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Asymmetric Campaign Advertising: Partisan Differences in 2014 Congressional Campaign Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

This preliminary study identified partisan differences in television advertisements for Senate candidates in 2014 and paves the path for further study of partisan differences in campaign advertising more broadly. Analyzing data gathered on all of the television advertisements aired for U.S. Senate candidates in 2014, this research finds distinct partisan styles emanating from both of the major political parties. In particular, the data suggests that candidates for the Republican Party used more cohesive messaging during the 2014 election cycle, while candidates for the Democratic Party advertised on a wider array of issues. These findings align with previous research on partisan asymmetry in the United States, and have important implications for future campaigns. Understanding how campaigns advertise to voters is one of the first steps to addressing growing polarization in Congress.

INTRODUCTION

Gardner: "Welcome to Yuma, Colorado – two hours from the big city."

Gardner's Daughter: "And a long way from anywhere else."

Gardner: "In a place like this, you learn to get along."

Gardner's Daughter: "That's how we do it here, dad."

Gardner: "It's too bad Washington doesn't work that way. I'm Cory Gardner – I'll be a Senator who solves problems instead of making them worse" (Cory Gardner for Senate).

Compare that 2014 television advertisement from Republican Representative Cory Gardner to this advertisement from incumbent Democratic Senator Mark Udall, running against him:

"There's a reason why women and families are front and center in this campaign. It's not just about respecting every woman's fundamental rights and freedoms – it's that everyone deserves a fair shot at success, with affordable student loans, equal pay for women in the workforce, and equal treatment when it comes to what men and women pay for their healthcare" (Udall for Colorado).

While those advertisements were just two of millions aired by candidates for Congress in 2014, they represent strategies utilized by candidates across the United States. Although both 30-second advertisements never mention party affiliation, there

is a distinct partisan style employed in them. Gardner's advertisement invokes conservative values like personal responsibility and family (such as his daughter's role in the advertisement), while Udall's advertisement clearly aims at women and mentions specific policies such as implementing "affordable student loans." While these distinctions may register as inconsequential at first glance, they carry important implications for modern American politics.

The 2014 midterm elections are ripe for studying campaigns at the academic level because of their perceived importance at the time and their results. That year, President Barack Obama was completing the first half of his second term in office and reaching the end of his presidency. The last midterm election in 2010 featured a historic Republican takeover of the House of Representatives as Tea Party candidates across the country campaigned vehemently against the healthcare reform law, the Affordable Care Act (also known as Obamacare) (Best, 2010). This GOP wave slowed by 2012 when Obama was re-elected president and the Democrats maintained control of the Senate. At that point, Republicans focused on regaining control of the Senate, so they could more effectively obstruct the president's agenda until his term ended in 2017. Their strategy, as reported in the Washington Post, was to "make it all about Obama, Obama, Obama," since his approval rating was in the low 40s (Rucker & Costa, 2014). That strategy appeared to pay off on Election Day 2014, when Republicans captured the Senate, gaining nine

seats, and boosted their already-high House majority by an additional 13 seats. This had important policy implications for the Obama administration. Namely, it prevented the president from passing any landmark legislation and forced Obama to pursue other paths – like executive orders – when pushing his agenda (Korte, 2016).

This paper argues that there are distinct partisan styles used in television campaign advertisements which have consequences that potentially threaten American democracy. Accordingly, this paper will explore the communication strategies utilized by Republican and Democratic congressional candidates during the 2014 election cycle grounded in partisan asymmetry theory and in the context of the highly polarized environment. I will start by reviewing the history of polarization in Congress and the explanations scholars have offered for the extreme polarization we see today. One explanation – “partisan sorting” – will be key to this study as it positions elite discourse as the primary mechanism in which the broader American electorate “sorted” itself into the political parties along ideological lines (Levendusky, 2009). Partisan sorting is vital to understanding how campaign messages contribute to increasing polarization in Congress. I will then proceed to analyze political ideology in the U.S. and how it has impacted campaign rhetoric. One theory in particular informs how I will approach this study: partisan asymmetry. This theory, articulated most recently by Grossmann and Hopkins (2016), argues that political parties are “asymmetric” in that the electorate is made up of “ideological Republicans” and “group interest Democrats,” which inherently creates an advantage for the Republican Party. Other academic work involving ideology focuses on how the U.S. is “symbolically conservative,” yet “operationally liberal” (Ellis & Stimson, 2012). Most research surrounding contemporary campaign communication lacks this context when seeking to explain partisan messages, as scholarly work on campaign communication has largely focused on how candidates discuss issues. Two competing theories have emerged from this work: issue convergence and issue ownership. Issue convergence argues that candidates will campaign on a similar set of issues to win the voters in the middle who tend to decide elections (Sides, 2006). Issue ownership, however, argues that candidates will campaign on a distinct set of issues that their political party has an advantage on and will frame the remaining issues in ways aligned with their party’s rhetoric (Petrocik, 1996). Lastly, I will briefly explore the literature around political television advertising, the medium analyzed in this study.

In the sections that follow my literature review, I will propose a specific research design for answering my research question. I have conducted a pilot study that considers the following research question:

RQ: How did the television advertising of Republican and Democratic candidates differ in the 2014 election

cycle?

After reporting the results of the pilot study, I will conclude with a discussion of how the pilot study’s results compare to the literature presented and the value they have in American political campaigns. Additionally, I propose a more complete study to build off this pilot study by adding more election cycles, House races, differentiating between primary and general election advertisements, distinguishing advertisements from specific candidates, and adding other sources of ideological analysis.

What present research on campaign communications lacks is how partisan campaign messages contribute to the polarization we see today and how they accentuate asymmetry in American politics. This research will consider the partisan differences in campaign advertising, discussing how candidates talk about issues, as well as the partisan style they use in their advertisements that convey information to voters. The results of this pilot study will inform academic understanding on how partisan asymmetry is operationalized in political advertising and will allow future candidates disappointed by the polarized environment to incorporate the findings into their campaign strategy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Polarization and “Partisan Sorting”

