues unabated (see Wallace, 2016), and claims that the partisan divide grows sharper over the past decade (see Jurkowitz et al., 2020), effective message tactics for negative campaigns to reach partisan voters deserve further attention. This study considers the implications of the findings for creating strategic messages to increase the persuasiveness of negative campaigning in a two-party election system.

Partisan Cues in Negative Campaigns

Citizens often rely on partisan cues (e.g., party source) to make sense of political dynamics (Nteta et al., 2016). Such cues are influential when parties clash during election times, activating partisan biases (Goren et al., 2009). Party identification functions as a primary bias when citizens evaluate election messages (Goggin & Theodoridis, 2017). Party identification becomes salient when citizens encounter criticisms of the in-party candidate (Westen et al., 2006). Partisans are believed to be more open to congenial content about the in-party candidate, counter-arguing uncongenial claims (see Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Hence, negative ads inherently serve as implicit or explicit in-party and out-party cues for partisans, inducing opinions to polarise and the desire to sustain inter-party distinctiveness (see Rothbart, 2004).

Partisan motivated reasoning grows as negativity peaks during an election campaign, and partisans intrinsically seek positive identity with in-party candidates while distinguishing themselves from rival party candidates (see Abrams, 1992; Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). Partisans are motivated to depreciate negative claims about their candidate while appreciating criticisms about the out-party candidate (Chang, 2003; Stevens et al., 2008). Research further suggests that partisans tend to see substantial facts presented by rival party campaigns as negatively biased (see Matheson & Dursun, 2001). Thus, partisans likely raise their guard against a negative ad against their candidate.

Partisan Cues and Outcome-Framed Negative Political Advertising

Negative campaigns stir up inter-party competition. Increasing inter-party conflict invokes motivated political reasoning; partisans may adopt a defensive strategy for external information criticising their

candidate (see Wiest et al., 2015). Research suggests that defense-oriented audiences are concerned with the presence or absence of outcome-related arguments when encountering a persuasive message (Allison et al., 1990). Research further suggests that in a competitive intergroup context, defensive audiences are likely to accept outcome-focused arguments only when the outcomes are favourable to their side (Mackie & Ahn, 1998). In contrast, when an outcome-framed political message counters partisan audiences' expectations (e.g., attacks on their candidate), partisan leanings come into play, leading to greater defensive responses to the external information. Thus, an outcome frame can function as a tactic for a negative ad to influence partisans.

Research further suggests that partisans are affected by how outcomes are portrayed in a persuasive message (Druckman et al., 2013). Thus, gain versus loss outcome framing may serve to moderate the impact of party identification or party affiliation on partisans. Gain-loss framing is a broad classic approach for understanding how consumers make a choice when risky elements are involved (see Tversky & Kahneman, 1986). A gain-framed argument is designed to promote compliance with a choice by highlighting its positive outcomes, whereas in a loss framed argument, negative consequences are accentuated as a result of noncompliance (Rothman et al., 2006). Applied to the context of negative advertising, a gain-framed negative ad would underscore the positive outcomes of defeating the targeted candidate, whereas a loss-framed negative ad would stress the negative ramifications of electing the targeted candidate. Decision framing literature indicates that gain-loss framing moderates the effects of variances in audiences (see Maule & Villejoubert, 2007; Wiest et al., 2015). For instance, perceived risk, tension, or uncertainty situationally induced by external information may lead to the advantage of a loss versus gain frame (see Gallagher et al., 2011; Rothman et al., 2006).

Research further suggests that the relative persuasiveness of a gain versus loss frame is affected by individual's self-regulatory orientation (Dijkstra et al., 2012; Kees et al., 2010). Individuals are believed to use either a prevention-focused (i.e., to avoid unwanted outcomes) or a promotion-focused strategy (i.e., to secure positive outcomes) when organising thoughts about a choice problem (Higgins, 2002). When a prevention focus is momentarily activated by external information, audiences are preoccupied with safety and internalise the undesired consequences (see Higgins, 1998; Kim & Park, 2010). Thus, a negative ad targeting the rival-party candidate may provoke a safety-oriented mindset (i.e., prevention orientation) because partisans likely see the target as a threat that must be stopped for their community or party. Work in self-regulatory focus suggests the relative advantage of loss versus gain-framed persuasive messages when a safety-seeking mindset is predominant (see Idson et al., 2004; Lee & Aaker, 2004; Yi & Baumgartner, 2009). Thus, a loss framed-negative ad targeting the out-party candidate is expected to be more influential than the gain-framed counterpart.

