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Do Emotional Ads Persuade? Evidence from Real-Time Campaign Advertising Experiments

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ABSTRACT

We evaluate whether campaign advertisements that generate larger emotional reactions also generate larger persuasive effects in contemporary elections. We analyze 29 weeks of experiments conducted during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, in which 48 authentic campaign ads were tested in real time, often within days of their debut. The ads and a placebo were randomly assigned to approximately 28,000 subjects. We find that campaign ads reliably move emotions, albeit in largely partisan ways, with comparatively muted reactions among independents. Critically, however, these emotional reactions do not predict the magnitude of an ad's effect on candidate favorability, vote intention, policy preferences, or turnout intention. Our results cast doubt on emotion-based accounts of advertising persuasion in polarized elections and caution practitioners against using self-reported emotional reactions as a measure of message effectiveness.

KEYWORDS

Political persuasion;
campaign advertising;
emotions; randomized
experiments

Introduction

Leo Burnett redefined mid-20th-century marketing by tying persuasion to emotion. From the “dependable” Maytag Repair Man to the joyful Pillsbury Doughboy, Burnett argued that advertising works when it makes people feel something (Ewen, 1998). Political advertisers followed Burnett's lead, from the buoyant “I Like Ike” jingle in 1952 to Lyndon Johnson's provocative “Peace: Little Girl” (“Daisy”) spot in 1964, which deliberately stoked fears of nuclear war.

Political research has largely echoed this intuition. Prominent theories and a large empirical literature treat emotional reactions as mechanisms through which campaign messages can focus attention, stimulate learning, and shift political attitudes and behavior. Campaign professionals appear to believe these theories as well, continuing to design advertisements around emotional appeals. The open question is whether the theories are correct: do larger emotional reactions to campaign ads translate into larger effects on attitudes or behavior, or do they primarily reflect the partisan likes and dislikes of the viewer?

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To test this, we analyzed 29 weeks of large-scale survey experiments conducted during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, in which 48 authentic campaign ads (fielded in real time, often within days of their debut) were randomly assigned to approximately 28,000 subjects. We find that campaign ads often generate emotional reactions in the direction their sponsors intend. Yet across our broad set of stimuli, emotional reports are disconnected from persuasion: ads that elicit a stronger emotional response are no more (or less) persuasive than ads that elicit a weaker reaction. Ads vary dramatically in how they move people emotionally, but variation in emotional responses does not correlate with the variation in persuasive effects.

Emotions and Politics

The earliest work in political behavior explicitly linked what voters like and dislike about parties and candidates to political choices (Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell et al., 1960). Over subsequent decades, emotions have been regularly treated as part of the machinery of political evaluation. Marcus (1988) and Marcus and MacKuen (1993), for example, argued that during campaigns, anxiety regulates attention and reduces reliance on habitual cues and shortcuts, while enthusiasm energizes voters and sustains engagement. A few years later, *Affective Intelligence Theory* generalized these insights into a broader account of emotions as regulators of political cognition and involvement (Marcus et al., 2000). By the end of the twentieth century, the field had a clear theoretical basis for viewing emotions as a mechanism through which campaigns might shape persuasion and participation.

Subsequent research on emotions and campaigns moved in two complementary directions: toward discrete emotions as distinct psychological states with different political consequences, and toward campaign communication – especially advertising – as a primary vehicle for inducing them. Scholars increasingly rejected the idea that emotion is well captured by a single positive–negative dimension, emphasizing instead that anger, anxiety, fear, enthusiasm, and hope can each have distinct downstream implications for attention, learning, and action (Huddy et al., 2007; Redlawsk & Mattes, 2022; Weber, 2013). Ted Brader’s work helped define the empirical agenda by demonstrating that campaign ads can use stylistic cues such as imagery and music to evoke emotions and thereby shape political engagement and persuasion (Brader, 2005, 2006). This shift dovetailed with a line of research on worried citizens that treated emotions as inputs into information seeking and learning during campaigns (Valentino et al., 2008), and with subsequent work arguing that specific negative emotions (especially anger) were particularly relevant for political participation (Valentino et al., 2011). Syntheses of these findings organized them into a broader view: emotions are not epiphenomenal reactions to politics, but part of the causal chain linking campaign communication to judgments and behavior (Neuman et al., 2007; Redlawsk, 2006; Redlawsk & Mattes, 2022; Vasilopoulos, 2019; Wagner & Morisi, 2019).

