

# Seeing Spots: Partisanship, Negativity and the Conditional Receipt of Campaign Advertisements\*

John A. Henderson<sup>†</sup>      Alexander G. Theodoridis<sup>‡</sup>

Assistant Professor

Political Science

Yale University

Assistant Professor

Political Science

UC Merced

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## Abstract

Changes in the media landscape increasingly put voters in control of the amount and type of political content they consume. We develop a novel experiment to assess the factors that drive this *conditional receipt* of information. We focus on how party source and tone interact with partisanship to influence the campaign messages voters seek out or avoid, as discretion over self-exposure varies. We randomly expose subjects to comparable positive or negative television ads aired by Democratic or Republican candidates from the 2012 Presidential election, and measure subjects' propensities to skip, re-watch and share the spots. Partisans avoid out-party ads, albeit asymmetrically: Republicans are more consistent partisan screeners than Democrats. We find more such selectivity as discretion increases, but little evidence that negativity influences self-exposure. Our findings provide greater insight into the forces behind information selectivity, and have important implications for elections in the post-broadcast era.

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<sup>†</sup>john.henderson@yale.edu, <http://www.jahenderson.com>, Institution for Social and Policy Studies, Yale University, 77 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06520

<sup>‡</sup>atheodoridis@ucmerced.edu, <http://www.alexandertheodoridis.com>, School of Social Sciences, University of California, 5200 North Lake Rd., Merced, CA 95343

## 1 Introduction

Increasing its amplitude does not always make a message more intelligible, nor does it impel the listener to pay closer attention rather than flicking the “off” switch (Campbell et al. 1960, p., 172-73).

Since at least *The American Voter*, political scientists have studied how partisan competition can distort voter beliefs and information (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Campbell et al. 1960).<sup>1</sup> While there is considerable evidence that partisan attitudes impact how people *use* the information they receive (e.g. Arceneaux and Nickerson 2010; Bartels 2002; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Zaller 1992), there is little agreement about whether voters selectively expose themselves to different information environments, including campaign messages (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). Indeed, nearly five decades of research suggest that such distortion is a far more consistent force than selectivity in driving voter beliefs, behavior and attitudes, and thus also in explaining the way campaigns target, persuade and mobilize votes (Berelson et al. 1954; Iyengar et al. 2008; Sears and Freedman 1967; Stroud 2011).

Significant changes underway in the media environment, however, may be heightening the importance of selectivity in contemporary politics. The volume, reach, and negativity of political information has increased dramatically in the U.S., especially in state and national elections (Freedman et al. 2004; Geer 2006). Simultaneously, television and on-line media in the post-broadcast era have substantially fragmented with the expansion of on-demand and narrow-cast sources (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Arceneaux et al. 2012; Iyengar et al. 2008; Prior 2007).<sup>2</sup> Greater flexibility in how people access infor-

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<sup>1</sup>Data and code to reproduce analysis are available on the Political Behavior Dataverse at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/WP7ETR>.

<sup>2</sup>Indeed by 2016, more voters now say they primarily use online sources (30%) to learn about elections, than they do either cable (24%) or broadcast (10%) television (Gottfried et al. 2016). This ongoing trend has prompted presidential campaigns to increase online

mation, from the advent of the remote control, to online streaming and social media, is increasingly putting voters in charge of the political content they consume, through an active rather than passive process (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013).

At the same time as these changes in the media landscape have taken hold, we have seen a stark rise in a psychological, group-identity-based manifestation of partisan division, often termed “affective polarization” (Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Nicholson 2012; Nicholson et al. 2016). The new media environment, characterized by discretion over information sources, may be contributing to this affective polarization. In providing people with greater control over the information they access, their partisan commitments may increasingly override other factors, yielding a narrower set of views, opinions and facts to which voters are exposed. On the other hand, partisan selectivity may be mediated by the rise in negativity, especially in campaign context, which may dampen partisan impulses by making information more interesting or engaging (Freedman et al. 2004). In breaking through the partisan screen, exposure to negative information may lead voters to alter, rather than reinforce their existing commitments (Brader 2006).

In this article, we extend a model of *conditional receipt* of information to provide an account of partisan screening under conditions of increasing discretion. We build on Zaller’s (1992) Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model, and the Active Audience (AA) account developed by Arceneaux and Johnson (2013). Accordingly, we expect that exposure to political information is motivated by a desire to seek out messages that affirm voters’ beliefs and loyalties stemming principally from their partisanship, and to avoid content that challenge these attitudes. However, this motivation may be mediated by other factors, most notably, the *tone* of the information being delivered, and the amount of *control* people have over their own self-exposure. Negativity may ‘hijack’ people’s pre-cognitive psychology, sidestepping motivated desires to avoid such messages. Further, partisan motivations may have less leverage in contexts where information is passively

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ad spending from \$78 million in 2012, to over \$1 billion by 2016 (Kurtzleben 2016).

received.

We develop a novel experimental approach to assess this theoretical account of voter selectivity in a context analogous to how many voters encounter ads in contemporary campaigns. In a representative, large-N study administered online, respondents were randomly shown a positive or negative television ad favoring either the Republican or Democratic candidate, drawn from the 2012 Presidential race (fielded as part of the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study).<sup>3</sup> Respondents were given the opportunity to skip the ad after five seconds of watching the video. We record the length of time each respondent watches the ad. We then provide an opportunity to replay the ad, and ask a series of follow-up questions gauging the desire to share the ad with friends or request a link to similar ads online.

Our design overcomes a number of limitations in prior elections research. We exploit advances in online survey methodology, such as those pioneered by Clinton and Lapinski (2004), to conduct a type of large-N experiment previously possible only in lab settings with many fewer subjects (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). The approach explicitly addresses people’s propensity to turn off political ads, which can pose inferential challenges to studies that ignore self-selection (Druckman et al. 2012; Gaines and Kuklinski 2011). Substantively, our experiment also offers the first empirical examination of *two-way* information screening, assessing both avoidance and seeking behaviors (Iyengar et al. 2008). Finally, our outcomes (not skipping, replaying, sharing, and requesting links to ads) range from relatively passive to more active *behaviors* allowing us to investigate selectivity at different levels of discretion, without relying on attitude-like measures.

We apply this new method for measuring message-seeking propensity to examine the extent of partisan selectivity and whether it is mediated by tone. We thus provide one of the first explorations of the interactive effects of party source and tone on voter screening.

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<sup>3</sup>We also replicated this study through a virtually-identical experiment for the 2013 gubernatorial election in Virginia (fielded through YouGov). See Appendix Section F.

Though we focus on tone and partisanship, our experimental design could be readily used to study a much wider range of political messages or forms of media consumption. Moreover, while we exploit the increasingly familiar context of ad skipping and sharing on the internet, we expect that the underlying screening propensities measured by our task generalize across many other information contexts. For example, skipping may be analogous to clicking the remote to switch the channel, averting one’s gaze, or getting up to grab food when a political ad appears on television.

