

# Effects of Soft-Money Issue Advertisements on Candidate Evaluation and Voting Preference: An Exploration

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*This empirical study assessed the effects of negative issue advertisements sponsored by both political candidates and soft-money political organizations. An experiment was conducted to see how negative issue advertisements sponsored by different political entities affect people's assessment of the political candidates and voting decisions. Results provide strong support for the hypothesis that negative advertisements significantly lowered assessments of the target candidate and backfired against the sponsoring candidate. However, the backlash effects were minimal when negative advertisements were sponsored by soft-money political organizations. These results suggest that even in the absence of express advocacy to vote for or against political candidates, soft-money negative issue advertisements could produce the intended detrimental impact while avoiding boomerang effects.*

Spending on soft-money issue advertising has exploded in recent years. In some campaigns, as a matter of fact, the amount of expenditure on issue ads funneled through soft money has exceeded that of hard money (Magleby & Holt, 1999; Marcus, 2000). Jamieson (2001) reported that spending on issue advocacy advertisements has climbed steadily in the last three election cycles, from an estimated \$150 million in 1996 to nearly \$500 million in 2000. Soft-money-sponsored

advertisements tend to focus on issues or candidates' positions on certain issues. They are different from express advocacy ads, which call for electing or defeating a particular candidate and are subject to campaign finance laws. Due largely to the 1976 Supreme Court's ruling in *Buckley v. Valeo*, issue advocacy advertising enjoys the First Amendment protection. In other words, spending on issue advocacy ads is not subject to campaign finance laws' restrictions concerning spending limits and disclosure as long as the ads do not contain "vote for" or "vote against" running candidates (Dreyfuss, 1998).

In recent years, soft-money-sponsored issue advocacy ads have been used as a way to circumvent campaign finance laws. Although stopping just short of explicitly advocating the election or defeat of a candidate, various advocacy groups and individuals have run ads often loaded with the clear and unambiguous intention of affecting the outcome of election (Dreyfuss, 1998; Marcus, 2000). Because issue advocacy ads are not required to reveal their identities and expenditures, they are often difficult to trace and their messages can be misleading. Although some of the issue advocacy ads focus on legislative issues such as Medicare and education reforms, most make claims about political candidates. These candidate-focused issue ads were mostly negative ads designed to attack the records of certain political candidates (Abbe, Herrnson, Magleby, & Patterson, 2000; Jamieson, 2001).

As soft-money issue advertising becomes the staple of political campaigns and elections, its potential impact on the democratic process and the electorate has caused grave concerns among voters and policymakers. Critics called the infusion of vast soft money into the electoral system "a mockery of the federal election laws" (Marcus, 2000, p. A1). Polls showed that Americans are deeply troubled by the role big money plays in politics (Kuhnhenh, 2001). During the 2000 Republican presidential primaries, Senator John McCain appealed to voters by vowing to stop unlimited, unregulated soft-money contributions if elected. According to a Gallup poll (Moore, 2001), most Americans support legislation curbing the influence of soft money on politics, which perhaps was the primary reason why President Bush signed the bipartisan bill into law in 2002.

Our survey of literature indicates that the impact of political advertising has been extensively investigated in the past. However, little empirical research has been conducted to evaluate soft-money sponsorship's influence on individuals' perceptions of the candidates (see Pfau, Holbert, Szabo, & Kaminski, 1999). The only published study on the subject predated the current surge of soft-money spending in political campaigns (Garramone, 1985). This research, therefore, intends to investigate on a microscopic level whether political issue ads sponsored by candidates or soft-money political organizations will lead to differences in audiences' assessments of candidates and voting decisions. The core of this research involves the controlled presentation of textual political ads to respondents in a simulated political election. We manipulated the experimental conditions by systematically alternating the sponsorships and valence of these political ads.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

## Impact of Negative Ads on Target Candidate

Negative political ads and their effects on elections have been a subject of research and public debate almost since their inception. Political consultants and practitioners believe that negative or attack ads can create a crucial edge in competitive races by hurting the target candidates<sup>1</sup> (Perloff & Kinsey, 1992; Trent & Friedenber, 2000). They pointed to dramatic instances—such as George Bush's come-from-behind win over Michael Dukakis in 1988—as evidence showing that negative advertising is a powerful tool to win political campaigns (Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, & Babitt, 1999). Recently, researchers (e.g., [Jaspersen & Fan, 2002](#); [Weaver-Lariscy & Tinkham, 1999](#)) indicated that under certain conditions, negative political ads can have serious, damaging effects—either short term or long term—on the target candidates.