Simultaneously, the focus specifically on negative emotions produced a collection of work testing persuasion claims through different pathways. *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate* treated attack advertising as consequential for democratic participation (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), while John Geer’s *In Defense of Negativity* (Geer, 2006) disputed the premise that negativity is inherently undermining, emphasizing that attacks can be information-rich. Subsequent work introduced further nuance. Klein and Ahluwalia (2005) showed

that negative feelings are more strongly linked to lower evaluations of candidates among those already opposed to the candidate. Phillips et al. (2008) similarly highlighted how prior preferences constrained the impact of ad valence, even when ads elicited different reactions. Fridkin and Kenney (2011) added that negativity is not a single treatment: the persuasive impact of attack advertising can vary with features such as relevance and incivility. Together, these studies moved away from the idea that negative ads had uniform effects and toward an emphasis on heterogeneity – by content, by recipient predispositions, and by the emotional pathways that messages activate.

As theorizing proliferated, newer studies expanded the emotion inventory beyond anger, anxiety and enthusiasm to include sadness, contempt, and simply being moved, often arguing that these reactions were politically consequential as well. A set of recurring empirical patterns emerged: that emotional response is strongly conditioned by partisan alignment with the message source; and that emotion is frequently correlated with intended political behavior in ways that are difficult to interpret causally in small, observational, or within-subject designs (Grüning & Schubert, 2022; Seibt et al., 2019). The proliferation of concepts and measures has produced a rich but sometimes fragmented empirical record built on narrow stimulus sets and limited power. This fragmentation makes it especially important to test not merely whether ads *can* evoke emotions, but whether emotional reactions systematically map onto causal effects for the political endpoints that theories emphasize.

The possibility of emotionally driven persuasion is also challenged by a separate but increasingly central body of evidence raising skepticism about the magnitude of persuasion in real-world elections. Large-scale experimental work argues that average persuasive effects of campaign advertising are small in size (Coppock et al., 2020; Hewitt et al., 2024; see also Kalla & Broockman, 2018). Field experiments that explicitly harness emotional mechanisms have been most consistently successful on mobilization rather than vote choice, including interventions commonly understood as invoking emotions such as shame or pride (Gerber et al., 2008), gratitude (Panagopoulos, 2011), hope (Panagopoulos, 2014), and anger (Huber et al., 2025), as well as affect-laden framing information (Chong et al., 2015) and mobilization through negative messaging (Barton et al., 2016). The evidence on persuasion raises a sharp question for emotion-based theories of campaign influence: if persuasion is scarce on average, do emotional reactions identify the rare cases when it occurs, or are emotional responses primarily expressive and partisan even when measured carefully?

These theories offer reasons to expect that emotional appeals will affect political outcomes and the empirical record offers many demonstrations that indeed campaign messages can elicit emotional reactions (Brader, 2005; Marcus, 1988; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Marcus et al., 2000; Valentino et al., 2011). Yet the literature offers less direct evidence on a proposition that is central both to theory and to campaign practice: across the universe of real campaign ads, are the ads that generate stronger emotional reactions systematically more persuasive? Addressing this requires a large and varied set of authentic stimuli rather than one-time ad manipulations, random assignment to recover ad-specific causal effects, and enough power to estimate effects within partisan subgroups. Our design is built precisely for this task: it treats campaign advertising as a distribution of real messages and evaluates whether emotional reactions predict the causal effects of messages on political choices and related outcomes.

In the progression from ad content to emotional reactions to attention or learning and finally to political evaluation and intended behavior, our findings demonstrate a very clear first stage: ads move emotions, and the emotional responses are patterned by partisanship and the tone of the ads. But beyond that first stage, we find a critical disconnect: variation in emotional response does not map on to variation in persuasion.

Design and Results

Our experiments were conducted from March to November 2016 during the U.S. presidential election campaign. The ads were tested in real-time in the sense that we tested them just days after they were deployed by candidates. Across 29 experimental waves, we measured the effects of 48 unique political advertisements on more than 28,000 individuals. Because some ads were fielded in multiple waves, the experiments include 58 total ad treatments.¹

For each wave, nationally representative samples of Americans were delivered by YouGov. Most commonly, our samples included 1,000 completed responses, but during the party convention period (June 20 to August 15, 2016) we increased the number of cases to 2,000. Subjects were recruited for this study from an ongoing YouGov panel of individuals who had agreed to participate in surveys generally. Each week, subjects were randomly assigned to watch a campaign ad or a placebo ad (a commercial for car insurance). Some subjects were assigned to see two ads; we exclude these subjects entirely from the present analysis. The treatments were chosen from campaign ads airing close to the time of the experiment. Ads were chosen using weekly ad-buy data purchased from Kantar Media as well as news coverage. In total, we estimate the effects of six pro-Clinton, three pro-Trump, 11 anti-Clinton, 23 anti-Trump ads, one pro-Kasich, two pro-Cruz, and two pro-Sanders ads.