In support of partisan selectivity, our primary finding is that the propensity to watch ads depends predominantly on the party source of the information for partisan identifiers, while tone has little effect on exposure. We uncover some nuance, with Republican identifiers being far more consistent screeners than Democrats. The former are much less willing to watch *any* Democratic ads, while Democrats behave more heterogeneously. Significantly, we also find that partisan screening increases in the amount of active effort required for exposure, which varies across our outcome measures. Counter to expectations drawn from research on negativity (and a straw poll surveying experts in the field) we find that advertising tone does *not* influence watching, skipping, or sharing behaviors. These findings suggest politicians may face challenges in communicating to out-party voters through negative appeals, particularly in media environments where voters are tasked with seeking out political content. Politicians can more easily reach their own partisans in discretion-driven markets, though this may be asymmetric across parties. Our study suggests that partisan selectivity, unlikely to recede in the face of growing affective polarization, will play an increasingly important role in multi-cast elections defined as much by choices over media sources as that between candidates.

## 2 Prior Research on Information Screening

Scholars have long been interested in how voters receive and incorporate political information (Berelson et al. 1954; Prior 2007; Sears and Freedman 1967; Zaller 1992). Most

of this prior research sees selection into information environments as a straightforward function of political interest or features of the information itself (such as tone), but *not* partisanship or political attitudes (Graber 1984; Guess 2016; Mummolo 2016; Prior 2007; Zaller 1992). The early findings from work on party-motivated selectivity have been quite mixed (Graber 1984; Sears and Freedman 1967). In comparison, the correlation between self-reported interest in politics, knowledge of political facts and stated exposure to political content are consistently robust across many contexts (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Zaller offers perhaps the most influential take on this as part of his Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model of attitude formation. There he depicts the information environment as “consist(ing) of moderately intense, temporally stable information flows ... (in which) a person’s predispositions, although affecting acceptance of persuasive messages, *do not affect reception*” (emphasis added, Zaller 1992, p. 58, 139).

## 2.1 Discretion and Selectivity

In this study, we extend a theory of the *conditional receipt* of political messages to account for how voters screen information in an emerging ‘hyperchoice’ environment (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). We draw on insights from the RAS model and the groundbreaking work on Active Audiences (AA) by Arceneaux and Johnson (2013), who examined selection *among* media options. Accordingly, we argue that conditional reception depends not only on features of the information, but also the interaction between how voters are being exposed and their predisposition to self-exposure. At the level of *sociodemographic* mediators, factors like where people live, how their social networks are structured, or their electoral pivotalness, among other things, influence the kinds of messages voters are likely to receive. Largely, these are the contextual factors that campaigns take as givens when choosing how to mobilize or persuade voters (e.g., Freedman et al. 2004). At a micro-level, *psychological* factors, like partisan discounting, backlash or other automatic processes also mediate the information people incorporate when targeted (e.g.,

Zaller 1992).

Separate from these targeting and incorporation effects, we emphasize that people may be more or less likely to receive a message because of their own tendency to *selectivity*, choosing to opt into or out of particular information environments, and of focus here, specific types of content. Thus, a voter's underlying propensity to seek out or avoid certain messages mediate her exposure to and thus eventual incorporation of the various considerations conveyed in political communication. This propensity can be conceptualized as a force that either repels or attracts messages systematically based upon their readily discernible characteristics (e.g., tone, partisan source, topic relevance). When presented with a message, 'active audience' voters select into or out of further receipt depending on the features they observe from early portions of the message. Moreover, we argue this selective behavior will be augmented (or dampened) in contexts where voters have more (or less) discretion over their own exposure.

In the broadcast era, the blunt targeting of political information into living rooms, asked people to *passively* receive such information. Here active effort is required to avoid reception, so that only the most motivated will be selective (Prior 2007). Consequently, the balanced reception described by Zaller (1992), likely characterized much of this period, profiling the importance of campaign targeting and information 'acceptance' as robust explanations for voter learning. However, the recent explosion in narrow-cast, cable and online media has provided much greater discretion over information consumption (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Arceneaux et al. 2012; Garrett et al. 2013; Guess 2016; Mummolo 2016; Prior 2007). As media environments shift to allow greater consumer control over content (e.g., cable to DVR to internet media), voters must use effort to *actively* opt into particular information streams. Thus, the highly motivated will still be selective in the information they actively seek out, but those willing to passively receive certain unwanted messages will be much less likely to actively search these out. Consequently, we expect conditional receipt to depend fundamentally on whether exposure

requires more active effort on the part of voters.

## 2.2 Negativity

We consider message tone or negativity to be one of the major content-level characteristics that may drive the conditional receipt of political information. Following the recent explosion in campaign negativity (Freedman et al. 2004; Geer 2012*b*), scholars have committed tremendous effort to studying the electoral and behavioral effects of attack strategies (Lau et al. 2007; Djupe and Peterson 2002; Peterson and Djupe 2005). Much of this research has uncovered potentially detrimental impacts of negativity on political engagement, knowledge and interest, among other things (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Garramone et al. 1990; Hill 1989; Krupnikov 2011). Yet, other work on the disengaging effects of negativity has produced more mixed results (e.g., Arceneaux and Nickerson 2010; Clinton and Lapinski 2004; Geer 2006; Kahn and Kenney 2004; Mattes and Redlawsk 2015).

An major finding in campaign research is that attack ads are typically more interesting, provocative or compelling to watch, making them more effective at catching people's attention (Brader 2006; Geer 2006). In a polarized political context, this finding suggests negativity may be a powerful way to cut through voters' cognitive or psychological resistance, so long as people receive the message. Scholars in other fields, notably including psychology and neuroscience, highlight specific mechanisms to explain how negativity may be more effective in attracting attention or overcoming cognitive screening (Berger and Milkman 2011; Ito et al. 1998; Pratto and John 1991; Smith et al. 2003). However, other researchers have found relatively little influence of negativity on self-selection or information exposure (Lau et al. 2007; Sears and Freedman 1967). A response to negativity is sometimes attributed to those *most* informed about politics (Zaller 1992), but at other times to the *least* informed (Baum 2002). Nonetheless, by implication people should differ in their propensity to screen negative and positive ad content, which may

also depend on their level of political interest, or whether the information is presented in an interesting way (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013).<sup>4</sup>

Notably, our experimental design can help disentangle some of the conflicting findings about the effects of negativity. As Gaines and Kuklinski (2011) highlight, experiments that force subjects to watch ads are likely to suffer significant concerns about external validity when generalizing to the real-world where exposure is voluntary. While our study is not focused on the downstream effects of advertising (e.g., mobilization, persuasion), our approach and findings hold important implications about how selectivity may mediate these behaviors at a stage prior to exposure. By giving subjects the opportunity to both avoid *and* seek out advertisements, randomly varying tone, our design can address whether people’s self-selection to watch ads alters the influence that negative information has on voter behaviors or attitudes (Druckman et al. 2012).