A negative ad against the in-party candidate, on the other hand, possibly induces a responsibility-seeking mindset as partisans may perceive the negative aspects of the in-party candidate as a risk or threat that could undermine the legitimacy of party identity. As such, partisan audiences may have some sense of responsibility that they should forsake the targeted candidate to protect their party identity as a result of ad exposure. Research suggests the relative advantage of a loss versus gain-framed message when a responsibility-seeking mindset is temporarily predominant (Lee & Aaker, 2004). However, it would be more plausible to argue that partisan cues such as party affiliation could have the greatest impact on partisans in a country with polarised politics when they encounter attack messages on their candidate (Foos & Rooij, 2017). Hence, the outcome framing effect is expected to be minimal in the in-party condition. The current study expects that overall, a loss-framed negative ad is more influential than a gain-framed negative ad for partisans, while the impact of loss framing increases in the out-party versus in-party condition.

- H_1 : A loss-framed negative ad will be more effective in reducing intention to support the targeted candidate than a gain-framed negative ad.
- H_{2a} : The effectiveness of a loss-framed negative ad will increase in the out-party versus in-party condition.
- H_{2b} : The effectiveness of a gain-framed negative ad will decrease in the out-party versus in-party condition.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 was designed to explore how the impact of partisan matching (i.e., in-party versus out-party) on partisan voters varies as a function of outcome framing when a Republican candidate is the target of a negative political ad. Thus, participants who identified as Republicans were assigned to the in-party condition, while those who identified as Democrats were classified in the out-party condition.

Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk. The current study employed US based standard MTurk workers who have approval ratings of at least a 95% and more than 100 HITs completed. A convenience sample of 108 (51 Democrats, 45 Republicans, 12 independents) subjects participated in return for a small cash reward. Those who identified as independents were excluded from the experiment as the present study focuses on partisan voters in a society with a polarised political system. A total of 96 subjects (47 women, 49 men) were analysed for hypothesis testing. The average age was 36.9 ($SD = 9.92$). The majority (90.6%) were whites, followed by African Americans (6.3%), and Asian American (3.1%). A total of 88.6% of participants reported having a bachelor's or higher degree, and 69.8% of participants reported their annual income was lower than \$70,000. After confirming they were 18 years or older, reading the informed consent and agreeing to participate in the study, participants proceeded to the experiment. The project was introduced to participants as a copy-test for an actual political campaign. Using Qualtrics, participants were randomly assigned to the four experimental conditions. The study took approximately 12–15 minutes to complete. After exposure to the message, the instrument measured the dependent measure and demographics.

Stimulus Materials for Experiment 1

Negative political advertising can be classified into three distinct types: implicative advertising, in which attacks on the target are indirectly presented; comparative advertising, where its primary goal is to address that the ad sponsor is more qualified than the target; and assault advertising, which explicitly blames the target's personality, motives, or accomplishments (Gronbeck, 1994). The current study conceptualises negative political advertising as strategic messages designed to attack the target's achievements or election pledges with declarative negative claims. The stimuli were created using factual elements from extant negative political ads against Republican politicians. In the negative ad, a Republican candidate, Mark Harrison (fictitious character) was accused of supporting corporate tax cuts that would bring heavier tax burdens to American families. The negative ad messages underscore one of

Table 1. Negative Ad for Experiment 1.

Outcome Frame	Negative Ad
Gain	<p>Stopping conservative Republican Mark Harrison is a recipe for economic recovery for our neighbourhood businesses.</p> <p>We know Republican Mark Harrison supported raising taxes, but what is he up to now? Mark Harrison supports cutting corporate tax rates which could force up increased taxes costing every family sixty thousand dollars a year and eliminate hundreds of thousands of jobs.</p> <p>Remember, defeating Republican Mark Harrison will lead to greater economic growth for our community.</p>
Loss	<p>Supporting conservative Republican Mark Harrison is a recipe for economic disaster for our neighbourhood businesses.</p> <p>We know Republican Mark Harrison supported raising taxes, but what is he up to now? Mark Harrison supports cutting corporate tax rates which could force up increased taxes costing every family sixty thousand dollars a year and eliminate hundreds of thousands of jobs.</p> <p>Remember, electing Republican Mark Harrison will lead to a bigger economic crisis for our community.</p>

Source: The authors.

two framing conditions: a loss outcome frame, with elements emphasising the negative consequences of supporting the target, including arguments that electing Republican Mark Harrison will lead to a bigger economic crisis for our community; and a gain outcome frame, with elements highlighting the positive outcomes of defeating the target, including arguments that defeating Republican Mark Harrison will lead to greater economic growth for our community (see Table 1 for a full description of the negative ads).