Two theories have been advanced to explain why voters weigh negative political advertising messages more heavily than comparable neutral or positive messages. One is the perceptual *figure-ground hypothesis*, which argues that negative information is perceptually more salient, more easily noticed, and, therefore, more readily processed ([Lau, 1985](#)). Against a background of generally positive messages, negativity may simply stand out. The other is the motivational *cost-orientation hypothesis*, which holds that people are more motivated to avoid costs than to approach gains ([Lau, 1985](#)). As the potential cost associated with negativity increases, people tend to give negative information more weight than positive information when forming evaluation and perception of candidates. Both these explanations have found empirical support in the past. Fiske (1980) and Hamilton and [Huffman \(1971\)](#), for example, found that individuals relied far more on negative information than other kinds of information when forming overall impressions, assessing liability, and making judgmental decisions about issues or people. Applying this to political advertising, [Freedman and Goldstein \(1999\)](#) found that voters weighed negative ads more heavily than positive counterparts when processing political information.

Particularly relevant to this research are several studies that indicate negative ads' detrimental effects on target candidates' overall evaluations, liking, and character perceptions. Kaid and [Boydston \(1987\)](#), for instance, found that audiences in general tended to rate the targeted candidates as less qualified, less honest, less serious, less sincere, less successful, and less fiscally responsible after exposure to negative political advertisements. Similarly, [Pinkleton \(1998\)](#) found that negative comparative ads significantly reduced liking for the targeted candidate. These results were confirmed by several other similar studies (e.g., [Lau et al., 1999](#)).

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<sup>1</sup>Target candidate of negative ads in this article refers to the candidate that is being attacked.

A number of studies have also examined the effect of attack ads on viewers' decisions or intentions to vote for the target candidate. Although the findings were mixed, the majority of the results indicated that negative ads could abate voting intentions. In a survey of eligible voters during the 1988 Minnesota Senate race, Faber, Tims, and Schmitt (1993) found negative political ads lowered the high-involvement voters' intention to cast their ballots for the candidate being attacked. Several experimental studies discovered that participants exposed to negative-issue-oriented commercials were less likely to vote for the target candidate than those exposed to positive or image-oriented ads ([Pinkleton, 1998](#); [Roddy & Garramone, 1988](#)).

In sum, previous research findings provided ample evidence that negative information in political ads could produce negative changes in the overall evaluations of the target candidate. This body of knowledge provides the basis for our first hypothesis:

H1: Participants who are exposed to negative candidate-sponsored political ads will have a less favorable opinion of the target candidate than those exposed to positive political ads or no political ads at all.

Empirical research on the influence of negative issue ads on audience's perception is scant. To date, only a few studies have compared the effectiveness of ads sponsored by candidates and interest groups (see [Garramone, 1985](#); Pfau et al., 1999). The overall finding is that viewing of independently-sponsored negative ads would lead to negative perception of the target candidate and a reduced likelihood for people to vote for her. The soft-money ads in this research employed the same copy as that in the candidate-sponsored ads. Therefore, we expect that negative ads sponsored by soft-money organizations will have negative effects similar to political ads sponsored by candidates. In other words, negative issue ads are more likely to generate greater effects than positive issue ads regardless of sponsorship. Based on the preceding rationale, we construct the following hypothesis:

H2: Participants who are exposed to soft-money-sponsored negative ads will have a less favorable opinion of the targeted candidate than those exposed to the positive issue ads or to no political ads at all.