### 2.3 Partisanship

Another potential feature driving selectivity is partisan source and party identity (PID). A major finding in political science is that PID influences information reception as a kind of “perceptual screen,” significantly coloring the way people evaluate the two political parties, their labels and their candidates (Campbell et al. 1960; Green et al. 2002; Theodoridis 2012*a,b*, 2017; Goggin and Theodoridis 2017). Early work in this vein highlighted both cognitive and behavioral aspects of partisan screening (Berelson et al. 1954; Campbell et al. 1960). Yet, until quite recently, researchers have mostly focused on the cognitive distortion rather than selection effects of partisanship (Geer et al. 2012), demonstrating a multiplicity of ways in which PID influences behavior, knowledge and

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<sup>4</sup>While attack ads may be more interesting or engaging on average, it is not clear that such characteristics should be treated as inherent to tone rather than as distinct dimensions. If separable, at least some the negativity effect could be attributable to how interesting the information is, rather than the tone itself.

attitudes (Campbell et al. 1960; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Zaller 1992; Nicholson 2012).

The new media environment has renewed debate over whether people receive a ‘balanced diet’ of information, or systematically seek out or avoid information based on its congruence with prior partisan or political attitudes. Some recent work finds that voters *do* selectively expose themselves to congruent information within the party ‘echo chambers,’ particularly where discretion over alternatives is greatest (Arceneaux et al. 2012; Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Lawrence et al. 2010; Prior 2007; Stroud 2011).<sup>5</sup> However, there is debate over how far these selectivity findings generalize to people’s living rooms.

Other research in political science (Guess 2016; Iyengar et al. 2008) and mass communication (Garrett 2009; Garrett et al. 2013) has found less partisan selectivity in media choices. Much of this work focuses on the consumption of online news, finding that ideological screening is limited to a small subset of highly active and engaged partisans, while most others choose to access relatively balanced news sources (Garrett et al. 2013; Guess 2016).

In summary, there is little scholarly agreement over whether or not partisan voters screen out or select into particular information environments, and whether these choices depend on individual predispositions or features of the information (e.g., party source or tone).<sup>6</sup> We might expect that partisan voters seek out ads only from co-partisan

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<sup>5</sup>Voters observe party cues from media they passively or actively consume, and then decide to tune in or out given these features, in order to avoid cognitive dissonance from information that conflicts with core aspects of their political identity (Jerit and Barabas 2012; Theodoridis 2012*a*).

<sup>6</sup>We surveyed leading scholars (as determined by publications on the topic) to gauge their baseline expectations about voter ad consumption. (Details of this survey are available in the Online Appendix.) Among the 62 scholars surveyed, 57% expect rates of skipping to be higher for positive ads, while 15% expect rates to be higher for negative ads and 29%

candidates. Yet, being politically engaged, partisans may also want to be aware of the claims made by their party’s opponents. Further, these effects may also depend on the tone of the advertising, and the effort required to avoid exposure. For example, partisans may be drawn in to watching an opponent attack their preferred candidate or similarly may most prefer watching an attack on the opposing team. But, they may be unwilling to spend any more time searching for such messages once the television ads are over. This empirical and theoretical disagreement highlights the renewed importance of identifying who are the most selective information screeners, and whether different content or context influence the extent of this screening behavior.

### 3 Data and Study Design

Our data come from an experimental study embedded in the University of California, Merced module (Theodoridis 2013) of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). That survey was fielded among a national sample in the days prior to Election Day 2012 through YouGov.<sup>7</sup> While the entire module featured 1437 respondents, only subjects taking the survey on a device allowing them to see and hear streaming video

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thought there will be no difference. 71% of experts believe ads from the opposing party will elicit more skipping, while 16% expect voters will skip more ads aired by their own party, with 13% stating no difference. The scholars in our survey expect negative ads to elicit greater self-exposure than positive ads; they expect more ad-seeking behavior from respondents presented with in-party ads; and while they expect both tone and source to influence behavior, they expect the impact of party source to be more pronounced.

<sup>7</sup>We also fielded a similar study through YouGov on a sample ( $N = 1200$ ) of Virginians in the days prior to that Commonwealth’s 2013 gubernatorial election. Details of that study can be found in the Online Appendix. In the interest of space, we do not highlight those results here, as they largely corroborate the findings in our national sample.

were included in this particular study ( $N = 1088$ ).<sup>8</sup>

Subjects were randomly assigned to watch one of 12 campaign advertisements from the 2012 presidential campaign. Half of the videos favored Mitt Romney and the other half favored Barack Obama, with half of each candidates' ads positive in tone and the other half negative. Ads were carefully selected to be as comparable as possible, especially in issue content, general appeal, and overall quality.<sup>9</sup> We excluded any ads that featured explicit appeals to particular subgroups (e.g. women or minority groups), and sought to match each Obama ad with a Romney ad that focused on similar subject matter or topics. Once selected, ads were edited slightly to ensure that they all had the same run time (30 seconds). In addition, some ads were edited so the approval language appeared at the end rather than beginning of the message.<sup>10</sup> (Ads used are listed in Table I in the

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<sup>8</sup>Following Mutz (2011) and Miratrix et al. (2017), we do not use survey weights provided by YouGov in our analysis. Not all subjects could watch video in the CCES, and weights are generated for the entire sample, not just this subset. Online recruitment by YouGov potentially over-samples the politically engaged, which could somewhat limit the generalizability of our results. For instance, we might uncover lower skipping rates than observed in the broader electorate, or might understate tone effects, if negativity impacts the least politically interested the most. The sample is diverse and broadly representative without weights, and our findings do not differ when using weights.

<sup>9</sup>Though the selected ads are very similar, they are not identical on all non-experimental dimensions. Yet, we use actual, as opposed to hypothetical ads, to maximize the realism and external validity of our experimental findings, which we think outweighs concerns about the slight heterogeneity across treatments.

<sup>10</sup>For robustness, we ran our analyses iteratively excluding each ad, and find no evidence of ad-specific effects. We also ran analyses excluding the outside-group ads "Briefcase" and "It's OK", and including an indicator for candidate or outside-group sponsored ad, again recovering identical results.

Appendix.)

Before watching the ads, respondents were shown the following text:

On the next page, you will see a short video randomly selected from among clips about the current presidential campaign. You don't need to watch the entire video if you don't want to, just the first 5 seconds. After those first 5 seconds, you can feel free to watch as much or as little of the video as you'd like.

Once subjects proceeded to the video screen, the ad began playing automatically. Subjects were able to advance to the next screen at any time. If they did not skip, the page automatically advanced upon completion of the video. The page containing the video frame reminded subjects that they were able to skip after five seconds. A reminder that they should feel free to skip also appeared in the video at the 5-second mark. We asked respondents to watch the first five seconds of the ads, in line with how people typically encounter ads online, for example on YouTube. Ads were also selected to ensure that their tone and source were clear in the first few seconds.<sup>11</sup>

After the video ended or was skipped, respondents automatically advanced to the next page where they were asked if they would like to replay the video. Those choosing to replay it were shown the video a second time, once again with the option to skip.