Dependent Measures

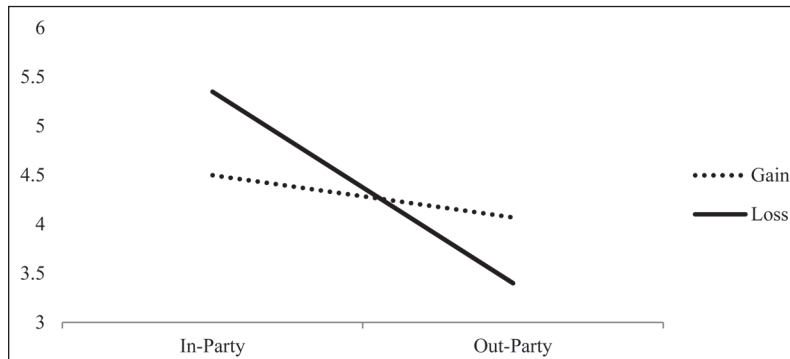
Decision framing literature suggests that message framing influences one's judgment or choice. Hence, after exposure to a negative political message, participants were asked to report how likely they are to support/vote for the targeted candidate if he runs for office in their community. This was measured on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 (very unlikely to support/vote for) and 7 (very likely to support/vote for). Responses were averaged into a single index ($\alpha = .95$, $M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.942$).

Results

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed for hypothesis testing. Intention to support the targeted Republican candidate was submitted to a 2 (partisan matching: in-party vs. out-party) \times 2 (outcome framing: gain vs. loss) between-subjects ANOVA. The current hypotheses were designed to test a main effect for outcome framing and an interaction effect of partisan matching and outcome framing on intention to support the targeted candidate. The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of partisan matching [$M_{\text{Outparty}} = 3.74$, $SD = 1.91$; $M_{\text{Inparty}} = 4.93$, $SD = 1.77$, $F(1, 92) = 10.01$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .098$] (see Table 2). This confirms that party affiliation serves as a powerful determinant for citizens to make

Table 2. ANOVA Results for Intention to Support the Target (Experiment 1, $N = 96$).

Independent Variables	F	H df	Error df	P	η^2
Partisan matching (IV1: In-party vs. out-party)	10.01	1	92	.002	.098
Outcome frame (IV2: Gain vs. loss)	.05	1	92	.820	.001
IV1 \times IV2	4.14	1	92	.045	.043

**Figure 1.** Interaction on Intention to Support the Republican Target.

sense of negative campaigns in polarised politics. Meanwhile, no significant main effect was detected for outcome framing [$F = 0.5, p = .820$]. Therefore, H1 was not supported in Experiment 1. The ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect of partisan matching and outcome framing [$F(1, 92) = 4.14, p < .05, \eta^2 = .043$]. Figure 1 suggests that the effectiveness of each frame varied between the two partisan matching conditions. ANOVA contrasts were performed to examine how the interaction unfolded. The data indicated that the gained-framed negative ad generated a minimal difference in intentions of supporting the target between the in-party and out-party condition, whereas the loss-framed negative ad was related to lower intentions to support the target among Democrats relative to Republicans. This indicated that the effectiveness of loss framing significantly increased in the out-party versus in-party condition; Democrats reported significantly lower intentions of supporting the target than Republicans when they encountered the loss-framed negative ad targeting the Republican candidate [$M_{\text{Outparty-Loss}} = 3.40, SD = 1.82; M_{\text{Inparty-Loss}} = 5.35, SD = 1.69, t(92) = 3.68, p < .01$]. Therefore, H2a was supported. H2b predicted that the impact of a gain-framed negative ad would decrease in the out-party versus in-party condition. The contrasts indicated that there is no significant difference in intentions to support the target between the two partisan matching conditions [$M_{\text{Outparty-Gain}} = 4.07, SD = 1.97; M_{\text{Inparty-Gain}} = 4.50, SD = 1.79, t(92) = .80, p = .427$]. Therefore, H2b was not supported.