## Negative Advertising and Backlash Effects

Backlash or boomerang effects are the unintended consequences of negative political ads, which might result in more negative feelings toward the sponsor rather than toward the target ([Jasperson & Fan, 2002](#); [Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991](#)). Although scholars tend to believe that negative political ads promote alienation and antipathy toward politics, the potential backlash effect of negative

political ads on the sponsors has been less certain (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991; Lau et al., 1999). Some studies in effect found that negative ads elevated liking for the sponsor (Wadsworth et al., 1987) and increased voting intention for the candidates using them (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Kaid, 1997). In contrast, others suggested that negative ads were more likely to generate negative evaluation of the sponsors (Garramone, 1984; Hill, 1989; Merritt, 1984). Political consultants overall believed that negative political advertising could reduce target candidate evaluation without causing any backlash (see Perloff & Kinsey, 1992).

These inconsistent findings may be explained by several factors that researchers believed might trigger or mitigate backlash effect. They include the degree of negativity (Pinkleton, 1997), sponsorship (Garramone, 1985), party affiliation (Pfau et al., 1999), ad truthfulness (Garramone, 1984), source credibility (Pfau et al., 1999), and subsequent rebuttal (Roddy & Garramone, 1988). Garramone (1984), for example, surveyed 367 Michigan voters during a congressional campaign and uncovered strong backlash or boomerang effect against the sponsoring candidates because of the perceived untruthfulness of the negative ads. Merritt (1984) also used a survey to examine the impact of negative advertising in a low-visibility state assembly campaign in California. She found that when an unknown source attacked an opponent, voters would derogate the source. Based on these findings, we hypothesize that without any mitigating factors, candidate-sponsored negative ads will lead to significant backlash against the sponsor.

H3: Participants who are exposed to candidate-sponsored negative ads will have a less favorable opinion of the sponsoring candidate than those exposed to positive political ads or to no political ads at all.

Soft-money-sponsored negative political ads are sponsored by organizations supposedly independent of political candidates. It is usually hard for a layperson to detect the hidden link between the political organizations and the candidate they implicitly support. Therefore, even if voters find the negative ads nasty or untrustworthy, there might not be consequences for the candidates whom the ads support. Garramone (1985), for example, compared candidate-sponsored and independently-sponsored negative ads and found that independent sponsorship reduced backlash effects. Sponsorship anonymity of soft-money-sponsored ads may well have a similar advantage over candidate-sponsored political ads. As such, we hypothesize that negative political ads run by soft-money organizations will not generate significant backlash effects against the candidate being implicitly supported in the political ads.

H4: Participants who are exposed to the negative soft-money political ads will not have a less favorable opinion of the candidate being supported than those exposed to positive political ads or to no political ads at all.

## Negative Political Advertising and Sponsorship

Research that compared the relative effectiveness of independently-sponsored and candidate-sponsored ads has produced mixed findings. One stream of research found that attack ads damaged the target candidate more severely when they were delivered by someone other than the sponsoring candidate or when they were sponsored by groups independent of the campaign (Garramone, 1985; Garramone & Smith, 1984; Kaid & Boydston, 1987). Garramone (1985), for instance, found that political action committee (PAC) sponsorship exerted a greater influence against the targeted candidate with reduced backlash effect against the supported candidate. On the other hand, Pfau et al. (1999) failed to discover any conclusive evidence on whether soft-money issue ads could yield a greater influence than both positive and negative political ads sponsored by candidates. Because the available literature provided inconsistent results regarding the impact of the sponsorships of ads, the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: Will the effect of candidate-sponsored political advertisements on audience attitude toward the target candidate and the sponsor differ from that of soft-money-sponsored political advertisements?