A discussion of partisan campaign communication strategies should first begin with a background of the increasing polarization seen in Congress and the resulting mass partisanship. Scholars agree that Democrats and Republicans are polarized at high levels -- according to political scientists Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal, Congress in 2015 was more polarized than it had ever been since Reconstruction in the 19th Century (The Polarization, n.d.). Poole and Rosenthal have developed a widely accepted measure of ideology called DW-NOMINATE, which spatially maps legislators in relation to each other based on their roll call votes. Most voting in Congress can be explained by the liberal-conservative dimension, although some voting can be explained by a regional dimension. Using Poole and Rosenthal’s DW-NOMINATE scores, it becomes clear that polarization has increased steadily since the 1970s. For example, the Democratic Party in the 92nd Congress (1971-1973) had a median ideology score (the “median member” of the party across both the House and Senate) of -0.33 (-1 being very liberal). In the 114th Congress (2015-2017), the Democrats’ score was -0.39. Republicans in the 92nd Congress had a score of 0.25 (1 being very conservative), while Republicans in the 114th Congress had a score of 0.49. The median Democrat was 0.58 away from the median Republican in the early 1970s on the DW-NOMINATE scale. In 2015, the median Democrat is separated by 0.87 from the median Republican – meaning the distance between the

parties increased by 33 percent over a period of 40 years.¹

As noted in the previous data, Congress began the recent trend of polarization in the mid-1970s. According to Theriault (2008), the parties were highly polarized throughout the 19th Century and continued to polarize until the turn of the 20th Century. At that point, the parties began a trend of convergence that lasted through the 1930s, reaching its peak in 1952, and remained converged until 1972. Theriault points out that in the 93rd Congress (1973–4), most Republicans were more liberal than the most conservative Democrat, and more than a third of Democrats were more conservative than the most liberal Republican (Theriault, 2008). During this period known as the “Textbook Congress,” political party leadership in Congress was relatively weak compared to the committee system, in which conservative party chairs limited the partisan strategies Democrats could use. However, the mid-1970s brought change with the beginning of the post-reform Congress – three different measures of polarization all confirm that Congress has become more polarized since then, with similar levels of polarization seen in both the House and Senate (Theriault, 2008). Theriault outlines the four existing major explanations for increasing polarization: redistricting, constituent sorting, extremism of party activists, and procedural changes. He argues that these theories only effectively explain polarization when considered as a whole. To that end, Theriault seeks to integrate these theories into one model for Congressional polarization beginning with a change in constituencies (due to redistricting or sorting), leading to procedural change, and resulting in party polarization in both the House and Senate (Theriault, 2008). Importantly, his model gives credence to the idea that partisan sorting has contributed to increasing polarization.

What does partisan sorting refer to? At a basic level, the theory states that as elites have polarized, the political positions of the parties have become easier and more accessible for mass Americans to understand, resulting in voters sorting themselves along ideological lines. Ultimately, this means that most Democrats are liberal and most Republicans are conservative (Levendusky, 2009). In *The Partisan Sort*, Matthew Levendusky (2009) argues that elite polarization has resulted in voters adopting the same ideological views of their party’s elites. He says this sorting comes from conversion (“existing voters aligning their partisanship and ideology with one another”) and replacement (new voters who enter the electorate already sorted). Notably, Levendusky finds that when voters move from “unsorted” to “sorted,” most change their ideology to match their partisanship, as opposed to changing parties to match their ideology. For example, liberal Republicans are more likely to remain a Republican and become conservative, as opposed to becoming a Democrat to

match their existing liberal ideology. Partisan sorting has essentially aligned voter ideology with party, which has made voters much more attached to their party both in and out of the voting booth (Levendusky, 2009). It should be noted that this theory relies almost exclusively on the view that voters look to elites for political positions because they do not take the time to inform themselves (Zaller, 1992; Campbell et al., 1980; Converse, 1964).² Like Levendusky, I adopt this elite-driven approach for this study. Levendusky establishes elite discourse as the primary mechanism responsible for sorting voters, but he provides little in the way of campaign-based evidence for this. Instead, he points to the recent shift in campaign strategy focusing on mobilizing base voters rather than persuading swing voters as proof of campaigns responding to a partisan sort (Levendusky, 2009). Furthermore, my study would provide a more complete study of the effect of partisan sorting on campaigns by analyzing campaign advertising for ideological appeals.

The more recent theory of partisan sorting relies on an assumption that parties have relevance to voters. As Levendusky points out, most voters switch their ideology to match their partisanship, which would mean parties have greater relevance to voters. This stands in contrast to the academic consensus before the turn of the century that parties in America were in decline (Bartels, 2000). Hetherington (2001) takes on that consensus and argues that the recent trend of polarization among elites has clarified political positions for ordinary Americans, increasing “party importance and salience on the mass level.” Essentially, polarization at the elite level has translated to greater partisanship at the mass level. He finds that more Americans in the 1990s positively think about one party and negatively about another than in the 1950s and less hold neutral views of either party. Americans are also better able to explain why they like or dislike a party than they were in previous decades (Hetherington, 2001). Note that this increased partisanship among the public does not necessarily mean that the public is more divided when it comes to issue positions. Along these lines, Mason (2015) distinguishes between social polarization and issue position polarization and finds that the public is more polarized along the social dimension. Social polarization refers to “increased levels of partisan bias, activism, and anger,” and is the result of alignment between partisan and ideological identity. This alignment causes people to have stronger partisan identities, but the same level of polarization has not transferred to people’s issue positions. This results in a country that is bitterly divided despite there being agreement on many issues. Partisanship as a social identity means that a “partisan behaves more like a sports fan than like a banker choosing investments” – they “feel emotionally connected” to the party

¹ The DW-NOMINATE data is accessible here: <https://voteview.com/parties/all>

² Levendusky (2009) defines elites as “politicians holding elected office who have some control over policy.”

and defend it when it's threatened (Mason, 2015). Notably, Mason (2015) concludes:

Thus, political identities are able to motivate social polarization in two ways – through the effects of partisanship and through the effects of identity alignment. Even without any change in the distribution of issue opinions in the public, it is possible for the electorate as a whole to regard outgroup partisans with increasing prejudice, to be driven to take action against the outgroup party, and to feel anger in response to electoral challenges from the outgroup party (p. 141).

If this is the case, the best strategy for political campaigns would most likely involve activating these partisan identities through partisan language in their communications.

A discussion of polarization would be incomplete without mentioning its consequences for policy making. As one might expect, a polarized Congress results in less compromise and less coalition-building, which means less significant legislation passed. Research produced in 2007 found that as House polarization increased, the amount of significant laws passed decreased (McCarty, 2007). Moreover, this “polarization-induced gridlock” has meant that “public policy does not adjust to changing economic and demographic circumstances,” which can have negative impacts on policies like minimum wage and welfare programs (Barber & McCarty, 2015).

Overall, polarization increased in Congress from the end of the 20th Century into the 21st Century. This elite-level polarization has translated to partisan sorting at the mass level, aligning partisan identities with ideological identities, increasing the partisanship of voters, resulting in social polarization, and making major legislation harder to pass. This has important implications for studying modern campaign communication, but a further understanding of ideology in the U.S. is required before turning to the literature on campaign advertising.