Discussion

Despite mixed findings on the effectiveness of negative advertising, American voters are far from immune to attack ads (see Stevens, 2012). Both Republicans and Democrats, to a greater or lesser extent, are likely to show negative feelings about the targeted candidate after exposure to an attack ad

(Kaid & Boydston, 1987). What is relatively unknown is the extent to which an attack ad is more effective for partisan voters when the main argument is framed differently. In Experiment 1, partisans (either Democrats or Republicans) encountered a negative ad criticising a Republican candidate. Republicans (i.e., the in-party condition) appeared not to be affected as much by the negative ad, as Democrats (i.e., the out-party condition). The results suggest that Republicans are most likely to support the Republican target regardless of the content of a negative ad. As such, negative advertising may have minimal impact in the in-party condition, especially in a polarised society. Democrats, on the other hand, expressed lower intentions of supporting the targeted Republican politician than Republicans after exposure to a negative ad. Importantly, this effect significantly increased with loss outcome framing. Considering the research findings that Democrats are relatively less swayed by negative campaign messages than Republicans (see Hamilton et al., 2013), it is noteworthy that loss outcome framing enhances the effectiveness of a negative ad against a Republican politician among Democrats.

Meanwhile, gain framing yielded little difference between the in and out-party conditions. Work in framing suggests that an ideal or accomplishment-oriented mindset evoked by a promotional-focused message is closely related to gain framing effects (Kim & Park, 2010; Yi & Baumgartner, 2009). It might be argued that the impact of a gain-framed negative ad is minimal because negative advertising itself is considered prevention rather than promotion-focused messaging, and such positive mindsets as accomplishment are less likely to be induced by attack messages. Future research may find the advantage of gain framing in general political advertising designed to promote and support a politician.

The obtained data indicate that the main effect of outcome framing was not detected. This could be because of the operationalisation of the partisan matching condition, where the targeted Republican politician was criticised for proposing corporate tax cuts. It might be argued that Republicans most likely strengthen their shield when they encounter an attack on a Republican candidate, leading to relatively little effect of message elements no matter what the issue is. Democrats, on the other hand, might be motivated to reject the proposed tax cuts, which was considered one of the Trump Administration's Policy Failures in recent years (Horsley, 2019). Given that the partisan gap between Republicans and Democrats has grown wider since Trump's presidency (see Carlson et al., 2021), citizens may rely more on partisan cues when making sense of external information about a politician or policy. Future studies may be needed to examine how the results would vary across different issues; both Republicans and Democrats may be more responsive to message elements when the subject matter of a negative campaign is focused on a bipartisan issue (e.g., international trade, poverty programs).

Experiment 2

In Experiment 2, the partisan matching condition was manipulated by exposing partisan individuals to a negative political ad targeting a Democratic politician. In contrast to Experiment 1, Republicans were classified in the out-party condition, while Democrats were grouped in the in-party condition.

Participants and Procedure

The same procedure was performed for Experiment 2. Participants were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk in return for a small cash reward. A convenience sample of 129 (65 Democrats, 58 Republicans, 6 independents) subjects participated in the experiment. After excluding participants who identified as independents, a total of 123 subjects (57 women, 66 men) were analysed for hypothesis

testing. The average age was 39.9 ($SD = 11.54$). The majority (90.2%) were whites, followed by Asian Americans (5.7%), and African (4.1%). A total of 84.6% of participants reported having a bachelor's or higher degree, and 80.5% of participants reported their annual income was lower than \$70,000. Using Qualtrics, participants were randomly assigned to the four experimental conditions.

Stimulus Materials for Experiment 2

The stimuli were developed using factual elements from extant negative ads against Democratic politicians. In the negative ad, a fictitious Democratic candidate, Mark Harrison was accused of enforcing the costly Green New Deal that would bring heavier tax burdens to American families. The negative claims highlight one of two framing conditions: a loss outcome frame, with elements emphasising the negative consequences of supporting the target, including arguments that electing Democrat Mark Harrison will lead to a bigger economic crisis for our community; and a gain outcome frame, with elements stressing the positive outcomes of defeating the target, including arguments that stopping Democrat Mark Harrison will lead to greater economic growth for our community (see Table 3 for a full description of the negative ads).

Dependent Measures

After exposure to a negative political message, participants were asked to report how likely they are to support/vote for the targeted Democratic candidate if he runs for office in their community. This was measured on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 (very unlikely to support/vote for) and 7 (very likely to support/vote for). Responses were averaged into a single index ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.64$).

Table 3. Negative Ad for Experiment 2.