## METHOD

### Participants and Design

To provide answers for the earlier hypotheses and research question, a between-group experimental design was implemented. Participants were 71 male and 79 female undergraduate students in introductory communication classes at a mid-western public university. The median age for all participants was 21, and their ages ranged from 18 to 45. Students were invited to participate in this study on a voluntary basis. They were randomly assigned to one of the five experimental groups: candidate-sponsored positive advertising, candidate-sponsored negative advertising, soft-money-sponsored positive advertising, soft-money-sponsored negative advertising, and the control group. The four treatment groups were exposed to the different stimuli pertaining to two fictional candidates competing for a state senate seat, whereas the control group read neutral print material unrelated to the campaign and the candidates. Individual group sizes ranged from 29 to 30.

After being briefed and signing the consent forms, participants read candidate profiles and completed a series of pretest scales. Next, they were instructed to read the stimuli carefully and then complete the posttest instruments. At the end of the experiment, these instruments were collected and the participants were debriefed. Each session took about 30 min. Several steps were taken to ensure that (a) the

observed differences among the experimental conditions were due to either the valence of political advertisements or to the sponsorships and (b) the observed differences in attitudes toward the candidates could not be attributed to any other spurious variables.

### *Biographic Profiles*

Biographic profiles for the two political candidates were created and tested for approximate equivalence. The profiles contained information about each candidate's educational background, family members, employment history, civic organization memberships, and political experiences. Neither candidate was identified as an incumbent or a challenger, nor was there any mention of their political affiliations that might mitigate the ad's effects.

### *Issue Involvement*

To determine the specific issues that were relevant and important to college students, the top 10 campaign issues during the 2000 election season were rated using the involvement scale (see Jamieson, 2001). Based on the pretest results, education and environmental protection were selected because they were the two highest involvement issues among the student participants surveyed. By using the issues of similar involvement level, we intend to hold it constant in our experiment.

### *Political Advertisements*

Advertising stimuli were designed to simulate real-world newspaper political ads. A total of eight negative and positive political ads were created and then pretested. Each ad used in the experiments includes a headline like "Here is what you should know about Candidate A," followed by four specific statements about the targeted candidate's positions and voting records on educational or environmental issues. For example, the first positive ad states that Candidate A has an excellent record on education; has voted for a bill that would allow families to make educational expenses tax deductible; supports increase in funding for education; and has voted to raise teachers' pay in the state. The second positive ad states that Candidate A has an excellent record in protecting the environment; has voted in state legislature to encourage business to implement environmental protection measures; has supported an increase of funding for the state's environmental protection agency; and has voted for a bill that protects the water and air quality in the state.

The negative ads were created by depicting the candidate's opposite positions on the same issues. Sponsorships of the ads were printed at the bottom of ads in

similar font size.<sup>2</sup> They were manipulated in such a way that the sponsorship comes from either a candidate or a soft-money independent organization. Only candidate-sponsored advertisements contain the express advocacy to vote for or against a candidate.<sup>3</sup>

Thirteen undergraduate students, who did not participate in the main experiment, rated the overall negativity of each ad on a 7-point, bipolar-adjective scale to ensure that each ad had the appropriate level of perceived negativity. The results of this pretest showed a successful manipulation of negativity in the stimulus ads. In other words, participants rated the negative ads significantly more negative than the positive ads.

### *Dependent Variables*

To measure participants' attitudes toward the candidates, we used four dependent measures that have been used in previous research (see Lau et al., 1999; Pfau et al., 1999; Roddy & Garramone, 1988). These measures represent the key dimensions in candidate evaluations: overall attitude, character perception, affect (i.e., liking), and behavioral intention (i.e., voting preferences).

*Candidate evaluation.* Each participant's global attitude toward candidates was measured using six bipolar adjective pairs that were developed by Burgoon, Cohen, Miller, and Montgomery (1978). The attitudinal scale has attained excellent reliabilities in past political communication research. The bipolar adjective pairs were: unacceptable/acceptable, foolish/wise, negative/positive, wrong/right, unfavorable/favorable, and bad/good. The alpha reliability of the attitude scale was .97.