Ideology in the United States

Understanding how ideology operates in the U.S. is critical to informing our study of campaign communication as it forms the basis of partisan asymmetry. First, we must define the two major ideologies in America: liberalism and conservatism. In their book, *Ideology in America*, Christopher Ellis and James Stimson (2012) provide useful summaries of each. Liberalism centers around the idea of equality of opportunity – “life’s endeavors ought to result from intelligence, determination, discipline, and hard work, and not from the circumstances of one’s birth” (p. 3). Liberals believe that America’s class system prevents true equality of opportunity and that it is the government’s responsibility to assist the disadvantaged when necessary. To that end, liberals believe redistribution of wealth, public education, and proper government regulation can help bring about equality of opportunity for all. On the other hand, conservatives place greater respon-

sibility on the individual than the government, “believing that private citizens, operating without the encumbrances of government constraints, are more effective in motivating growth, innovation, and opportunity” (Ellis & Stimson, 2012, p. 5). They see a limited role for government in regulating the market, but a much stronger role in “promoting traditional values and enforcing social order” (Ellis & Stimson, 2012, p. 5). Thus, the primary factor separating the two ideologies is the role they believe government has in society. It follows that if America were primarily liberal or primarily conservative, we would have policies that reflected that preference. However, as they note, America is neither a nation of the left or the right.

Instead, Ellis and Stimson (2012) argue that America is a “nation of both the left and the right” as ideology in America represents a paradox: Americans are symbolically conservative, yet operationally liberal. Ellis and Stimson state there is an important difference between symbolic ideology and operational ideology. Symbolic ideology refers to “how citizens think about themselves,” while operational ideology refers to what citizens think the government should or should not do in terms of policy. According to Ellis and Stimson, Americans view themselves as conservative (“symbolic conservatism”), while at the same time preferring liberal solutions (“operational liberalism”). Ellis and Stimson present evidence based on more than 7,000 survey questions asked over a period between 1952 and 2010 that shows Americans, on average, hold liberal policy preferences. Using these data, the authors create a “public policy mood” metric, which reveals that between 1952 and 2009, an average of 58 percent of the public indicated support for liberal policies over conservative policies – proof of operational liberalism. At the same time, Ellis and Stimson analyze survey data from 1937 to 2006 and find a steady decline in the number of Americans self-identifying as liberal – from just under half of Americans in 1937 to about 35 percent in recent years. This decline coincides with a rise in conservative self-identification – in part because of changing associations of what the term “liberal” means. Throughout the years, liberalism became “charged with symbols of race and of racial riot and of protest,” associated with blacks, labor unions, urban unrest, and people on welfare (Ellis & Stimson, 2012). In other terms, symbolic liberalism has fallen out of favor for symbolic conservatism, while Americans have largely kept liberal positions on specific policies.

This trend has led some scholars to highlight the “partisan asymmetry” of American politics. In *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats*, Mark Grossmann and David A. Hopkins (2016) argue that the modern Republican and Democratic Parties represent distinct constituencies in the American public. The Republican Party, they write, “serves as the vehicle of a conservative ideological movement...marketing its broad critiques of government, building a supportive or-

ganizational network, and moving party doctrine toward the policy commitments of its right wing” (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016, p. 14). In contrast, the Democratic Party “is a coalition of social groups that act as discrete voting blocs for candidates, constituencies for group leaders, and demanders of particular policy commitments” (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016, p. 14). These differences have created asymmetric parties in that the support for them come from distinct sources: ideological and deeply held beliefs on the right versus distinct groups supportive of specific policies on the left. This asymmetry means the parties have pursued very different strategies in communicating, campaigning, and developing policy (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016).

Grossmann and Hopkins outline the well-documented history surrounding the conservative movement and its success in fusing with the Republican Party. Three schools of conservative thought – cultural conservatism, libertarianism, and anticommunism and neoconservatism – combined to become a broader movement that fueled Barry Goldwater’s Republican nomination in 1964 and eventually elected Ronald Reagan president in 1980. Reagan’s presidency “sealed the conservative movement’s ascendance within the extended network of the Republican Party and the unchallenged adoption of conservative positions on economics, culture, and foreign policy as official party doctrine” (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016, p. 90). While the Republican Party has clearly embraced conservatism, the Democratic Party has not done the same with liberalism as there is no comparable movement on the left. Instead, the Democratic Party has consisted of various social movements including civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights, environmental, and antiwar movements. These movements, while sometimes sympathetic to each other, never merged together into one broader liberal movement. The result is a Democratic Party backed by activists with distinct policy goals, rather than uniting ideological principles (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016).

Furthermore, multiple studies prove these historical differences regarding partisan asymmetry. For example, an analysis of the content of presidential nomination acceptance speeches since 1948 found that Republicans were more likely to mention ideology, American imagery, and claim American exceptionalism, while Democrats were more likely to mention public policy, new policy proposals, social or interest groups, and specific demographic groups (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016). A similar finding came from reviewing the party platforms – Republican platforms were more dedicated to the size and scope of government, while policy stances and specific group mentions made up more than 40 percent of the Democratic platforms (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016). These findings also extend to Congressional candidates. One analysis found that Democratic pre-primary Congressional candidates were more likely than Republicans

to receive endorsements from economic and identity interest groups, while Republicans were more likely to receive endorsements from single-issue and ideological interest groups (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016). Grossmann and Hopkins also find partisan asymmetry in campaign messaging. They first note that only one Democratic presidential candidate won their nomination with a liberal ideological appeal (McGovern in 1972), while three Republican candidates won their nomination with a conservative appeal (Goldwater 1964, Reagan 1980, and W. Bush 2000). Moreover, they find asymmetry in presidential primary debate rhetoric. Republican candidates mentioned ideology or principle 56 percent of the time compared to just 26 percent of Democratic answers. At the same time, Democrats mentioned a social or interest group in 24 percent of their answers, compared to 15 percent of the Republican answers. Further, Democratic presidential campaigns were more likely to reference class groups than Republican campaigns in speeches from 1952 to 2012. Perhaps most important for this study, they reference data from 2013 that showed what Congressional candidates mentioned in their advertising from 1968 to 2012. Republican candidates were far more likely than Democratic candidates to mention size of government, with more than 30 percent of Republicans referencing the size of government, compared to less than 15 percent of Democrats. As expected, Democrats referenced specific issues and specific groups at a higher rate than Republicans. Further, Republican congressional candidates from 2000 to 2004 were more likely than Democrats to focus on ideology or personal values in their advertising, and data from 2010 and 2012 showed Republicans mentioning “liberal” or “conservative” at a far higher rate than Democrats, with zero Democratic advertisements mentioning either ideology in 2012 (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016).