Outcome Frame	Negative Ad
Gain	<p>Stopping liberal Democrat Mark Harrison is a recipe for economic recovery for our neighbourhood businesses.</p> <p>We know Democrat Mark Harrison supported raising taxes, but what is he up to now? Mark Harrison supports the radical and costly green new deal which could force up increased taxes costing every family sixty thousand dollars a year and eliminate hundreds of thousands of jobs.</p> <p>Remember, defeating Democrat Mark Harrison will lead to greater economic growth for our community.</p>
Loss	<p>Supporting liberal Democrat Mark Harrison is a recipe for economic disaster for our neighbourhood businesses.</p> <p>We know Democrat Mark Harrison supported raising taxes, but what is he up to now? Mark Harrison supports a radical and costly green new deal which could eliminate hundreds of thousands of jobs and force up increased taxes costing every family sixty thousand dollars a year.</p> <p>Remember, electing Democrat Mark Harrison will lead to a bigger economic crisis for our community.</p>

Source: The authors.

Table 4. ANOVA Results for Intention to Support the Target (Experiment 2, $N = 123$).

Independent Variables	<i>F</i>	H <i>df</i>	Error <i>df</i>	<i>P</i>	η^2
Partisan matching (IV1: In-party vs. out-party)	9.13	1	119	.003	.071
Outcome frame (IV2: Gain vs. loss)	4.11	1	119	.045	.033
IV1 \times IV2	.13	1	119	.725	.001

Results

Intention to support the targeted Democratic candidate was submitted to a 2 (partisan matching: in-party vs. out-party) \times 2 (outcome framing: gain vs. loss) between-subjects ANOVA. As shown in Table 4, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of partisan matching [$M_{\text{Outparty}} = 4.58$, $SD = 2.00$; $M_{\text{Inparty}} = 5.43$, $SD = 1.10$, $F(1, 119) = 9.13$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .071$]. Participants in the out-party condition expressed significantly lower intentions to support the target.

In contrast to the results of Experiment 1, the obtained data revealed a significant main effect for outcome framing [$M_{\text{Loss}} = 4.74$, $SD = 1.53$; $M_{\text{Gain}} = 5.30$, $SD = 1.70$, $F(1, 119) = 4.11$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .033$]. A loss-framed negative ad was more related to a lower intention to support the target than a gain-framed negative ad. The ANOVA, however, revealed no significant interaction effect of partisan matching and outcome framing [$M_{\text{Outparty-Gain}} = 4.90$, $SD = 2.16$; $M_{\text{Inparty-Gain}} = 5.66$, $SD = 1.02$; $M_{\text{Outparty-Loss}} = 4.22$, $SD = 1.78$; $M_{\text{Inparty-Loss}} = 5.19$, $SD = 1.14$, $F(1, 119) = .13$, $p = .725$, $\eta^2 = .001$]. Therefore, H1 was supported, but not H2a and H2b in Experiment 2.

Discussion

Experiment 2 was designed to examine how partisans react to a gain or loss-framed negative ad when a Democratic politician is criticised for enforcing the Green New Deal. Similar to the findings in Experiment 1, Republicans (i.e., the out-party condition) versus Democrats (i.e., the in-party condition) are less likely to support the Democratic target. Meanwhile, the main effect of outcome framing was detected in Experiment 2 such that loss versus gain framing yielded relatively lower intentions to support the Democratic target regardless of party affiliation. The prior study reported by Kaid and Boydston indicates that Democrats are responsive to criticism about their party candidates. Research in motivated reasoning suggests that defense-oriented audiences are likely to respond to a persuasive message when an outcome is pronounced (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005). The obtained data suggest that Democrats possibly engage in a negative message against a Democratic politician, perhaps as closely as Republicans, and thus are susceptible to the attack if a loss (versus gain) outcome is accentuated.

The predicted interaction, however, was not found in Experiment 2. Work in message framing suggests the extent which audiences are involved in the issue of interest as a confounding factor for the effect of gain-loss framing (Donovan & Jalleh, 1999; Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990). It may be suggested that moderate partisans are more responsive to a negative ad against an in-party politician than committed or uncompromising partisans. Thus, a loss-framed negative ad against a Democrat may be more influential in swing states than in traditionally blue states. Future studies may need to consider the level of partisan leanings or partisanship as a moderating factor of outcome framing effects.