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<sup>2</sup>An example of a negative ad reads: Here is something you should know about James Patterson (headline). James Patterson has a poor record in protecting our precious environment. James Patterson voted in 1998 against the "Schneider bill," a tax incentive bill that encourages businesses to implement reasonable environmental protection measures. James Patterson voted to cut funding for the state's environmental protection agency. James Patterson has consistently voted against measures to protect clean water and air quality in the state. Cast your vote against James Patterson. Paid for by Mike Fuller's Campaign for State Senate.

An example of a positive ad reads: Here is something you should know about Mike Fuller. Mike Fuller has an excellent record on education. Mike Fuller voted for a bill that would make families' education savings tax deductible. Mike Fuller has consistently voted to increase funding for education in the state legislature. Mike Fuller said in June 2000 that he supports teachers' pay raise since our teachers' pay is below the national average. Cast your vote for Mike Fuller. Paid for by Mike Fuller's Campaign for State Senate.

<sup>3</sup>Ad sponsorship was manipulated by changing the sponsor of the ads and related wordings at the end of ad copy. Depending on the issues, the soft-money sponsored political ads end with: *Cast your vote for the environment. Paid by the Alliances for Concerned Citizens* or, *Cast your vote for education. Paid by the Education Reform Alliance.*



*Character perception.* This variable was assessed using a bipolar adjective opposite scale adopted from previous studies (e.g., Pfau et al., 1999). Items included to assess participants' perceptions about the political candidates were dishonest/honest, bad/good, and selfish/unselfish. The alpha reliability of the character measure was .97.

*Candidate liking.* Liking measures affect for a candidate, which is an important variable in candidate evaluation and political decision making. We decided to include it in the study because past research has shown that negative political advertising can have a significant impact on voter's liking of candidates (Lau et al., 1999). Liking was measured using a 7-point, bipolar adjective scale with 7 (*like very much*) and 1 (*dislike very much*) as anchors for the candidates.

*Voting preference.* Like commercial advertising, the ultimate purpose of political advertising is to shift preference. Voting preference can be very predictive of actual voting behaviors. In this study, it was measured using a single item, a 7-point bipolar-adjective scale designed to measure the extent to which participants would be willing to vote for the candidates in the ads. The participants were asked to indicate how likely they would be to vote for the targeted or sponsoring candidate if the election were held that day.<sup>4</sup>

## RESULTS

### Manipulation Check

To check the validity of the stimulus manipulation, we used a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine participants' perception of all ads' negativity. Results show significant differences in perception between the positive and the negative ads used in the study,  $F(3, 115) = 186.75, p < .001$ . A post hoc analysis using Tukey's multiple-comparison tests subsequently revealed that all treatment conditions were significantly different with one another and that negative ads were perceived to be significantly more negative than positive ads.

### *Effects of Negative Ads on Target Candidate*

H1 predicted that those exposed to negative candidate-sponsored ads would have a lower opinion of the target candidate than those exposed to the positive candidate-sponsored ads or the control group. To test this hypothesis, an ANOVA

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<sup>4</sup>Specific wording of the question is: If the election were to be held today, how likely would you be to vote for James Patterson? Respondents then were asked to make a choice on a scale anchored by 1 (*very likely*) and 7 (*very unlikely*).

analysis was conducted to compare group differences on four dependent measures. Results indicated that there were significant differences among the three groups on the four measures: candidate evaluation,  $F(2, 87) = 24.81, p < .001$ ; character perception,  $F(2, 87) = 15.67, p < .001$ ; candidate liking,  $F(2, 87) = 19.57, p < .001$ ; and voting preference,  $F(2, 87) = 7.76, p < .001$ .

Further analysis using Tukey honestly significant difference (HSD) post hoc tests revealed that candidate-sponsored negative ads significantly reduced participants' evaluations of the target candidates on all four dependent measures (see Table 1). Compared to both the positive ads and the control group, candidate-sponsored negative ads significantly lowered the scores on all four dependent measures for the target candidate. These results suggest that negative political ads produced the intended detrimental effect on target candidates. H1 is, therefore, fully supported.