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<sup>11</sup>Dial testing data in Iyengar et al. (2010) suggests that subjects generally are able to discern the source and tone of ads within the first few seconds. In our sample, Barack Obama or Mitt Romney appeared in voice, image or name within the first second or two of every ad. In every negative ad, a clear line of attack is made within the first five or six seconds, accompanied by negative music, voiceovers and images. Four of the six positive ads open with the candidates speaking either to the camera or to supporters in rallies, alongside applause and uplifting music. The remaining Obama ad opens with photos of the President as a child with his mother going to school and growing up, and the final Romney ad opens with him talking about his character and leadership with workers on a factory floor. The videos used can be found at <https://sites.google.com/site/ccesvideos/>.

After either watching the video again or declining to do so, subjects were asked a series of questions regarding the video they had just seen, including:

- Would you like us to provide you with a link to this video after you complete the survey, so you can share it with your friends on Facebook, Twitter or over e-mail?
- Would you like to see another video similar to this one?

Following these questions, subjects were asked to evaluate the tone and content of the ads, indicating whether they believe them to be negative or positive, fair, untruthful, interesting, or unbelievable. In addition to these questions, we also recorded how long each subject spent watching ads (both on original play and replay).<sup>12</sup> We use these page-time measures to construct our skipping behavioral outcomes. These additional selectivity and evaluative questions were collected for all participants in the study regardless of whether they chose to skip or watch the ad. This was designed to approximate realistic information settings where it is commonplace for people to share media online that they have not watched in full, solely on a brief snippet of content.<sup>13</sup>

The experiment yields four measures of screening behavior. These include whether subjects chose to 1) *skip* ahead prior to the end of the ad, 2) *replay* the ad, 3) receive a link to the ad so that they could *share* it on social media or via e-mail, and 4) *get links* to similar ads. To measure skipping, we include a dummy variable that equals 1 for subjects who chose to skip prior to the end of the 30-second ad, and 0 for those who watched until the end, captured by the time spent on the video page.<sup>14</sup> Though our main analysis focuses on each of these outcomes separately, we also include an overall summary score of

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<sup>12</sup>We also recorded the time spent on the screen following the video page to make sure respondents did not leave their computers while completing the survey.

<sup>13</sup>We descriptively assess effect heterogeneity in downstream behaviors, stratifying on skippers and non-skippers, in Tables VI and VII in the Appendix.

<sup>14</sup>We also examine skipping using a 25-second cut-off, and recover similar findings indicating our results are not driven by individuals skipping at the final seconds.

self-exposure, combining the four outcomes into an additive measure of total ad-seeking choices. This measure helps capture a common information-seeking propensity exhibited noisily across each individual behavior.

The experimental interface is one familiar to most who have watched video content online, which often includes an option to skip ads after a few seconds of exposure.<sup>15</sup> Alongside its fidelity to the way many people watch ads, external validity in the design is further bolstered by subjects' desire to move on to other items and complete the survey, or to simply avoid video content. This incentive to minimize time spent watching ads in a survey may resemble other real-world situations where voters face tradeoffs between information and entertainment that compete for their attention during an election (Baum 2002; Prior 2007). While our experimental design exploits respondent familiarity with a particular mode of watching ads, our outcome measures capture variation in the underlying propensity of voters to avoid or seek out information at different levels of active effort. Consequently, our design can illuminate more general screening behavior in many other contexts where voters have varying abilities to regulate their self-exposure.

We expect subjects who skip ads presented to them in our survey will also be more likely to tune out similar content when it appears on their social media feeds, internet news sites, or even their televisions. While the mechanism driving selectivity will vary by medium, the desire motivating it should not. We expect revealed selectivity to vary in relation to a passive-to-active continuum. Complete passivity might resemble the Ludovico aversion therapy in *A Clockwork Orange*, where the viewer's head is forcibly immobilized and the eyelids pried open, leaving no choice but to watch the ads presented (Burgess 2013). At the other extreme might be the dogged pursuit of difficult-to-find

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<sup>15</sup>The 5-second ad skipping feature is extensively used by YouTube, allowing viewers to reach media content after only brief exposure to ads. Many online sources similarly allow viewers to skip ad content, and online television providers (e.g., Hulu) give viewers discretion to choose the amount and type of ads they watch.

content on obscure websites. Our outcomes likely fall near the middle of this spectrum, though more active than everyday television viewership with remote control in hand.

## 4 Descriptive Findings About Selectivity

An important innovation in our experimental design is that it allows us to observe actual behaviors in response to fully randomized ad exposures in as realistic a setting as possible. These behaviors can help inform us about who is watching or avoiding ads, and whether these choices vary meaningfully with voter characteristics (e.g., political interest), that are expected to influence information-seeking. We initially explore whether our design produces meaningful variation in each ad-seeking behavior, particularly ad watching *and* skipping. Inspecting summary statistics, the median respondent watched an entire ad, consuming 31.5 seconds of political content.<sup>16</sup> Using our binary measure, we find more than 40 percent of respondents chose to skip the ads shown to them. Overall, we find a robust, but not passive, amount of ad consumption. Hence, any concern that respondents would either mostly skip all ads or passively watch most ads, creating possible ceiling and floor effects, does not materialize.

The more active forms of ad-seeking (i.e., replaying, sharing, linking) are comparatively rarer than choosing not to skip an ad once it starts to play. We found that rates of replaying ranged between 9 and 13 percent, while requesting to share ads with friends ranged between 8 and 5 percent. However, more than 20 percent asked to be provided a link online to similar ads. Nonetheless, a sizable proportion allowed themselves to be

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<sup>16</sup>Viewing times are shown in density plots in Figures 1 and 3. A few subjects watched the video for longer than their duration, due to slight variations in connection speed for streaming video. The rarity of these longer views results from features of YouGov’s survey system designed to optimize video streaming. Since treatment assignment is random, there is no reason to expect differences in connection speed across conditions.

exposed, and some even sought out more exposure to political content even when given the option to avoid it. Though less frequent overall, these active behaviors are more prevalent among those who watched, rather than skipped ads. Only 10 percent of those who skipped ahead asked for a link to similar ads, as compared to 30 percent for those who watched the entire ad. Around 6.5 percent of those who had skipped chose to replay the ad, as compared to 11 percent for those who did not skip. And, just 3 percent of those who skipped were interested in sharing the ad, while 11 percent of non-skippers shared them. Of course our experimental setup does not offer us causal leverage to measure these conditional behaviors. Yet, this illustrates that selectivity clusters along a common dimension that might reinforce sorting into different information environments following early stages of exposure.

Finally, though not the main focus in the analysis of our experiment below, we use standard OLS regression to explore the role a variety of individual-level factors may have on variation in each selectivity outcome. The models include a number of factors hypothesized in prior research to influence ad and political information consumption, including political interest, (strength of) PID, voter registration, residing in a battleground state or county (as a proxy for information saturation), and additional controls (e.g., Geer et al. 2012; Prior 2007). Similar to prior research, we find that the most consistent individual predictor of information-seeking behavior is level of political interest (“follow what’s going on in government and public affairs”). Besides political interest, however, we find relatively few other individual factors directly influence overall ad-consumption in our survey.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Due to non-linearity in modeling binomial outcomes, we replicate results using logit model, and recover virtually identical results. See Tables II and III in the Appendix.