After viewing campaign ads or the placebo, subjects completed a brief survey that asked a number of questions about the ads including how the ad made them feel. We also asked people how favorably they viewed each candidate, their intended vote choice and likelihood of voting in the upcoming contest, their positions on major issues – specifically the ones mentioned in the ads, and some demographic and political indicators, among other things. We also asked respondents to use their judgment to rate the ads on a number of dimensions like overall quality, fairness, memorability, and veracity.²

To measure emotional response, respondents were asked if the ads they saw made them feel angry, worried, happy, and hopeful, each separately on a four-point scale from “Not at all” to “Extremely.” In Appendix A, we report a factor analysis that shows that positive emotional responses and negative emotional responses load on two distinct factors. We average the happy and hopeful questions to create a positive index and average the angry and worried questions to create a negative index. We rescale the indices to vary between 0 and 1. The Cronbach’s alpha for the positive scale is 0.89 and 0.72 for the negative scale.

An ad’s emotional content may be associated with its effectiveness in many ways, including whether the ad successfully elicits the specific emotion its sponsors intended. For example, an ad may make viewers laugh – not because it intended to, but because of how badly it missed its mark. To protect against this possibility, we coded the intended tone of each advertisement as mainly positive, mainly

negative, or an equal mix of both. Following the work of Brader (2006) and Geer (2006), we classify ads as negative in tone if they generally use black and white imagery, dark colors, shadows, or off-putting music. If an ad's purpose was to attack an opponent, we code it as negative in tone, regardless of the colors or sounds it uses (though attack ads often include these features). A good example of an attack ad we classified as negative in tone is Donald Trump's ad called "Unfit to Serve," which aired in major markets during the last few days of the campaign. The ad uses menacing music and darkly shaded pictures of Hillary Clinton while listing all the reasons she is unfit for office.³

Similarly, we coded ads as positive in tone if they were colorful, used upbeat music, or primarily focused on promoting a candidate. An example of an ad with a positive tone is Hillary Clinton's "Depend," which plays uplifting music over colorful videos of Clinton greeting people while a voice states Clinton's policy agenda to help hardworking Americans. We classified five contrast ads, which spent the first half of the commercial attacking one candidate and the second half of the commercial promoting another, as having a mixed tone. Donald Trump ran three of these ads, one of which showed intense images of terrorists and illegal immigrants and then cut to positive music with bright colored images of him waving in front of crowds at a rally.⁴

To test for the effects of emotional reports that are aligned with the ad's intention, we use our positive and negative indices. For ads that are intended to have a negative tone, we subtract the positive index score from the (intended) negative index score. For ads that were meant to evoke positive feelings, we do the opposite – subtracting the negative index from the positive. For the ads with mixed emotional intent, we add the two indices together. This allows us to test whether ads that more strongly generate their intended emotional response are more persuasive than those that do not.

Do Ads Move Emotions?

We present the average emotional responses to all 48 ads in [Figure 1](#). We represent the ads using color to indicate their intended persuasive direction – blue for ads intended to increase support for Democratic candidates and red for Republican candidates. Thus, in [Figure 1](#), pro-Democratic or anti-Republican ads are plotted with blue circles, and anti-Democrat or pro-Republican ads are shown using red triangles.⁵ The horizontal axis presents the distribution of positive emotional reactions to the ads and the vertical axis presents the distribution of negative reactions. The figure is also faceted by respondent partisanship.

The first thing to notice about [Figure 1](#) is that people are indeed having emotional reactions to campaign ads. Some ads made people happy and hopeful (plotting symbols on the right side of each of the panels), while some ads made people angry or worried (plotting symbols in the upper half of each panel). Examining the positive index, for both Democrats and Republicans, the range of emotional responses spans more than half the scale. The same is true of the vertical or negative index. Independents show comparably muted emotional responses on both dimensions.