H2 posited that negative political ads sponsored by soft-money organizations would generate significantly more negative effects on participants' attitudes toward the target candidates than positive issue ads or the control group. An ANOVA was also executed and resulted in significant differences among the three groups on the four dependent measures: candidate evaluation,  $F(2, 87) = 22.82, p < .001$ ; character perception,  $F(2, 87) = 12.74, p < .001$ ; candidate liking,  $F(2, 87) = 20.2, p < .001$ ; and voting preference,  $F(2, 87) = 9.26, p < .001$ .

Follow-up analyses using Tukey's HSD indicate that negative political ads sponsored by soft-money organizations yielded significant negative effects on evaluation of target candidate, character perception, candidate liking, and voting preference (see Table 2). Compared to the soft-money-sponsored positive ads and the control group, attack ads significantly reduced the scores on all four measures. Based on these findings, H2 is fully supported.

### *Effect of Negative Ads on Sponsoring Candidate*

H3 predicted that negative ads run by candidates have greater backlash effects than either positive ads or the control group. ANOVA results indicated that there

TABLE 1  
Effects of Candidate-Sponsored Ads on Target Candidate Evaluations

<i>Candidate-Sponsored Groups</i>	<i>Overall Evaluation</i>	<i>Character Perception</i>	<i>Candidate Liking</i>	<i>Voting Preference</i>
Negative ads	3.48 <sup>a, b</sup>	3.63 <sup>a, b</sup>	3.20 <sup>a, b</sup>	3.00 <sup>a, b</sup>
Positive ads	5.34 <sup>a</sup>	5.11 <sup>a</sup>	5.07 <sup>a</sup>	4.73 <sup>a</sup>
Control groups	5.18 <sup>b</sup>	5.13 <sup>b</sup>	4.50 <sup>b</sup>	4.18 <sup>b</sup>

*Note.* Means in the same column that share the same superscript differ at  $p < .05$  in the Tukey HSD comparisons. Cell entries are *M* scores.

TABLE 2  
Effects of Soft-Money-Sponsored Ads on Target Candidate Evaluations

<i>Soft-Money-Sponsored Groups</i>	<i>Overall Evaluation</i>	<i>Character Perception</i>	<i>Candidate Liking</i>	<i>Voting Preference</i>
Negative ads	3.58 <sup>a, b</sup>	3.80 <sup>a, b</sup>	3.17 <sup>a, b</sup>	3.03 <sup>a, b</sup>
Positive ads	5.24 <sup>a</sup>	5.07 <sup>a</sup>	4.89 <sup>a</sup>	4.83 <sup>a</sup>
Control groups	5.18 <sup>b</sup>	5.13 <sup>b</sup>	4.50 <sup>b</sup>	4.18 <sup>b</sup>

*Note.* Means in the same column that share the same superscript differ at  $p < .05$  in the Tukey HSD comparisons. Cell entries are  $M$  scores.

TABLE 3  
Effects of Candidate-Sponsored Ads on Evaluations of Sponsoring Candidate

<i>Candidate-Sponsored Groups</i>	<i>Overall Evaluation</i>	<i>Character Perception</i>	<i>Candidate Liking</i>	<i>Voting Preference</i>
Negative ads	4.57 <sup>a, b</sup>	4.00 <sup>a, b</sup>	4.03 <sup>a, b</sup>	3.97 <sup>a</sup>
Positive ads	5.23 <sup>a</sup>	5.13 <sup>a</sup>	4.83 <sup>a</sup>	4.50
Control groups	5.44 <sup>b</sup>	5.48 <sup>b</sup>	4.8 <sup>b</sup>	5.03 <sup>a</sup>

*Note.* Means in the same column that share the same superscript differ at  $p < .05$  in the Tukey HSD comparisons. Cell entries are group means.

were significant differences among the three groups on all dependent measures: candidate evaluation,  $F(2, 87) = 5.82, p < .01$ ; character perception,  $F(2, 87) = 12.29, p < .001$ ; candidate liking,  $F(2, 87) = 4.38, p < .05$ ; and voting preference,  $F(2, 87) = 3.55, p < .05$ . Post hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated that negative candidate-sponsored political ads resulted in significant backlash effects against the sponsoring candidate. As is revealed in Table 3, compared to the control group, participants exposed to negative ads significantly lowered the sponsors' overall evaluations, character perceptions, liking, and voting preferences among the participants. When compared to candidate-sponsored positive ads, negative political ads sponsored by candidates lowered all four measures of the dependent variables. With the exception of voting preferences, all other dependent measures were significantly lower (see Table 3). These results provided overwhelming support for H3.