## 5 Experimental Evidence of Conditional Reception

As discussed above, there is limited agreement in prior work about the sorts of ads voters will watch or seek out. With respect to tone, however, a number of findings suggest the entertainment value and neurocognitive allure of an ad is likely to breakthrough people’s partisan filter, leading them to watch more negative than positive messages. To examine this hypothesis, we estimate the effect that random exposure to a positive or negative ad had on each of the information-seeking (or avoiding) behaviors, including a summary of all of these. We also investigate the potential for mediating effects that may be attributed to important characteristics of voters, most notably their level of political interest interacting with ad tone.

### 5.1 Minimal Impact of Tone

Surprisingly, our findings are not consistent with the above expectations about negativity. In Figure 1 we present density plots of the amount of time respondents spent watching positive (solid lines) or negative (dashed lines) ads. In the figures, we also include  $t$ -test  $p$ -values for the hypothesis that respondents watched positive and negative ads at similar rates.<sup>18</sup> We see respondents watch virtually an identical amount of positive and negative advertising. In Figure 1, a  $t$ -test ( $p = 0.583$ ) shows that subjects did not differ either in the average amount of positive or negative ads they watched, or in rates of watching at various moments in the ads (e.g., first or last five seconds of ads).

Figure 2 shows the influence of ad tone on the variety of ad-seeking choices available to respondents. These plots display sample average rates of ad-seeking, without conditioning on any individual-level characteristics. Bootstrap 95% confidence intervals are estimated using fully non-parametric resampling, and indicated by upper and lower horizontal lines

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<sup>18</sup>We recover virtually identical findings using  $ks$ -tests when comparing how long participants watched positive and negative ads.

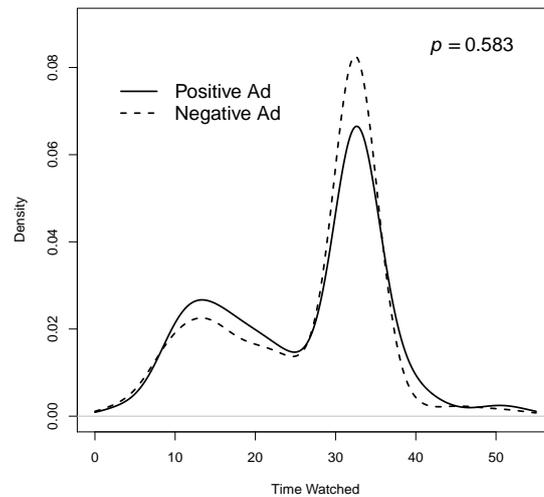


Figure 1: **Time Watched by Tone:** These figures display density plots for the amount of time viewed by ad tone. Leainers are included as partisans.  $P$ -values are based on two-sample  $t$ -tests.

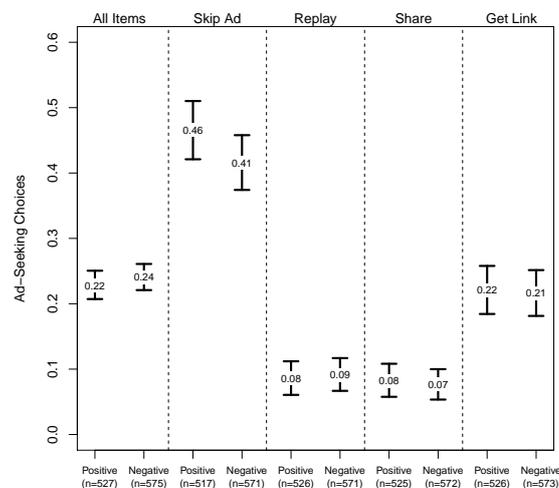


Figure 2: **Tone:** Figure shows rates of four ad seeking behaviors, and an overall summary measure, by tone of ad. Rates are sample averages by treatment condition, and bars indicate 95% confidence intervals produced by non-parametric bootstrap resampling.

in the figures. Strikingly, none of the measured behaviors differ significantly following exposure to positive or negative ads. We clearly see no differences across tone in replaying,

sharing or getting links.<sup>19</sup> Respondents do appear slightly more likely to skip positive over negative ads ( $p = 0.09$ ) in column two of Figure 2, though this difference is not statistically different from zero at standard levels of significance.<sup>20</sup>

This lack of a tone effect is confirmed in examining our summary measure aggregating all ad-seeking choices. Overall watching behavior is statistically indistinguishable ( $p = 0.348$ ) across positive and negative advertisements. As a final robustness check, we asked respondents if the video they saw was interesting, and aggregate these responses over the entire sample to score ads. We observe small differences in the proportion of respondents rating positive and negative ads as interesting, though these are statistically indistinguishable.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Our findings clearly contrast with Berger and Milkman (2011), who examine whether particular types of positivity or negativity influence the information people share online. A possible reason for the divergent results is that our study uses a large- $N$  survey experiment to measure how people respond to policy or character attacks made in partisan presidential advertisements, while Berger and Milkman (2011) analyze responses to an amusing Jimmy Dean sausage commercial ( $N=49$ ), an angry story about bad customer service by United Airlines ( $N=45$ ), and a sad story about 9/11 victims ( $N=47$ ). None of these latter vignettes prime partisanship, and they focus on particular emotional dimensions of tone, rather than on attack or promotion politics.

<sup>20</sup>We also assess whether tone influences ad-seeking behavior differently for certain respondents, in particular the most (or least) interested in current events (Baum 2002). In our auxiliary, multivariate models, we interact interest with (randomized) ad tone, to account for any conditional effects. We recover null interaction effects for all of ad-seeking outcomes, suggesting tone does not influence exposure depending on political interest. See Tables II and III in the Appendix.

<sup>21</sup>Auxiliary OLS results presented in Table IV in the Appendix show that an ad's interestingness does not increase exposure to it overall, or conditional on tone. Between 20 and

Overall, we find that tone has minimal influence on whether or not voters choose to avoid or seek out ads. Indeed, across virtually all analyses we consistently find that tone does remarkably little to influence voters’ appetites for consuming more political advertising. Consequently, when given discretion over information, we find negative messaging is unlikely to pierce through the partisan screen to reach out-party voters.<sup>22</sup>

## 5.2 Party Source and Partisanship

In contrast to tone, we strongly expect the party source of campaign messages to influence ad-seeking behavior by tapping partisan motivations. To examine this expectation, we asked respondents whether they had seen the ad shown to them. 40 percent of respondents rated ads in our sample as interesting. For comparison, the Vanderbilt Ads Project rated a larger sample of 2012 Presidential ads using an identical survey instrument, and found virtually all of these range between 34 and 41 percent (Geer 2012a). Both findings suggest that our results are unlikely to be idiosyncratic to the particular ads we studied.