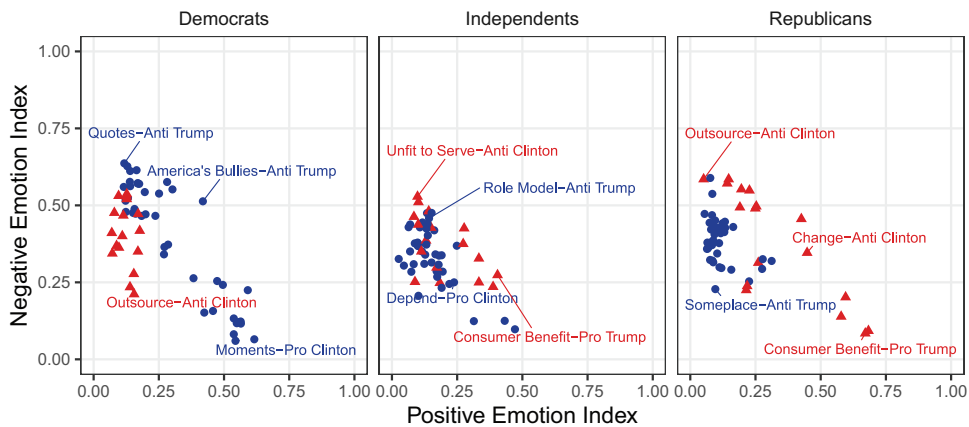


Figure 1. Distribution of emotional responses to ads by partisanship. *Note.* Blue circles represent ads intended to increase support for Democratic candidates (pro-Clinton or anti-Trump ads) and red triangles for Republican candidates (anti-Clinton or pro-Trump ads).

Another pattern that emerges from [Figure 1](#) is the difference in the way people respond emotionally to different kinds of ads (within party or across). For partisan aligned ads (blue dots in the first panel among Democrats and red triangles in the right-most panel among Republicans) the ads promoting the party's candidate made people feel happy and hopeful while rarely making them feel worried or angry. The within-party ads attacking the opponent, however, generally made people feel negative emotions and not positive ones. This is visually represented by the partisan-aligned plotting symbols roughly being arrayed along the diagonal that links high scores on one axis to low scores on the other. In-party ads evoke happy and hopeful feelings if they are promoting the party's candidate, but negative feelings if they are attacking the party's opponent.

Contrast this pattern of responses to partisan reactions to the ads made by the out-party (red triangles for Democrats and blue dots for Republicans) in [Figure 1](#). Reactions to these ads for respondents in both parties are arrayed along the vertical axis, but unlike the within-party ads, they do not spread out along the other axis – they basically form a straight line up and down the vertical space. This indicates that when partisans see an ad from the opposing party, they generally have a negative emotional response regardless of whether that ad is attacking their preferred candidate or promoting the opponent. Out-party ads mainly evoke anger and worry.⁶

The center panel of [Figure 1](#) shows the emotional responses among independents (excluding leaners). While overall their emotional responses are muted relative to partisans, both sets of ads – the red triangles offered by Republicans and the blue dots offered by Democrats – evoke a range of emotions on both axes. Essentially, for these respondents, both pro-Clinton ads like “Depend” and pro-Trump ads like “Consumer Benefit” are generating positive emotions, while anti-Clinton and anti-Trump ads are scoring lower on positive emotions. Generally, the Republican ads are making independents happier and more hopeful relative to the Democratic ads.⁷

Does Emotional Variation Affect Favorability and Vote Choice?

To assess the overall persuasiveness of ads, we estimated effects on favorability and vote choice. Favorability was measured on a five-point scale from “Very Favorable” to “Very Unfavorable,” with “Neutral” being the middle category and was measured in waves conducted during both the primary and general election periods. Here, we report the ads’ effects on its sponsor’s favorability among all respondents who were randomly assigned to see the ad. While we examine favorability across the entire campaign period, we study effects on vote choice during the general election phase only.⁸ Response options included voting for Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, saying you would not vote, or saying “don’t know.” The order of the candidates in the vote choice question was randomized.

We estimate conditional average treatment effects (CATEs) on candidate favorability and vote choice for each experiment using ordinary least squares regression (OLS) with robust standard errors. We condition these estimates on three-point party identification, with independents who lean toward a party classified as partisans. Estimates reflect the success of persuading people in the *intended direction* of the ad. For example, an anti-Clinton ad with a positive estimate can be interpreted as the ad successfully moving opinion of Hillary Clinton in a negative direction. Estimates are generated as a comparison of the target outcome between the treatment and control groups. In our design, OLS is a consistent estimator of CATEs. To increase the precision of our estimates, we also control for seven-point party identification, which was measured pre-treatment.

In order to test whether emotional reactions predict persuasiveness, we estimate meta-regressions of the CATEs on the average positive and negative indices, separately by respondent partisanship and the purpose of the ad. Specifically, we use a random-effects model with a block-diagonal variance-covariance matrix (to account for the correlation in the effect estimates for treatments compared to a common control group) and cluster-robust standard errors to account for the nesting of estimates within the study (Pustejovsky & Tipton, 2018).