These findings, and the theory of partisan asymmetry broadly, form the basis for my research as I am interested in finding the differences between Democratic and Republican advertising. On the whole, partisan asymmetry – in line with research on ideology that suggests Americans are symbolically conservative, yet ideologically liberal – suggests Republicans are more likely to focus on ideological principles in their advertisements, while Democrats are more likely to mention specific policy proposals and specific groups in their advertisements. This leads to my first hypothesis:

H1: Republican advertisement airings will mention ideology more than Democratic advertisement airings.

Issue Convergence Versus Issue Ownership

With the research on polarization and ideology in the U.S. serving as a broad foundation, we can now narrow our scope to review the literature surrounding campaigns. There are effectively two schools of thought involving campaign research: issue convergence and issue

ownership. Proponents of issue convergence argue that candidates tend to campaign on a similar set of issues, so they can win the so-called median voter (i.e. the voters in the middle that are believed to decide most elections) (Sigelman & Buell, 2004; Sides, 2006). Conversely, proponents of issue ownership argue that candidates campaign on issues they and their parties “own” (Petrocik, 1996; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, 2001; Spiliotes & Vavreck, 2002; Arbour, 2014).

First, we will consider issue convergence. Sigelman and Buell (2004) look at whether presidential campaigns tend to campaign about the same issues or focus on issues that their party has some advantage on. Contrary to previous research which had seemed to confirm the latter, they found that opposing campaigns tended to speak about the same issues. Rather than avoiding issues that their party did not have an advantage on, candidates instead focused on the important issues of the day. Indeed, they found in a 40-year span of 11 different presidential elections that the Republican and Democratic candidates converged on three-quarters of the issues, and that closer elections meant the candidates were more likely to converge (Sigelman & Buell, 2004). Similarly, Sides (2006) reviewed candidate advertisements from House and Senate races in 1998, 2000, and 2002, analyzing the time devoted to various issues. He found they “tend to advertise on the same set of salient issues.” In this manner, candidates would “trespass” into issues the opposing party “owned,” but would do so in a way that was consistent with their party’s rhetorical strategies (Sides, 2006).

Issue ownership theory, however, is a more recent academic development. Petrocik (1996) develops a theory of issue ownership that states that parties “own” certain issues when they have a history and reputation for “handling” that problem. This means candidates will run on a certain set of issues that are “owned” by their political party (Petrocik, 1996). Since the late 1990s, several major studies have confirmed issue ownership. One of those came in 2001 when researchers found that U.S. House candidates from 1874 to 1996 “almost never” converged ideologically. Instead, they took positions consistent with their national party’s ideology, which means voters generally chose the candidate that most represented their views from those partisan choices. They note that there have been times when candidates showed more responsiveness to district interests (such as from the 1940s to the 1970s), but more recent elections have seen declining responsiveness (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, 2001). It should be noted that their study was based on results from the National Political Awareness Test (NPAT), but more recent research has utilized other methods, coming to the same conclusion.

For example, Sulkin and Evans (2006) analyzed CQ’s *Weekly Report*’s “Special Election Issue” coverage of congressional campaigns between 1984 and 1996 and found “considerable diversity” in the issues candidates cam-

paigned on. In terms of partisan differences, they found that Democrats have a larger agenda than Republicans. Specifically, the top four issues comprised of 40 percent of the Democratic agenda, while the top four issues for Republicans added up to 53 percent, suggesting greater uniformity in messaging among Republicans (Sulkin & Evans, 2006). Another method studied campaign advertising. Along these lines, Spiliotes and Vavreck (2002) looked at campaign advertisements in 1988 and found that candidates talked about different issues based on their party, confirming party divergence rather than convergence. For example, they found Republicans were 33 percent more likely to advertise about the economy than Democrats, while Democrats focused more on education and juvenile justice. Candidates in more competitive districts deviated more from this by mentioning certain issues more or less than their partisan colleagues (Spiliotes & Vavreck, 2002). Most recently, Arbour (2014) extended this research to include the specific frames campaigns used in advertising. Framing, as defined by Entman (2004), is when a campaign “[selects] some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient.” This means a campaign would highlight certain parts of their platform that are most acceptable to the voters, instead of trying to persuade voters to adopt their same positions. Arbour found that while candidates are willing to “trespass” into issues that the other party “owns,” both parties use distinct issue frames. In other words, Republicans frame issues differently than Democrats in ways beneficial to them. Both the partisanship of the candidate and the partisanship of the district influence the issue frames used by campaigns. For example, while both Democrats and Republicans discuss taxes, Democrats focus on taxes on the middle class and corporate tax breaks, while Republicans focus on valence issues surrounding taxes and how their opponent wants to raise taxes. Arbour believes that his data shows the “seemingly disadvantaged party” on certain issues uses a wider variety of frames because the party “lacks a more focused message” (Arbour, 2014). His findings appear to show that Republicans are more unified on messaging than Democrats (i.e. Republicans are more likely to use similar frames than Democrats), but Arbour does not specifically address this.

While there is no academic consensus on how campaigns message (issue convergence versus issue ownership), issue ownership theory is more compelling because research shows that even when candidates are discussing the same issues, they tend to diverge in terms of the frames they utilize, which are consistent with their party’s views (Arbour, 2014). Measuring the time candidates devote to each issue in advertisements misses the content of what they are discussing, and does not necessarily prove issue ownership to be a weak factor. As Arbour makes clear, even if a party does not “own” a certain issue, they can still campaign on it by using party-owned issue frames. For this reason, my second hypothesis is:

H2: *The top five issues mentioned by Democrats will differ from the top five issues mentioned by Republicans.*

Taken together, the research on ideology, partisan asymmetry, and issue ownership lead to my third and final hypothesis:

H3: *There will be greater uniformity in issues and other phrases mentioned by Republicans than Democrats.*

This hypothesis reflects the evidence that the Republican Party is a more ideological party than the Democratic Party, meaning Republicans derive a majority of their messaging from their overarching conservative ideology. Democrats lack an overarching theme in their messaging, instead supporting specific policies promoted by specific constituencies. If this is the case, then Democratic messaging will be more varied and diverse than Republican messaging.