<sup>22</sup>We also assess whether prior (reported) exposure to ads outside the experiment is attenuating ad-seeking behaviors, especially by tone. We ask respondents whether they previously had seen the ad shown to them, and aggregate this to measure overall exposure to each ad. Of course, this measure could be influenced by factors that vary across the ads, rather than outside exposure, though again we sought to make ads as similar (and as similarly interesting) as possible to minimize such concerns. Nevertheless, we find that respondents were equally likely to report being exposed to positive (43%) and negative (42%) ads in our sample. We present additional auxiliary regression results in Table V in the Appendix, using this measure to assess what impact prior exposure has on ad-seeking in our experimental frame. Previous viewing dampens self-exposure to ads in our study, but this effect is statistically similar for *both* positive and negative ads. In combination, these two results strongly suggest that outside exposure to the sample ads is unlikely to have any mediating effect on how ad tone impacts self-exposure.

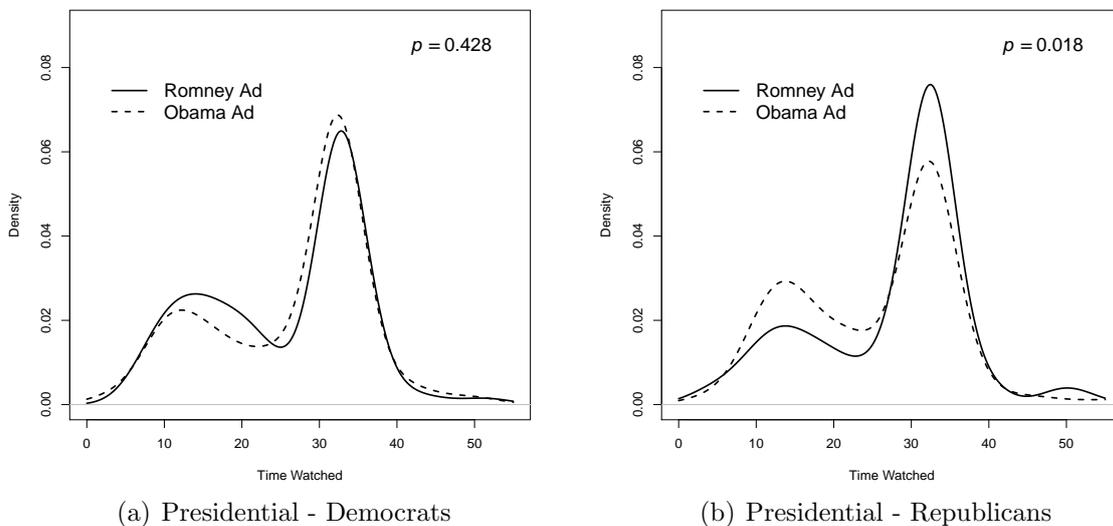


Figure 3: **Density of Time Viewed by PID:** These figures display density plots for the amount of time viewed by PID. Leaners are included as partisans.  $P$ -values are based on two-sample  $t$ -tests.

tation, we again look to density plots of the time respondents spent watching randomly selected ads. Figure 3 presents these densities for ads aired by Romney and Obama. The plots again present  $t$ -test  $p$ -values assessing differences in rates of watching partisan ads, broken down by respondent PID.

As expected, we see a general pattern that partisans tend to watch more of their own party’s ads than that of partisan opponents. Yet, these show clear differences in the time Republicans and Democrats spent watching co-partisan ads. Indeed, this partisanship is exhibited almost exclusively among Republicans. Figure 3(b) shows the amount of time Republican identifiers spent watching Democratic or Republican ads. We find significant differences, with Republicans watching much more of the ads aired by Romney than by Obama. Conversely, there is no statistically significant difference in viewing time between Democrats watching Democratic ads and Democrats watching Republican ads, as seen in Figure 3(a). Interestingly, this finding points to an asymmetry in the degree to which Republicans choose to not watch Democratic ads, relative to Democrats’ choices not to watch Republican ones. This is consistent with other findings of an ‘intensity gap’

between the parties, yielding asymmetry in partisan behavior(Theodoridis 2012a).<sup>23</sup>

We find somewhat similar patterns when examining the other ad-seeking behaviors in our study. These are presented in Figure 4, which show ad-seeking choices by ad source and respondent PID.<sup>24</sup> Similar to the above plots examining ad tone, these display sample average rates of ad-seeking broken down by PID, without otherwise modeling individual-level characteristics. Again non-parametric bootstrap 95% confidence intervals are indicated by upper and lower horizontal lines in the figures. Among Republicans (in red) in Figure 4, a strong pattern emerges with regard to three of the four behaviors. Republicans skip Obama ads at significantly greater rates than Romney ones, regardless of tone, as seen the top panel. They are more inclined to request links to the ad they saw and to share that link with others at substantially higher rates for Romney commercials. Republicans are also slightly more likely to replay their own candidate’s ads, though positive Romney ads lag behind in this behavior.

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<sup>23</sup>Pure independents appear to behave somewhat more like Republicans, perhaps hinting at the composition of that group in this particular electoral context. See Section E.1 in the Appendix for more details.

<sup>24</sup>Figure VI in the Appendix show ad-seeking choices by ad type (tone and source) and respondent PID. Interestingly, a fair number of Republicans (49%) and Democrats (55%) completely watch out-party ads. We *do not* find that these partisan identifiers are more moderate or cross-pressured on the issues, but do find they are more interested in politics and consume more news media.