H4 hypothesized that negative ads run by soft-money organizations would have a greater negative impact on voters' attitudes toward the sponsoring candidate than do the positive ads or the control group. ANOVA results showed that group differences were significant on two dependent measures: candidate evaluations,

$F(2, 86) = 4.20, p < .05$ , and character perceptions,  $F(2, 87) = 3.70, p < .05$ . However, there were no significant group differences on measures of candidate liking,  $F = .56, p = .58$ , and voting preferences,  $F = 2.02, p = .14$ . Further analyses on the two significant measures showed that soft-money negative ads that were organization sponsored significantly lowered candidate evaluations (4.82 vs. 5.44,  $p < .01$ ) and candidate character perceptions (4.72 vs. 5.48,  $p < .05$ ) only when they were compared to the control group. However, as Table 4 indicates, no significant differences of candidate evaluation and character perception were found between negative and positive issue ads run by soft-money organizations. These findings suggest that the backlash effects attributable to soft-money-sponsored political ads were negligible as compared to candidate-sponsored negative ads discussed earlier. Given the limited backlash effects found for soft-money-sponsored negative ads, we concluded that H4 was generally supported.

RQ1 is concerned with whether political ads sponsored by either soft-money political organizations or candidates themselves would result in varied impact on the sponsoring candidate and the target candidate. To answer this question, we used an ANOVA to compare the effects of positive and negative ads sponsored by both candidates and political organizations. Results revealed no significant differences between candidate-sponsored and soft-money-sponsored ads on the participants' responses toward the target candidate on all four dependent measures. However, candidate-sponsored negative ads generated marginally more significant backlash effects than did soft-money-sponsored negative ads. Specifically, on the measure of the sponsor's character perception, a significant difference in the means was found (4.0 vs. 4.7,  $p < .05$ ). On the measure of liking for the sponsor, there was marginally significant mean difference (4.0 vs. 4.5,  $p = .09$ ) between soft-money- and candidate-sponsored ads.

These results provide additional grounds in support of the conclusion that sponsorships of political issue ads could lead to differential backlash effects on the sponsoring (or supported) candidates. Specifically, candidate-sponsored negative ads are likely to generate stronger backlash effects than ads sponsored by

TABLE 4  
Effects of Soft-Money Sponsored Political Ads on the Sponsoring Candidate

<i>Soft-Money-Sponsored Groups</i>	<i>Overall Evaluation</i>	<i>Character Perception</i>	<i>Candidate Liking</i>	<i>Voting Preference</i>
Negative ads	4.82 <sup>a</sup>	4.72 <sup>a</sup>	4.53	4.67
Positive ads	5.25	5.14	4.63	4.23
Control groups	5.44 <sup>a</sup>	5.48 <sup>a</sup>	4.8	5.03

*Note.* Means in the same column that share the same superscript differ at  $p < .05$  in the Tukey HSD comparisons. Cell entries are group means.

soft-money political organizations. However, different sponsorships did not result in significantly different effects on evaluations of and voting intentions for the targeted candidates.

## DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

Consistent with previous scholarship on the effects of negative political advertising (e.g., Lau et al., 1999; Pinkleton, 1998), this study found that negative ads generated the intended negative attitudes and reduced voting preferences toward target candidates. In particular, both candidate-sponsored and soft-money-sponsored negative ads lowered the overall evaluation, character perception, liking, and voting preference of target candidates. In addition, this study revealed that backlash effects varied across different sponsorships. When attack ads were sponsored by a political candidate, participants lowered their evaluations of the sponsoring candidate. They also expressed a lower likelihood to vote for the sponsoring candidate. However, such boomerang effects were minimal when negative ads were sponsored by soft-money political organizations.<sup>5</sup> In light of the experimental controls imposed on the study, such differential backlash effects may be attributed to the source or the sponsor of the ads. It might be that soft-money-sponsored issue ads were more likely to be seen as objective and impartial. Prior research in political communication has consistently shown that source credibility and message fairness are important mediators of message effectiveness (Freedman, Wood, & Lawton, 1999). Future scholarship should explore the relationship between these mediating variables and voter responses to various political ads.

The investigation about whether soft-money-sponsored issue ads were more effective in generating the intended negative effects against the target and reducing the unintended backlash against the sponsor resulted in interesting, yet meaningful, findings. A stronger backlash effect was found when the ads were sponsored by political candidates. However, when compared to positive ads, negative soft-money ads yielded no significant backlash effects and generated only minimal backlash effects when compared to the control condition. Taken together, these findings may serve as additional evidence of the impact of negativity in political advertising. Negative soft-money-sponsored ads had the same effects as candidate-sponsored negative ads, even though the former category of ads was

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<sup>5</sup>Although negative ads could adversely affect both the target and the sponsor, it is unknown whether they hurt the target more than the sponsor. To test that, we conducted a series of *t* tests. Results indicated that participants who were exposed to negative political ads evaluated the target candidate significantly more negatively than they evaluated the sponsor on all of the four dependent measures: overall evaluation (3.53 vs. 4.69,  $p < .001$ ); character perception (3.72 vs. 4.36,  $p < .001$ ); liking (3.18 vs. 4.28,  $p < .001$ ); and voting preference (3.02 vs. 4.32,  $p < .001$ ).

barred from explicitly asking for a vote for or against a target candidate. Given such a level of effectiveness, the public's concern over the impact of soft-money issue ads on political campaigns and democratic processes seems warranted. Although candidate-sponsored negative ads resulted in backlash against the sponsor, minimal backlash effects were observed in negative ads funded by soft-money political organizations. It could be the camouflage of seemingly neutral, issue-labeled organizations and hidden nexus with their supported candidates help avoid boomerang effects.

Overall, issue advertising is a potent arsenal for political candidates as well as political organizations. Although this could have been a contributing factor in the recent surge of spending on political advertising, it suggests that factors underpinning its impact need more empirical examination. Rather than creating more voices as intended in *Buckley v. Valeo*, unrestricted spending on issue advertising could give interest groups, PACs, unions, or even billionaire tycoons louder voices in elections than average citizens. The ramifications of the present system and the possible means to ensure the fairness and integrity of the electoral process certainly await further scholarly research.

There are several limitations of this study that should be noted. The main shortcoming is the artificiality of the controlled experiment, whereby participants were exposed to the ads once and then were asked to evaluate the candidates. Although experiments allow researchers to control for the influence of extraneous variables, they nevertheless have lower generalizability than cross-sectional or longitudinal surveys. Voters' choices and attitudes toward candidates are often a cumulative effect of multiple factors over a long period of time. Our study simply could not replicate a natural environment. The other limitation is the use of college student participants, who, albeit eligible voters, are not typical electorate. Therefore, their interpretation of the ads and their subsequent evaluations of the political candidates cannot be entirely representative of the general electorate. Finally, the use of newspaper stimuli in the experiment means findings here may not be necessarily applicable to other media. The exclusive use of one medium is not typical in the real campaign world, so readers should be careful when applying the findings of this study to other nonprint media.

In light of these limitations, future research should replicate or extend the current research by using survey methods or employing broadcast or other media to test the effects of negative political advertising sponsored by various political entities. This will substantially enhance the external validity. Researchers should also examine various factors that could mediate the relationships examined in this study. For example, future studies may explore whether soft-money-sponsored issue ads are perceived to be more credible or objective than candidate-sponsored ads. Examining the causal relationships among the key variables will give us a better understanding of the impact of negative political advertising.

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