Political Advertising on Television

Lastly, a brief discussion of what political campaigns do and how they advertise is warranted to demonstrate the importance of studying political advertisements. Political campaigns communicate information to voters designed to shape their opinions about candidates, bring up relevant issues and signal election importance (Bartels, 1993; Holbrook, 1996). Holbrook and McClurg (2005) developed a model for campaign mobilization that is dependent on three parts: partisan voters, campaign resource allocation, and voter environment. This model shows which voters are most likely to respond to campaign information and messaging. Crucially, they found that mobilization matters in the context of presidential campaigns and that mobilization is most likely to succeed with “core voters,” or people bound by their party identification (Holbrook & McClurg, 2005). Eric McGhee and John Sides (2011) extended this research and found that mobilization had an effect on voter turnout not just at the presidential level, but on down ballot races as well. Specifically, they found that “the more one party dominated the campaign, the greater the proportion of its supporters went to the polls” (McGhee & Sides, 2011). Notably, they found that other fundamental factors, including the economy and presidential approval, actually played less of a role than campaigns did in voter mobilization (McGhee & Sides, 2011). Thus, the research demonstrates that campaigns, through voter outreach and advertising strategies, have a large impact on mobilizing voters.

One of the more traditional ways of advertising to voters is through television, the medium used in this analysis. There are three foundational areas of research on political advertising on television: affect, enthusiasm, and advertisement tone. Extensive research has found that political advertising on television has influenced voters’ attitudes towards candidates, an important factor as attitudes, or

affect, has been found to be an important factor in deciding who to vote for (Kaid, 2004). Another important angle of research has centered around voter enthusiasm, and how television advertisements can impact that. The findings show that political advertisements can impact views of candidates and tell voters what issues to think about, while also stimulating emotional response designed to spur interest and involvement in the campaign (Brader, 2006; Kim, Painter, and Miles, 2013). A third area of research has focused on advertisement tone, which has found that television advertising can be divided into candidate-positive and opponent-negative (Kaid & Johnston, 2001). Generally, this research has determined that negative advertisements may negatively impact views of a candidate, while positive advertisements elicit positive attitudes and effectively communicate issue positions to voters (West, 2013). The literature on advertising on television extends as far back as the mid-1970s when Atkin and Heald (1976) found a relationship between political advertising on radio and television with indicators like political knowledge and interest. More recent research on the 2008 presidential election revealed that television advertisements had significant effect on increasing Barack Obama’s overall vote share – and that television advertisements had a greater impact in 2008 than in 2004 (Franz & Ridout, 2010). This research demonstrates the important role political television advertisements have had in past elections. Considering the estimated \$1.4 billion campaigns and outside groups spent on television advertisements in 2014, it appears campaigns still view television as a critical medium for messaging to voters, which is why it remains a critical medium to study campaign messages (Fowler & Ridout, 2014).

METHODS

My pilot study will analyze data on television advertising during the 2014 election cycle provided by the Wesleyan Media Project (WMP) (Fowler, Franz, and Ridout, 2017). WMP acquires this data through Kantar Media/CMAG, which is a private firm that utilizes “Ad Detectors” in every U.S. media market, as well as the national networks and cable networks. This system of detectors recognizes the “digital fingerprints” behind specific advertisements, and has been found to be “highly reliable in tracking the universe of advertisements aired.” Kantar Media/CMAG provides tracking data on both frequency and content.³ CMAG also codes basic variables, including the party affiliation of the favored candidate. WMP then codes the content of the advertisements, with project staff answering an extensive list of questions through an online platform. These codes include basic variables, such as who the favored candidate is and the location of the race. They also code more extensive variables like ad-

³ CMAG codes frequency as when and where the ad aired and content as the video files for each advertisement.

Mentioned in advertisement airings	Republican advertisement airings	Democratic advertisement airings
“Conservative”	74,107 (14.4%)	1,205 (0.25%)
“Liberal”	35,070 (6.8%)	0
Total ideological mentions	109,177 (21.2%)	1,205 (0.25%)

TABLE 1. | Ideological mentions, by party

Mentioned party label of candidate	Republican advertisement airings	Democratic advertisement airings
No	478,779 (92.9%)	449,827 (92.4%)
Yes, favored candidate	23,172 (4.5%)	17,878 (3.7%)
Yes, opposing candidate	9,802 (1.9%)	14,784 (3%)

TABLE 2. | Party mentions, by party

vertisement tone, whether the advertisement contrasts or promotes, whether the advertisement focuses on personal characteristics or policy matters, if the advertisement mentions or pictures certain people or objects, what emotional appeals an advertisement makes, what words or phrases and advertisement mentions, and what issues are mentioned. A sample of these advertisements are double-coded to shed light on reliability of each of the codes, but WMP cautions that these statistics can be misleading in circumstances where a characteristic is not observed in most advertisements.

WMP analyzed all television advertisements airings by House and Senate campaigns in the 2014 election cycle, coding them in several ways that will be useful in this study. This pilot study will analyze only the data provided for Senate advertisement airings. I will not distinguish between primary or general election advertisements, or whether a candidate or other group sponsored the advertisement. I will view the data in Stata 14, a statistics software provided by the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences at The George Washington University. After selecting the appropriate variables, I will run cross tabulations between the selected variables and party affiliation of the favored candidate. These variables include party label mentions, issue mentions, phrase/other mentions, advertisement tone (coded as promote, contrast, and attack), emotional appeal (coded as fear, enthusiasm, anger, pride, humor, or sadness), and advertisement focus (coded as personal characteristics or policy matters). This analysis will provide a preliminary look at advertisements aired in the 2014 congressional elections for Senate races.

RESULTS

The first two hypotheses for the pilot study are clearly supported by the results. Table 1 shows the amount of ideological mentions (whether an advertisement mentioned “conservative” or “liberal”) in all 2014 Senate advertisement airings. In total, 21.2 percent of Republican advertisement airings⁴ mentioned the terms “conservative” or “liberal,” while less than one percent (0.25%) of Democratic advertisement airings mentioned either term. Of the Republican advertisement airings, 14.4 percent of them mentioned “conservative,” and 6.8 percent of them mentioned “liberal.” Notably, not one of the 487,077 Democratic advertisement airings mentioned the term “liberal.” This supports the first hypothesis that more Republican advertisement airings mention ideology than Democratic advertisement airings.

Regarding party label, both parties showed surprising aversion to mentioning the party of both the favored and opposed candidates. Table 2 shows a similar pattern between both parties – the vast majority of advertisement airings do not mention party label at all, and if they do, they are more likely to mention the party label of the favored candidate.