In Figure 2 we plot the relationship between the average emotion index scores and the conditional average treatment effects on candidate favorability and vote choice. In each favorability panel, we report 58 separate tests, and for each test we estimate the effect separately for three groups – Democrats, Republicans, and independents – yielding 174 estimates in total. In each vote choice panel, we report 34 separate tests, again estimated separately for the same three groups, yielding 102 estimates in total. Each point is a CATE estimate with vertical lines representing 95% confidence intervals. The top row shows the relationships between the CATEs and the negative emotion index, and the bottom row shows the same for the positive emotion index. Red and blue plotting symbols correspond to effects among Republican and Democratic respondents, respectively. Effects among independents are represented by purple symbols. Triangles represent ads that are pro-Republican and circles represent ads that are pro-Democratic. We report the meta-analytic estimates and standard errors in the upper right corner of each panel. The solid line in each panel is obtained from the meta-analysis and summarizes how the persuasive effects of each ad (measured separately by partisan subgroup) vary with the average level of the emotional responses they effect (again measured separately by partisan subgroup).

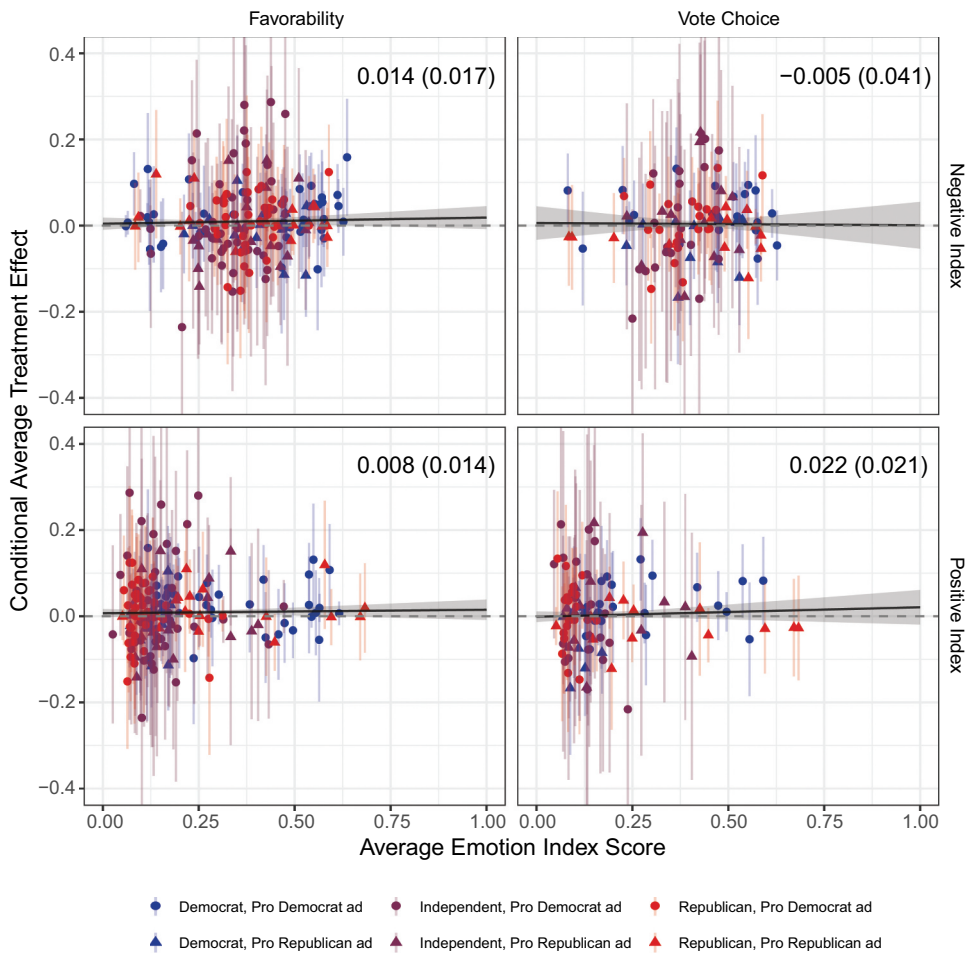


Figure 2. Relationship between an ad’s level of emotional response and its persuasive effects (CATEs) on favorability and vote choice. *Note.* Red points correspond to an ad’s average emotion index score and CATE among Republican respondents; blue points among Democrats; and purple points among independents. The points are plotted with triangles for anti-Clinton or pro-Trump ads and with circles for pro-Clinton or anti-Trump ads. Meta-analytic estimates in upper right corner.