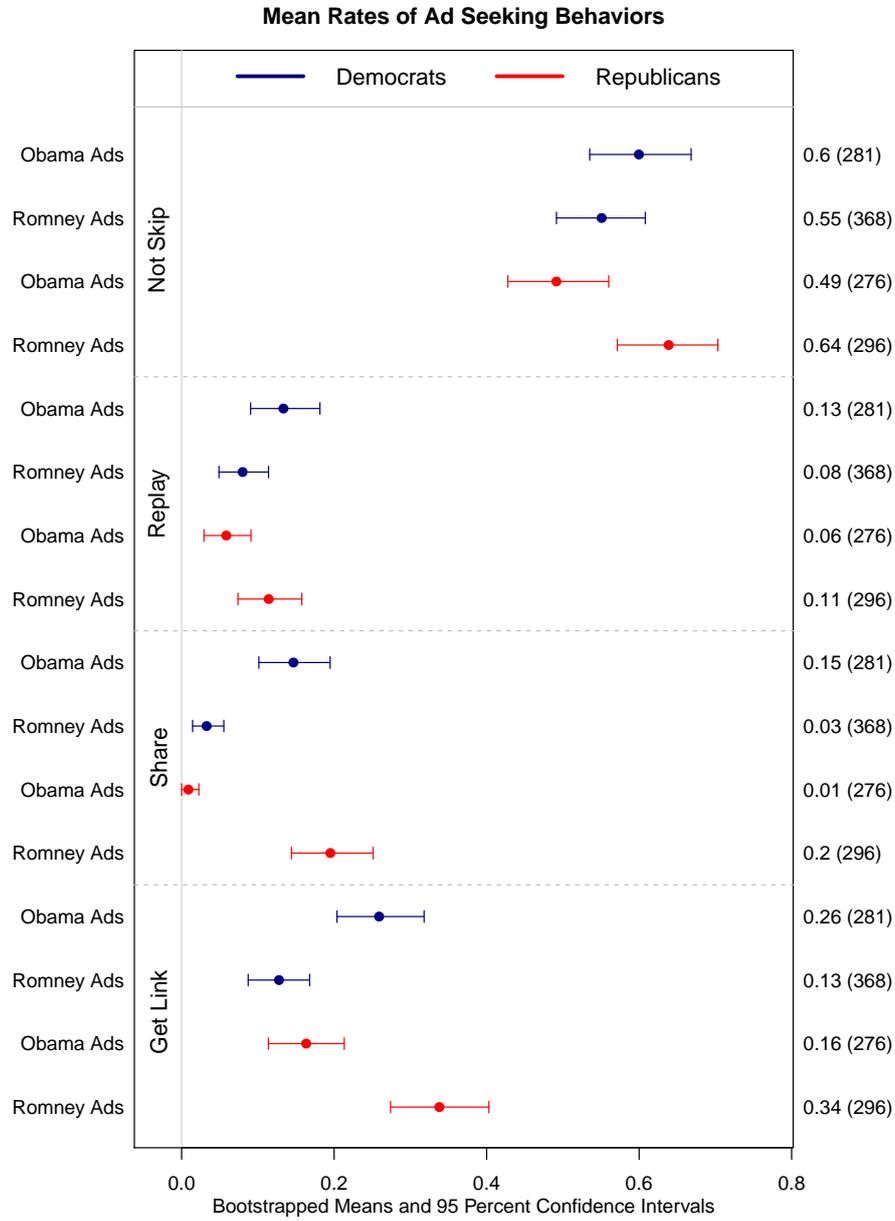


Figure 4: **Ad Seeking by PID and Source:** Figure shows the rates at which subjects pursued the various behaviors associated with ad exposure propensity by ad source and respondent PID. Leaners are included as partisans. Rates are sample averages by treatment condition (stratified by PID), and bars indicate 95% confidence intervals produced by non-parametric bootstrap resampling.

The above asymmetry between Republican and Democratic identifiers emerges in these other individual behaviors as well. In the top panel in Figure 4, we see Democrats (in blue) skip Romney and Obama ads at statistically similar rates. There is a small, and just statistically significant difference in replay, with Democrats choosing to rewatch more Obama than Romney ads. And as shown in the lower two panels, there *are* sizable differences in the frequency in which Democratic identifiers share or get the link to co-partisan ads. Overall, we see this as evidence that both Republican and Democratic identifiers are more likely to seek out or not avoid ads aired by their in-party candidates, but that this effect is much stronger for Republicans.

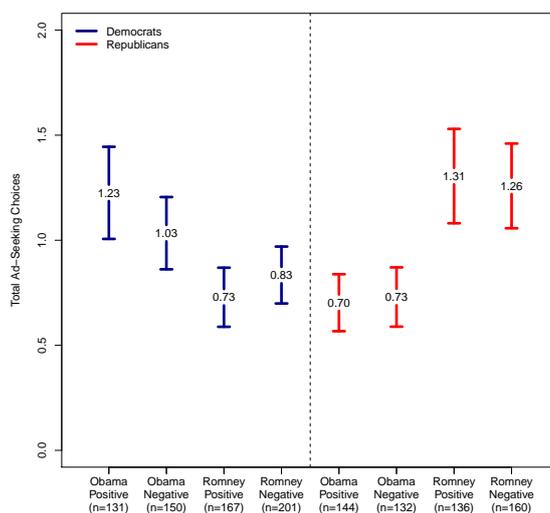


Figure 5: **Summary Measure of Ad Seeking by PID:** Figure shows an additive summary measure for the rates at which subjects pursued the various behaviors associated with ad exposure propensity by respondent PID and ad tone/source. This measure is simply an additive scale of all four behaviors we observed. Rates are sample averages by treatment condition (stratified by PID), and bars indicate 95% confidence intervals produced by non-parametric bootstrap sampling.

Next, we investigate overall patterns of behavior as reflected in our summary measure displayed in Figure 5. Recall this summary combines all ad-seeking behaviors (watching the entire ad, replaying, and requesting links) into a single, additive outcome. In this figure we include both the party source and tone of the randomized ads. In using the

summary measure, the figure can clarify if there are any underlying partisan behaviors overall that are obscured by looking at each individual outcome. Further, by breaking these down by tone and source, we can investigate if these two factors interact in interesting ways driving partisans to respond differently to various ad combinations. In Figure 5, we see that both Democrats (in blue) and Republicans (in red) score higher in their underlying ad-seeking for in-party, rather than out-party ads. Yet, we can also see evidence again of the striking asymmetry between these two groups, with Republicans behaving much more consistently in screening out opposing advertisements.

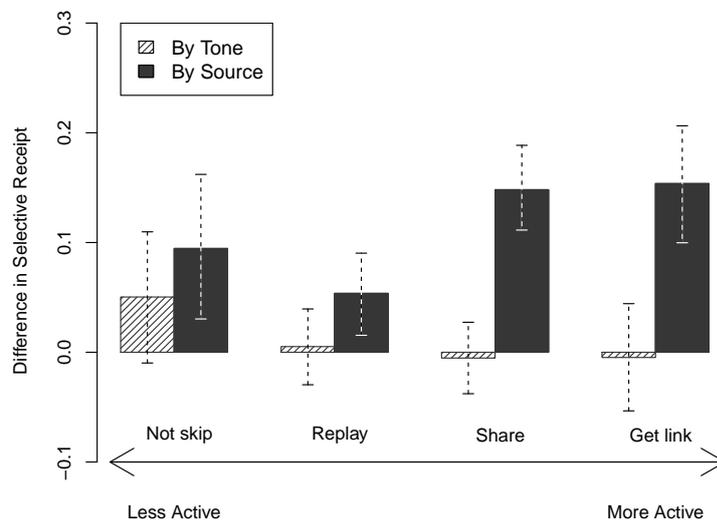


Figure 6: **Difference in Selectivity by Level of Active Reception:** This figure shows the degree of selectivity by party source or tone for the four outcome measures arrayed by level of active effort required to screen information. By Party indicates estimates for *In-Party - Out-Party* conditions, pooling over party. By Tone indicates estimates for *Negative - Positive* conditions. Bars are 95% bootstrap confidence intervals.

### 5.3 Selectivity from Passive to Active Reception

A key feature of our design is that our outcomes vary how much active effort is associated with receiving particular messages. Our theory of *mediated receipt* expects

that people with the propensity to screen out particular messages will have similar latent motivations to do so across many different information environments. Yet, we predict that these motivations may be activated differently when passively versus actively receiving information. When passively consuming media, the default is to continue to do so, and thus effort is needed to mute the television, change the channel or choose to skip an online ad. Yet, in active searches, seeking out rather than avoiding new information requires motivation and effort. We argue that those willing to put in this effort will be driven by certain characteristics, like their party identity or political interest, that will distort the messages they seek out (e.g., Brader 2006). By implication, tasks that involve an active decision to receive political information will be subject to greater selective reception.