The results also support the second hypothesis – that the top five issues mentioned by Republicans would differ from the top five mentioned by Democrats. Tables 3 and 4 show the top five issues mentioned in Democratic and Republican advertisement airings. The top five issues mentioned in Democratic advertisement airings are: taxes (22.3%), jobs/unemployment (21.2%), Social Security (14.6%), Medicare (14%), and education/schools (13.4%). For Republicans, the top five issues are: Afford-

⁴ Advertisement “airings” refer to every time an advertisement was aired on television. Note that this means an advertisement could be aired hundreds of times.

Issue	Mentioned in Democratic advertisement airings	Mentioned in Republican advertisement airings
Taxes	108,517 (22.3%)	71,648 (13.9%)
Jobs/unemployment	103,260 (21.2%)	108,143 (21%)
Social Security	71,064 (14.6%)	18,453 (3.6%)
Medicare	68,336 (14%)	46,185 (9%)
Education/schools	65,170 (13.4%)	25,566 (5%)

TABLE 3. | Top 5 issues mentioned in Democratic advertisement airings

Issue	Mentioned in Republican advertisement airings	Mentioned in Democratic advertisement airings
ACA/Obamacare	182,678 (35.4%)	8,280 (1.7%)
Jobs/unemployment	108,143 (21%)	103,260 (21.2%)
Deficit/budget	96,957 (18.8%)	16,024 (3.3%)
Taxes	71,648 (13.9%)	108,517 (22.3%)
Gov't spending	66,906 (13%)	9,692 (2%)

TABLE 4. | Top 5 issues mentioned in Republican advertisement airings

able Care Act/Obamacare (35.4%), jobs/unemployment (21%), deficit/budget (18.8%), taxes (13.9%), and government spending (13%). The only overlap here is taxes and jobs/unemployment, but the parties' other top issues are distinct. Also included in the results is how much the opposing party mentioned the same issues. For example, while taxes was the top issue mentioned in Democratic advertisement airings (22.3%), it was the fourth-most mentioned issue (13.9%) in Republican advertisement airings. However, the contrast is starker on the Republican side. While their top issue was ACA/Obamacare, with more than a third of Republican advertisement airings mentioning it, less than two percent of Democratic advertisement airings (1.7%) mentioned ACA/Obamacare in their advertisement airings. These results show that the parties largely differed in the issues they focused on in their advertisement airings.

The results are less clear when it comes to support for the third hypothesis – that Republican advertisement airings would be more uniform in content and style than Democratic advertisement airings. This hypothesis relies on measuring uniformity, which can be done in multiple ways. For my study, issues and phrases mentioned provide indications of how similar advertisement airings are. First, top issues mentioned serve as one indicator of uniformity. Tables 3 and 4 show the top five issues mentioned in Democratic and Republican advertisement airings. By averaging the advertisement airings mentioning each of the top five issues, we gain a sense how prevalent the top five

issues were for both parties. The average percentage a top-five issue was mentioned on the Republican side was 20.4 percent. This was 17.1 percent for Democrats, meaning the top five issues mentioned in Republican advertisement airings were mentioned more frequently than the top five issues in Democratic advertisement airings. This would seem to reflect the fact that Republican advertisement airings mentioned ACA/Obamacare in more than a third (35.4%) of their advertisement airings, while the top Democratic issue (taxes) was only mentioned in 22.3 percent of their advertisement airings.

Second, we can analyze the top phrases mentioned as an indicator of uniformity. Tables 5 and 6 show the top five phrases (or people) mentioned (or pictured) in Democratic and Republican advertisement airings. The most mentioned phrases in Democratic advertisement airings were: Republicans (8%), middle class (6.8%), Democrats (5.8%), special interests (5.7%), and upper class/rich/wealthy (5.6%). On the other hand, the five most mentioned (or pictured) phrases and people in Republican advertisement airings were: Barack Obama (54.4%), conservative (14.4%), liberal (6.8%), Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell (5.1%), and change (4.1%). First, all five phrases mentioned in Democratic advertisement airings are different than those mentioned in Republican advertisement airings – similar to the results regarding issue mentions. Second, more than half of all Republican advertisement airings (54.4%) mentioned Barack Obama. There is no equivalent on the Democratic side, where the top

Mention	Mentioned in Democratic advertisement airings	Mentioned in Republican advertisement airings
“Republicans”	38,868 (8%)	13,659 (2.7%)
“Middle Class”	33,267 (6.8%)	11,494 (2.2%)
“Democrats”	28,250 (5.8%)	15,566 (3%)
“Special interests”	27,617 (5.7%)	9,587 (1.9%)
“Upper class / rich / wealthy”	27,325 (5.6%)	1,134 (0.22%)

TABLE 5. | Top 5 phrases mentioned in Democratic advertisement airings

Mention	Mentioned in Republican advertisement airings	Mentioned in Democratic advertisement airings
Barack Obama	280,203 (54.4%)	13,659 (2.7%)
“Conservative”	74,107 (14.4%)	1,205 (0.25%)
“Liberal”	35,070 (6.8%)	0
Mitch McConnell	26,082 (5.1%)	18,557 (3.8%)
“Change”	21,288 (4.1%)	5,991 (1.2%)

TABLE 6. | Top 5 phrases/people mentioned (or pictured) in Republican advertisement airings

phrase mentioned (Republicans) is only seen in 8 percent of Democratic advertisement airings. Using the same averaging technique discussed above regarding issues, it becomes evident that Republican advertisement airings were more likely to mention the same phrases (or people) than Democratic advertisement airings. A top-five phrase on the Republican side was mentioned an average 16.9 percent, while a top-five phrase on the Democratic side was only mentioned an average 6.4 percent. This becomes much closer when removing the Obama mentions – at that point, a top-four phrase is mentioned an average 7.6 percent in Republican advertisement airings. However, both results show Republican advertisement airings used more of the same phrases than Democratic advertisement airings. This result would also seem to indicate greater uniformity in Republican advertising.

Table 7 combines the issue and phrase mention data, showing the top five mentions by party. Notably, the top five Democratic mentions were all issues, while only three of the top five mentions were issues in Republican advertisement airings. Even more notable is the difference in the average times these top five phrases or issues were mentioned in the advertisement airings. Almost 30 percent (28.8%) of all Republican advertisement airings mentioned one of the top five Republican phrases or issues – meaning Republican advertisement airings were more than 10 percent more likely to include these than Democratic advertisement airings. This presents more evidence that Republican advertisement airings were

more uniform in content than Democratic advertisement airings.