Figure 2 suggests that emotional responses are disconnected from the persuasive effect of an ad. As we move across the horizontal axis from left (low emotional response) to right (high emotional response), we see very little change in the estimated size of the persuasive effects – the solid line is flat. Three of the slope estimates are positive, and one is negative, but all are indistinguishable from zero. The absence of a connection between emotional reports and persuasion is true for both positive and negative emotional reports, on average, and is also true among Democrats, Republicans, and independents (see Appendix C for within party meta-analytic results). An ad’s emotional response appears to be uncorrelated with the size of its persuasive impact.

Earlier we raised the possibility that emotion may connect to persuasion only when the ad is successful at evoking the emotional response it intended. In Figure 3 we present results of the

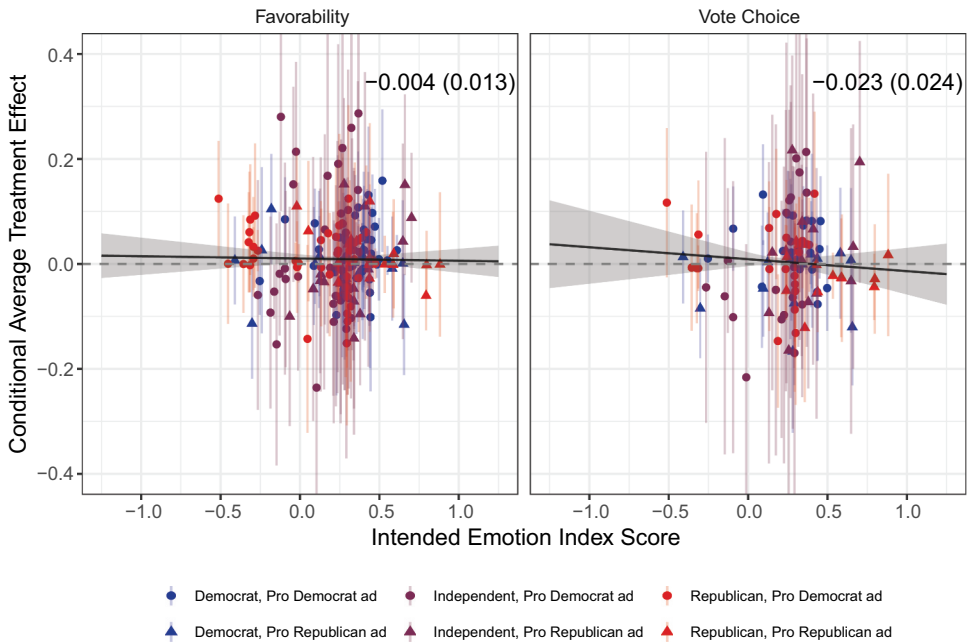


Figure 3. Relationship between an ad's level of intended emotional response and its persuasive effects (CATEs) on favorability and vote choice. *Note.* Red points correspond to an ad's average emotion index score and CATE among Republican respondents; blue points among Democrats; and purple points among independents. The points are plotted with triangles for anti-Clinton or pro-Trump ads and with circles for pro-Clinton or anti-Trump ads. Meta-analytic estimates in upper right corner.

same analysis as in Figure 2, but instead of using the positive and negative emotion indices, we use the previously described measure of emotional response that accounts for how successfully the ad evoked the emotional response it intended. The results for candidate favorability are on the left and for vote choice on the right. The meta-analytic estimates (upper right corner) and difference in predicted persuasive effect between treatment and control (solid lines) cannot be distinguished from zero and are estimated to be slightly negative. These results suggest that even when ads are successful at evoking mainly the emotions they intend, they are no more persuasive than ads that do not hit the emotional mark.

Does Emotional Variation Affect Intention to Vote or Positions on Issues?

Thus far, we have shown that an ad's emotional content is not associated with its persuasive effects on candidate favorability or vote choice. As noted above, however, the use of emotions in politics generally and in advertising specifically may be intended to do something else like shift people's views on issues under debate or engage people in the political process through mobilization or other forms of participation. Our design allows us to examine these possibilities by analyzing the effects of ads on respondents' preferred positions on policies targeted in the ads and their intentions to participate in the upcoming election.

After exposure to treatment, we asked respondents about their support for a variety of issues. The policies we asked about reflected topics the candidates were talking about in their campaigns and also included issues directly addressed in the treatment ads. The set of issues we asked about included whether to build a wall on the Mexican border, raise taxes on individuals earning more than \$200,000 a year, provide a pathway for illegal immigrants already in the United States to become U.S. citizens, repeal a woman's right to have an abortion, and send American ground troops overseas to fight, among other topics. Respondents reported whether they favored or opposed each policy strongly or only somewhat. They could alternatively check a box to indicate they didn't know what they believed about the issue.