General Discussion

The Capital attack several weeks after the US presidential election in 2020 is believed to mark the culmination of decades of polarisation in the US. Work in citizens' political perceptions in polarised politics suggests that voters are affected not only by partisan media content (e.g., right-wing news as propaganda, see Bauer et al., 2022) but also by negative information strategically created to criticise political opponents. For instance, a recent study suggests that highly involved Republicans (versus Democrats) are more likely to accept and share disinformation against the rival-party candidate on social media if they see it as useful for hurting the adversary (see Osmundsen et al., 2021). The current study focused on how differently framed attack messages work for partisan voters in the US. Although message framing has been examined extensively in various strategic communication contexts, relatively little is known about how partisan voters make sense of outcome-focused negative campaign messages. The present study may represent the first empirical test of the impact of gain-loss outcome framing on partisan voters in the context of negative messaging. When a negative campaign aims to cover a market where the rival party candidate is competitive, the results from the two experiments suggest that the campaign may benefit from the strategic use of loss-framed attack messages. For instance, the negative campaign practitioners for a Democratic party candidate may adopt a loss outcome strategy in blue and swing states to reinforce the impact of negative messages against the Republican counterpart. A Republican party candidate, on the other hand, may lay out loss-framed negative messages to erode the Democratic rival's support base in blue and swing states. Finally, considering the relative advantage of a loss versus gain outcome under risk or uncertainty, an experienced or high-profile Democratic presidential candidate may benefit from capitalising on a loss strategy for negative messaging against a political novice or relatively low-profile competitor in Democratic primaries.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Political polarisation in American politics has been attributed to an increase in fragmented news, social media misinformation, and negative political advertising. Kubin and Sikorski (2021) describe two distinct types of polarisation: ideological and affective. According to Iyengar et al. (2012), affective polarisation assesses the extent to which people like their political allies and dislike their perceived political enemies. Although the current study did not specifically test political polarisation, the findings reveal that attack advertising may be more effective for partisan voters when the main argument is framed in terms of loss versus gain outcomes. As negative campaign advertising is part of the larger political discourse, future research may want to address the role of right-wing sources, social media commentary, and news/fake news in partisan perceptions of differently framed negative campaign messages.

The predicted interaction effect of outcome framing and partisan matching was found only in Experiment 1, but not in Experiment 2. This partial result is not entirely surprising considering that actual voting intentions can be affected by numerous variances across political market segments. For instance, partisan voters' evaluations may be attributed to various factors, including polarising or populist issues (e.g., COVID-19, abortion, immigration), political knowledge (Bergan, 2021), and political cynicism (see Martin, 2015; Schenck-Hamlin et al., 2000). As different demographic groups may have different levels of knowledge or involvement over politics, politicians, or election campaigns,

future studies should explore how the results of the current study may vary across different voter segments.

Unaffiliated voters were excluded from the current experimental design because the study focused on partisans' responses to a negative message in the American two-party system. It may be argued that unaffiliated or pure independent voters are less involved in or indifferent to partisan appeals relative to partisan voters. Prior research suggests the relative advantage of gain outcome framing under low involvement decision contexts (Donovan & Jalleh, 1999). Future studies may need to examine how unaffiliated voters react to differently framed negative messages in a country where independent voters are as much influential as partisans.

This study is based on a convenient sample of standard MTurk workers. The majority of participants for the experiments were white. Thus, the results may not generalise to the general voter population in US. Future research may be conducted to explore how the results may vary across diverse ethnic groups because different racial segments may have different perspectives on a social issue (e.g., the US national anthem protests).

Lastly, one might argue that the loss framing advantage in the out-party condition may not be detected in other situations, for instance, where an attack ad comes from a low credible endorser. Research shows that the effectiveness of an attack ad varies depending on whether it is sponsored by a political party or an independent group (Dowling & Wichowsky, 2015). Framing literature suggests that low credible sources may not be ideal to present negatively framed messages (see Jones et al., 2003). Future research may want to examine how sponsor credibility moderates the effect of outcome framing on partisan voters.

Conclusion

The obtained findings provide political marketing professionals with an insight into strategic messages for negative campaigns in the US. When a Republican politician was the target of a negative ad, no differential effect was found between gain and loss-framed negative ads, but the effectiveness of a loss-framed negative ad significantly increased in the out-party (i.e., Democrats) versus in-party condition (i.e., Republicans). On the other hand, when a Democratic politician was the target of a negative ad, a loss-framed negative ad was more influential than a gain-framed negative ad regardless of voters' party affiliation, but the effectiveness of loss framing did not significantly increase in the out-party (i.e., Republicans) versus in-party condition (i.e., Democrats). Lastly, a gain-framed negative ad did not produce any significant difference between the in-party and out-party conditions.

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