Taken together, these results confirm greater uniformity on the Republican side in terms of issues and phrases mentioned, thus supporting my third hypothesis. However, some caution should be taken with this conclusion. This measure of uniformity is very narrow in that it only captures mentions of an issue or a phase or person. This data does not tell us much more than that – as in what candidates are saying about the issue or how they are using a phrase. For example, it would be assumed that most Democratic advertisements mentioning Republicans were negative, but this data only shows that they mentioned Republicans, not how they mentioned Republicans. Further study should look beyond issues and phrases for similar messages.

DISCUSSION

These findings clearly demonstrate a partisan difference in the campaign television advertising for Senate candidates in 2014. First, Republican advertisement airings were much more likely to mention ideology than Democratic advertisement airings, mentioning “conservative” or “liberal” in their advertisement airings more than 20 percent of the time, compared to almost no mentions in Democratic advertisement airings. Second, the top five issues mentioned differed by party, with only two issues – taxes and jobs/unemployment – coming in the

Republican advertisement airings		Democratic advertisement airings	
Mention	Amount (%)	Mention	Amount (%)
<i>Barack Obama</i>	280,203 (54.4%)	<i>Taxes</i>	108,517 (22.3%)
<i>ACA/Obamacare</i>	182,678 (35.4%)	<i>Jobs/unemployment</i>	103,260 (21.2%)
<i>Jobs/unemployment</i>	108,143 (21%)	<i>Social Security</i>	71,064 (14.6%)
<i>Budget/deficit</i>	96,957 (18.8%)	<i>Medicare</i>	68,336 (14%)
<i>“Conservative”</i>	74,107 (14.4%)	<i>Education/schools</i>	65,170 (13.4%)
Average	28.8%	Average	17.1%

TABLE 7. | Top 5 issues and phrases mentioned, by party

top five for both parties. Third, Republican advertisement airings were more uniform in content than Democratic advertisement airings, being more likely to mention a similar set of issues and phrases (and people) than Democratic advertisement airings.

These results align well with the literature on ideology, partisan asymmetry, and issue ownership. My finding that Republican advertisement airings were more likely to mention ideology than Democratic advertisement airings was unsurprising, given the extensive research that already exists on this. The Republican Party has embraced conservative ideology, while simultaneously attacking the liberal ideology (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016). This has led, as Ellis and Stimson (2012) argue, to a symbolically conservative, yet operationally liberal country – one that is more likely to identify as conservative and appreciate the symbols of conservatism, but at the same time support liberal policies and programs. In short, the term “conservative” carries positive connotations, while “liberal” carries negative meanings. This was observed in the 2014 Senate advertising data. “Conservative” was mentioned in 14.4 percent of Republican advertisement airings and 0.25 percent of Democratic advertisement airings, while “liberal” was mentioned in almost seven percent of Republican advertisement airings and zero Democratic advertisements. While the data does not provide the context for these mentions, we can safely assume that most (if not all) mentions of “liberal” in Republican advertisements were negative, while a good amount of the “conservative” mentions in Democratic advertisements were most likely positive. It should also be highlighted that zero of the 487,077 Democratic advertisement airings mentioned the term “liberal.” That is a stark finding, and one that gives credence to partisan asymmetry – there is no Democratic equivalent to the conservative ideology. This leaves the Democratic Party significantly disadvantaged in messaging because the conservative ideology provides Republican candidates with broader themes to utilize like small government and individual responsibility. These overarching principles do not exist for Democrats.

My second finding that the top five issues mentioned in the advertisement airings differed by party also aligns with previous research. In particular, this finding supports issue ownership theory – that candidates tend to campaign on issues that they and their party have a known reputation for handling (Petrocik, 1996). The parties only overlapped on two of the top five issues: taxes and jobs. On these shared issues, we can be fairly certain that these advertisements employed different frames consistent with the candidate’s party (Arbour, 2014). The other three top-five issues mentioned in Republican advertisement airings were Obamacare, deficit/budget, and government spending, while the other three in Democratic advertisement airings were Social Security, Medicare, and education. Obamacare, deficit/budget, and government spending all qualify as size of government issues (see Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016) and fit quite neatly into the research surrounding ideology and partisan asymmetry. In contrast, Social Security, Medicare, and education are all specific policies for specific groups, which also aligns with partisan asymmetry and the idea of operational liberalism (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016; Ellis & Stimson, 2012).

My final finding of greater uniformity in Republican advertisement airings is perhaps the most interesting to consider. Indeed, the data shows that Republican advertisement airings mentioned the top five Republican issues or phrases an average of 28.8 percent of the time, while Democratic advertisement airings mentioned the top five Democratic issues or phrases an average of 17.1 percent of the time – more than a 10 percent difference. Two of the top mentions in Republican advertisement airings were the phrases Barack Obama (54.4%) and conservative (14.4%), while all five of the top mentions in Democratic advertisement airings were issue-based. This reflects Grossmann and Hopkins’ (2016) research that showed Democrats were more likely to campaign on specific issues, while Republicans were more likely to campaign on personal values and ideology. The top two mentions in Republican advertisement airings were Barack Obama (54.4%) and his signature healthcare law,

Obamacare (35.4%). Of the Republican advertisement airings mentioning Obama, 94 percent portrayed him in a disapproving fashion. This would confirm *The Washington Post's* reporting that the GOP strategy was to “make it all about Obama, Obama, Obama.” In this sense, Republican messaging among Senate candidates in 2014 was far more cohesive than Democratic messaging. A majority of the half-million Republican advertisement airings mentioned Obama, and more than a third mentioned Obamacare. Comparatively, Democratic advertisement airings were much more spread out among what issues they mentioned, perhaps reflecting poor strategy and coordination emanating from party leaders.

This suggests Republicans were effective at framing the election as a referendum on Obama because they made *him* the salient issue for voters. In other words, Republicans could link their Democratic opponents to Obama, making voters' disapproval for the president the salient issue when they cast their ballots.

The uniformity finding also confirms the existence of partisan asymmetry in 2014 campaign advertising – Republicans were more unified around ideological considerations, while Democrats campaigned on various policies for specific groups. Three of the top five mentions in Republican advertisement airings were about size of government or conservatism itself. All of the top five mentions in Democratic advertisement airings were about specific issues, and all of the top five phrases mentioned in Democratic advertisement airings were groups. Indeed, the top five phrases mentioned in Democratic advertisement airings were: Republicans, middle class, Democrats, special interests, and upper class/wealthy. These results are exactly in line with what partisan asymmetry would have us expect: ideological Republicans and group interest Democrats (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016).