Indeed, this is what we roughly find. We array our four outcomes in Figure 6 based on whether information is being more or less actively consumed. These go from not-skipping, which requires the minimal effort of avoiding a mouse click, to replaying, sharing, and getting access to additional ads, which involve more active behaviors. We stratify sample average differences in selective receipt by party (*In-Party* minus *Out-Party*) and tone (*Negative* minus *Positive*), with 95% bootstrap confidence intervals. We find that the choice to watch or access ads is increasingly driven by partisan considerations as we move from more passive to more active modes of reception. The difference in rates of not-skipping in-party minus out-party ads is 0.095, while differences for sharing (0.148) and getting more ads (0.154) are decidedly larger. However, partisan differences in selective receipt for replaying ads (0.054) is smaller than that for not skipping them. In contrast, we find that selectivity by tone does not vary based on the level of active effort required for reception, again confirming its null impact here. This heterogeneity analysis is not strictly identified by our experimental design (e.g., Kam and Trussler 2017), but indeed suggests that the impulse to screen partisan (but not negative) information is exacerbated when more active effort is required for exposure to take place.

## 5.4 Partisan Evaluations of Ads

Lastly, we explore whether a lack of agreement about what makes an ad ‘negative’ (e.g., Sigelman and Kugler 2003) could be behind the lack of tone effects we find. As such, respondents may not concur with our classification of ads as negative or positive in tone. To evaluate this possibility, we implemented a manipulation check by asking respondents, after each study, to tell us whether they thought the ads they saw were negative or positive in tone. We find surprisingly little misclassification, a result consistent with the conclusion of Sides et al. (2010, p. 14) that “public perceptions of negativity do in fact respond to reality.” Less than 10 percent of respondents disagree with our classification. The disagreement does appear to be related to respondent partisanship. But, due to its remoteness, this disagreement is unlikely to be the source of our surprising null result. Further, to the degree partisanship renders respondents unable to distinguish the tone of an ad, we view this as another mechanism through which party rather than tone is driving ad consumption. We interpret this (relatively minor) expressive misclassification by partisans as additional evidence of the limits to the use of negativity to communicate to out-party voters.

## 6 Discussion: Media and Partisanship in the On-Demand Era

Using a novel experimental paradigm designed to measure the mediated receipt of political information among different respondents for different types of ads, we investigate the two dimensions most discussed in scholarship on political communication – tone and source. In the design, we randomly assign respondents to watch negative or positive ads favoring either the Republican or Democratic candidate drawn from two different elections. We measure whether respondents skip before completing the ad, replay it, and ask for links to similar ads. By allowing subjects to tailor their ad viewing, our experiment can capture the kinds of information consumption behaviors voters may exhibit in the

real world. These propensities are important in the current media environment and will become more pertinent as exposure to media becomes increasingly driven by selectivity and choice. Despite this growing importance, work in political science currently provides no clear guidance regarding the precise patterns and rates we should expect. *We find pronounced evidence of partisan selectivity in our study. And, we find remarkably little evidence of any moderating effect of ad tone on any of these behaviors.*

Republicans chose to watch, rewatch and seek out more ads supporting their preferred candidates. We do find a similar screening pattern among Democrats, but one that is substantially weaker. This asymmetry is consistent with recent findings examining partisan intensity, bias and boosting (Goggin and Theodoridis 2017). The reasons behind this intensity gap remain a puzzle. Perhaps it is related to the qualitative differences between the parties observed by Grossmann and Hopkins (2015, 2016), or the differential intensity of identification shown by Theodoridis (2017). Scholars have also noted differences between conservatives and liberals on key personality and cognitive traits, such as need for cognition (Bizer et al. 2004), need for closure (Zavala et al. 2010), conscientiousness and openness to new experiences (Mondak et al. 2010). The connections between these findings and observed gaps in behavioral outcome measures such as the ones we measure warrant further examination by scholars.

Our findings also help clarify an important disagreement in the debate over the role negativity plays in elections. Some of the strongest evidence supporting the claim that negativity diminishes political engagement has come from experimental analyses. Through randomization, researchers are assured that respondents are receiving negative and positive information with equal probability, and thus are not selectively opting in or out of exposure, or being targeted in strategic ways. While our results do not speak directly to the behavioral outcomes in this debate, the lack of a strong tone effect in our study does offer some endorsement of the external validity of experimental studies (Gaines and Kuklinski 2011). If tone is not a major determinant of ad or information avoidance,

these prior experimental findings using forced exposures become more credible.

A common concern about the *non-experimental* findings on tone is that competitive races typically experience both greater voter mobilization *and* greater use of negativity as a result of the strategic mobilization choices of candidates (Kahn and Kenney 2004). Although a great deal of observational research points to nominal or beneficial effects of negativity, it is often difficult to know whether this is a true causal inference, or a reflection of candidate targeting choices or voters' propensities to be exposed to certain types of information. Once again our results, while not squarely addressing candidate targeting, suggest that voter preferences over negative messages may not be a significant confounder in such observational research. The lack of a tone effect in our study does not indicate the absence of downstream effects (either positive or negative) for negative advertising. However, our results do suggest that candidates should not rely on voters to self-select into or out of negative messages when targeting them.

More generally, the findings presented here have implications for understanding partisanship and elections in the contemporary period of the multi-cast, on-demand campaign defined fundamentally by choice over media sources. Voters have a wide variety of options to turn to gain as little or as much political information as is desired. From a practical perspective, the differential exposure we observe may offer strategic candidates an effective way to target different portions of the electorate in ways that may have previously been missed. *The American Voter's* prediction of campaigns primarily serving to remind voters of their partisanship becomes easier to manage as voters increasingly seek messages from their own side. On the other hand, there are various reasons campaigns might seek to target those opposing them in the electorate. They might wish to depress turnout (Brader 2006) or appeal to them on cross-cutting issues (Hillygus and Shields 2009). Our findings of strong source effects, but limited tone effects, suggest a possible obstacle for campaigns pursuing 'crossover' strategies.

One implication of this view is that polarization may be driving the rise in negativity in

ads, rather than the reverse, since tapping more sorted partisan voters through negativity may help engage partisans without necessarily mobilizing the opposition. This prediction may also have implications for the content of ad messages, and the focus on issue or policy information. The asymmetry we observe, with Republicans screening opposing content more vigorously than Democrats, also suggests that Democratic and Republican candidates can rely on different amounts of screening when targeting messages. Of course, while we do find pervasive source effects, the interaction of source and voter PID is by no means deterministic when it comes to predicting ad seeking. Ultimately, self-selection of voters into or out of information must be considered as *part* of a complex process of message delivery, which requires further investigation to more fully uncover.

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