We matched the issues to the ads to estimate each ad's persuasive effect on support for policies. Some ads did not contain information on any policy, and some ads contained information on more than one topic. Because we want to allow for persuasion to happen on as many topics as are mentioned in the ad, we do two tests. The first reports the persuasive effect of ads on issue positions for the primary issue targeted in the ad only. We call this the strict issue mapping. The second test stretches the match to include other issues, beyond the dominant topic, that are mentioned in the ad. We call this stretch issue mapping. We report results from the strict mapping here and report the results for the stretch mapping in Appendix C.

We also measured respondents' engagement with the election by asking voters whether they would vote for Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, or were "Not sure/Won't vote." To assess engagement and turnout intention, we collapse votes for either of the candidates into one category – engaged or already decided and turning out – and place the remainder of respondents who said they were not sure who they would vote for or whether they would vote into the other category of less certainty or engagement with no intention to vote at the time of the survey.

Figure 4 presents the results on both the issues and engagement outcomes. Once again, negative emotional reports are on the top row and positive reports are on the bottom. The left-hand panels show the correlation of the ads' CATEs on corresponding issue positions and the right-hand panels show the correlation of CATEs on engagement/participation. Meta-regression estimates are in the upper right hand corners, with the solid line showing the predicted effect on each outcome of seeing an ad with a given level of emotional impact relative to the effect of a control ad (the CATE). Just as we saw with favorability and vote choice, as we move from low to high levels of emotional response, the emotional reach of the ads is not related to the way people are changing their views on the issues after seeing the ads; nor is the emotional content explaining anything about the way the ads are affecting people's engagement with the election or intention to participate in it. The slopes of all four meta-regression lines are close to zero and are not statistically significant.⁹

Discussion

Across 29 weeks of real-time experiments on 48 authentic 2016 presidential campaign advertisements, we find clear evidence for what might be called the "first stage" of emotion-based theories of persuasion: ads reliably elicit emotional reactions. Those reactions are patterned in intuitive ways by tone and partisan alignment – partisans react warmly to in-party promotional appeals, with expected hostility to in-party ads pointing out failures of