Although this study cannot determine exactly the impact message uniformity had on the results of the election, it would be logical to conclude that having a more cohesive message helped the Republicans. In other terms, voters hearing the same message over and over from one party, while hearing mixed messages from the other party would certainly have an impact on how voters came to their decisions.

I would argue that we cannot consider these results without a discussion of the growing polarization at the elite levels of this country and the resulting partisan sort. These findings demonstrate a distinct partisan difference in advertising based on ideology, issues mentioned, and message uniformity. This difference in advertising is important because it is a manifestation of elite polarization, which clarifies partisan positions for voters and leads to the partisan asymmetry in the current political climate. Partisan sorting theory suggests that voters match their ideology to fit the views of their party (Levendusky, 2009), but this becomes problematic if only one party sends ideological cues. It means Republicans would

hold much stronger partisan views than their Democratic counterparts and would translate to greater allegiance and emotional connection to the Republican Party (Mason, 2015). Combined with increased uniformity in messaging, you have an extremely powerful political party – and an asymmetric political system. Despite many other components, this shows how campaign advertising must be considered as one of the mechanisms increasing polarization in Congress. A form of elite discourse, political advertising is one of the explanations for partisan sorting at the mass level, which has continued the cycle of increasing polarization in Congress. Campaign advertisements, like the ones studied here, contribute to polarization through their asymmetric partisan messaging.

My pilot study has several limitations that my proposed study would seek to minimize. Most prominently is the lack of generalizability of these findings. My pilot study's findings only extend to campaign advertising for Senate races in 2014. My proposed study would add three more election cycles, as well as advertising data from House races. It would also distinguish between advertisements aired during the primary versus the general election, and whether the advertisement was sponsored by the candidate or an outside group, such as a super Political Action Committee (PAC) or party committee. This would increase the generalizability of the findings, so they can be more useful in determining trends in advertising. Additionally, my pilot study did not differentiate data based on individual candidates. For that reason, I could not make any claims that “Republicans did this” or “Democrats did this.” I could only say that “Republican advertisement airings did this” or “Democratic advertisement airings did this.” While it may seem like an inconsequential distinction, the findings may have been skewed by candidates with more advertisements than others. Distinguishing advertisements based on candidates would allow me to make broader claims, such as “In 2014, Republican candidates devoted 34 percent of their advertisements to Obamacare.” Another limitation of my pilot study came from the WMP data I analyzed. This data only allowed for certain words or issues to be analyzed, without any context or information about how those words and issues were framed. My proposed study would add a component to study these advertisements in more depth. This would consist of conducting an additional content analysis on a random sample of advertisements, yielding more detailed data.

Finally, my proposed study would add a layer of other measures to provide greater depth of analysis. Specifically, DW-NOMINATE ideological scores would position each incumbent candidate in terms of their ideology, which would show trends in advertisements based on ideology, rather than party affiliation. For instance, do more conservative Republicans advertise similarly to their more moderate counterparts? Cook Partisan Voter Index (PVI) scores would position each candidate in

terms of their district's partisan leanings, which would show trends in advertisements based on the composition of voters in a district. For example, do candidates running in swing districts moderate their advertisements more than candidates running in more stable districts?

CONCLUSION

This preliminary study identified partisan difference in advertisements for Senate candidates in 2014 and provides a basis for further study of partisan differences in campaign advertising more broadly. More specifically, it confirmed that partisan asymmetry exists in political advertising, which has implications for future campaigns. Studying partisan difference in campaign advertising is important given increasing polarization at the elite level and growing partisanship at the mass level. Understanding how campaigns advertise to voters in a more polarized environment is one of the first steps to addressing asymmetric partisanship and reducing polarization in Congress.

This study highlights how message cohesiveness and utilizing partisan strategies in advertising accentuates asymmetry in American politics and contributes to greater division in Congress. While we can only speculate how these partisan differences impact the electorate, it would be logical to conclude that greater uniformity in messaging is an effective strategy in winning elections, and perhaps was a factor in the Republican takeover of the Senate in 2014. In this case, Republican advertising was heavily focused on President Obama and his major legislative accomplishment, the Affordable Care Act, while Democratic messaging was more spread out amongst various issues. This suggests that parties should pursue more cohesive messaging in their advertising. It also exemplifies the effectiveness of linking down-ballot candidates to an unpopular president. This means part of the Republican advantage in 2014 came from their out-party status (as in they did not have control of the White House). Thus, it would be easier for a party to be unified in their messaging due to their opposition to a president. In this case, Democrats had a more difficult task standing by the same agenda as President Obama's, leading to less cohesive messaging coming from Democratic candidates broadly.

My findings have several troubling implications for American politics. First, the partisan asymmetry observed in campaign advertising translates to an apparent Republican advantage in messaging that stems from their ideological backing. Democrats simply do not have the same ideological foundation (at least symbolically) to pull from in formulating their messaging. This, in turn, results in less uniform messaging, which creates a disadvantage when advertising to voters. Our two-party system requires two highly competitive political parties, but this may be eroded if the Democratic Party continues to

message in the way it does. The Democratic Party should make it a long-term priority to rebrand the term "liberal," and look for ways to incorporate this ideology into their messaging. If Democrats continue to let Republicans define the term "liberal," Republicans will enjoy an advantage on this front. Second, the findings support issue ownership theory, which means candidates are talking about a distinct set of issues. A strong democratic system relies on a robust debate of the issues, but these findings suggest that candidates are not engaging in this type of debate – instead, they are essentially talking past each other and to completely separate audiences. In other words, candidates are appealing to their partisan base, rather than the "median voter." This encourages more partisan candidates to run for office, and will only increase polarization in Congress further. Third, while uniformity in party messaging may be an effective strategy in winning votes, this could threaten democracy. The reason lies in how voters come to their decisions at the ballot box. If a voter hears the same messaging coming from all of the candidates in one party, they may miss differences between individual candidates. For example, a Republican candidate using similar messaging coming from other Republican candidates may have more extreme issue positions, but voters would not be able to detect this from the advertising. Of course, it becomes the responsibility of the media and the opponent to inform the voters of this discrepancy, but it remains a concern.

Further research on this topic should consider the impacts of partisan differences in advertising on voters, and seek to definitively link campaign advertising to polarization. First, while this study establishes partisan difference in advertising, it does not determine how these differences impact voters. This could include conducting experiments that test the effectiveness of these kinds of messages on voters. Second, this study discussed how campaign advertising can lead to polarization, but did not establish any causal link. Future research should consider how campaign advertising relates to increased polarization in Congress. Broadly speaking, more research is needed on campaign communication because there is a void in that area of political research.

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