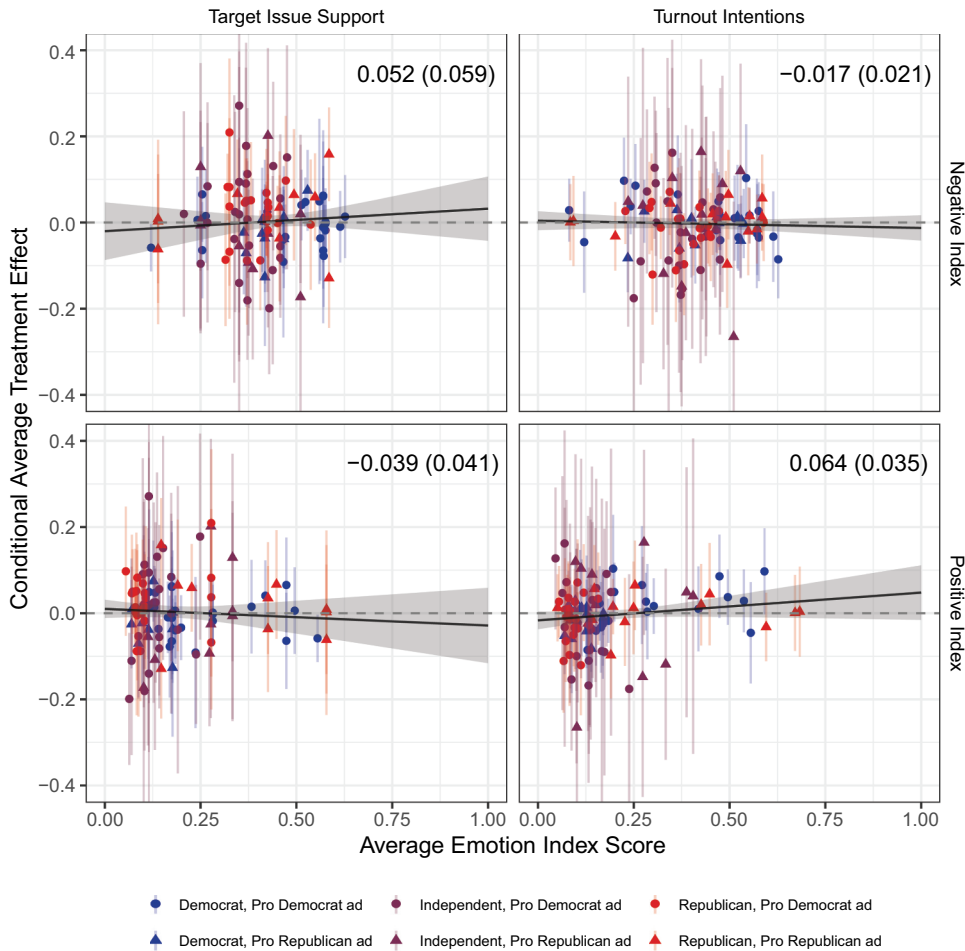


Figure 4. Relationship between an ad's level of emotional response and its persuasive effects (CATEs) on issue positions and turnout intentions. *Note.* Red points correspond to an ad's average emotion index score and CATE among Republican respondents; blue points among Democrats; and purple points among independents. The points are plotted with triangles for anti-Clinton or pro-Trump ads and with circles for pro-Clinton or anti-Trump ads. Meta-analytic estimates in upper right corner.

the out-party, and broadly negatively to out-party messages whether promotional or attack. Independents register weaker affect overall. Yet our central empirical result is a disconnect that persists across outcomes and specifications: variation in self-reported emotion does not predict the effects of ad exposure on candidate favorability or vote intention. The same null relationship extends to policy attitudes on issues targeted by the ads and to measures of electoral engagement and turnout intention. In short, these experiments show a robust emotional response to campaign advertising, but little evidence that this response systematically maps onto persuasion.

These findings sharpen an important distinction between *being moved* and *being moved politically*. Emotional reactions to ads in a polarized environment appear to be primarily expressive, functioning more like an immediate affective appraisal filtered through partisan

identity, rather than a mechanism that reliably transmits advertising effects to downstream political judgments. This pattern holds even when we focus on intended emotions of ads, which should be the most favorable case for mechanism-based accounts. Taken together, the results suggest that emotional self-reports are better understood as indicators of the partisan fit between the message and the audience rather than as leading indicators of the causal impact of ads on evaluations, choices, or issue preferences.

The implications for scholarship are twofold. First, they qualify strong versions of emotion-centered theories of advertising persuasion – at least as applied to contemporary presidential campaigns with stable partisanship and clear (and appreciable) differences between the parties (see Sides et al. (2022) on this last point). Theories in which discrete emotions regulate attention, learning, and evaluation may still hold in principle, but our experiments indicate that emotional arousal alone is not sufficient to generate measurable changes in the political endpoints those theories emphasize. Second, the results speak to a broader literature skeptical of large persuasive effects in real elections: if persuasion is scarce on average, emotional reactions do not appear to be a reliable way to identify the rare ads that do persuade. For practitioners, the message is cautionary, but constructive. If campaign professionals evaluate a creative product by asking whether (or how much) it makes viewers feel happy, hopeful, angry, or worried, these data suggest that such emotional diagnostics are a weak proxy for persuasion and may instead mostly track partisan resonance. Importantly, independents are harder to arouse, perhaps as a consequence of not having a partisan team for which to cheer. Emotional appeals, however, may still matter for goals not measured here (fundraising, volunteer recruitment, agenda setting) and may operate through channels we cannot observe directly (attention, memory, later information seeking). But as a metric for predicting changes in candidate favorability, vote choice, targeted issue positions, or participation, self-reported emotions offer little guidance.

Notes

1. For a complete report of the persuasive impact of these ads, see Coppock et al. (2020).
2. For an analysis of whether these subjective ratings correlate with advertisement persuasiveness, see Appendix E.
3. Interestingly, Clinton ran an ad called “Unfit” in August that attacked Trump.
4. See Appendix D for dispositions of each ad.
5. Primary ads are coded as support for the sponsor’s party. In our sample, nearly all the primary ads were positive in tone.
6. For the direct relationship between Republican and Democrat emotional reactions to individual ads, see Appendix B.
7. These patterns might be partially explained by the balance of promotional to attack ads offered by each side.
8. Unlike the general election vote choice item, which was asked of all respondents, the primary vote choice question was asked only of those who reported having voted (or intending to vote) in a party’s primary. As a result, once we restrict to primary voters and then split respondents across experimental conditions, the remaining cell sizes are often too small to support reliable inferences about vote choice in the primary. Accordingly, and consistent with Coppock et al. (2020), we do not analyze primary election vote choice.
9. In Appendix C, we show that the meta-analytic results are unchanged when we use the stretch issue mapping, and when we rerun both mappings using the intended emotion measures rather than the raw indices.

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Notes on Contributors

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Data Availability Statement

The data and code that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CB3LP1>.

Ethics Approval

This research was reviewed and approved by the University of California Los Angeles Institutional Review Board [IRB#16000691].

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