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Lyndon B. Johnson's "Daisy Girl" campaign advertisement has become widely recognizable across the United States for its negative portrayal of what the world would look like if the opposing candidate, Barry Goldwater, won the 1964 presidential election (Mann). This campaign advertisement has been thought to be controversial as it depicts a little girl holding a daisy when suddenly she's struck by an atomic bomb (Mashon). Through the use of creativity and pathos, this campaign advertisement completely revolutionized how "smear" campaign ads were produced to target the opposing political candidate, furthermore, raising questions about their effectiveness at mobilizing voters in elections. In this research paper, I will be looking at California's most competitive congressional districts to understand the relationship between congressional campaign advertisements and individual voter turnout during the 2022 congressional election. California's congressional districts number 22, 13, 27, 3, and 9 were considered competitive in 2022 given that each of these districts had some similarities in demographics and political partisanship which means that it is a toss-up to see whether the Republican or Democrat candidate will win the election. In order to analyze the relationship between congressional campaign advertisements and voter turnout, I will be looking at several online campaign advertisements and their tone as well as data of voter registration and overall results of the 2022 congressional California election.

Significance

In recent years, politics have become very partisan leading to immense tension between the two major parties in the US—Republicans and Democrats. The voting-eligible population ends up being victims of the situation as misinformation circulates around the internet that is often negative and harmful towards the candidates running for a position in government. In California, 60% of the voting population is registered as Democrats which means that at the national level, California doesn't have much partisan tension, however, at a congressional district level, we begin to see the diversity in voting for either the Republican or Democrat candidate (Baldassare et al.). If the congressional districts that are being analyzed in this study use dramatic and smearing campaign advertisements that are significantly harmful to the reputation of a candidate, that could impact how the constituents view the candidate, whether or not they decide to even participate in the election, and if they will vote for that specific candidate. From a democratic point of view, it is clear that this can result in skewed results that aren't representative of the views of the population which hinders the ability of having a truly representative government. Citizens value honesty and transparency within government, so if candidates are basing one of their campaign strategies on attack ads instead of focusing on how they are going to fulfill the promise of making a positive change in their elected position, then it is easy to lose trust in the government system.

By analyzing congressional campaign advertisements of California candidates, we'll be able to see what types of advertisements those politicians put out for the public and possibly find a pattern that shows similarities in the profiles of the candidates that solely rely on negative campaign advertisements. Building trust is the challenge for many candidates when they run in

elections, therefore, starting a foundation of honesty and taking a more positive approach to campaigning without the intentional smear aspect could be a key to success for these candidates.

Background

When it comes to the relationship between campaign advertisements and voter turnout, previous research shows similar results, however, they point to different factors within the campaign advertisements and the political environment that potentially play a role in mobilizing voters.

In a 2016 study done by the University of Rhode Island, researchers wanted to understand why candidates decide to promote negative campaign ads about their opponents and consistently make their whole campaign negative (Malloy and Merkowitz). To answer this question they looked at campaign advertisements from gubernatorial, senatorial, and presidential elections from 2000 to 2008 and categorized them based on tone and county (Malloy and Merkowitz). After analyzing the results, researchers found that in order to increase the margins of victory, a candidate must avoid attacking their opponent and that if candidates put out positive advertisements in areas in which they had low support, they were likely to increase their number of voters (Malloy and Merkowitz). This study covers information that previous studies didn't look at such as how campaign advertisements did in areas where there was low support for a candidate. Through this discovery, researchers came to the conclusion that out-advertising candidate A will definitely increase the margin of victory for candidate B. The data conducted in these studies regarding the relationship between the tone of campaign advertisements and overall voter turnout provides further knowledge to build upon in future studies, but is also thought to potentially help candidates understand how to best attract successful results at the polls. Researchers Malloy and Merkowitz, however, had a different point of view on this as they

asserted that candidates and campaign consultants aren't interested in truly learning about the values of a democratic election, since their goal is to win no matter how they get there (Malloy and Merkowitz). At the end of the day, if only a certain portion of the population is voting and that portion happens to be in favor of the candidate that the consultant company is working with, then it makes no sense to them why they would try to change the system and risk their chances at winning an election. Using this logic, it's easy for candidates, campaign consultants, and even voters to want to blur information related to creating fair elections that are representative of the population we have here in the US.

In another study done in collaboration with Purdue University, researchers wanted to see whether there was any effect on voter turnout based on the campaign tone of ads (Gordon et al.). The researchers categorized positive advertisements as those that "solely emphasize the advertising brand, whereas negative ads aim to contrast against or denigrate another brand"(Gordon et al.). After looking at presidential campaign advertisements with varying language tones from 2000 to 2004, researchers found that "positive ads encouraged more people to show up on Election Day while negative ads slightly suppressed voter turnout" (Gordon et al). They also found that negative advertisements had a stronger impact on relative candidate share which stemmed from the fact that a negative ad decreased the opponent's attractiveness and left the advertiser's attractiveness relatively unchanged (Gordon et al). Positive advertisements did impactful work in terms of promoting the civic duty that is voting, however, the advertiser didn't necessarily receive as many benefits as it put out (Gordon et al). Both of these effects simply demonstrate that there are risks associated with both positive and negative advertisements and the candidate themselves has to choose what they value the most. Interestingly enough, the research conducted for this study did take into account some challenging factors that had the

potential of affecting the results. In particular, researchers knew that the data on “advertising exposure by tone likely contained measurement error due to measure construction and tone classification”(Gordon et al). Other data that looked at positive and negative advertisements classified the tones in a similar manner as Gordon and other researchers, but if a consistent definition isn’t being used across all research studies looking into this relationship, then the data will be skewed. Researchers of this study also pointed out that the tone of campaign ads that are released close to the time of elections is enough to tip a tight election to one side as data demonstrated that Al Gore would have become president in 2000 if more positive ads were shown (Gordon et al.).

A study done by researchers Ansolabehere and Iyengar pointed out that negative campaign advertisements decrease voter turnout by “reducing a voters’ faith in the electoral process and their sense of efficacy” (Griffin). Their research was conducted by having voters look at campaign advertisements that were positive and negative toned and after asking the voters to disclose who they would be voting for. These ads were either real or created by the researchers, but overall they did reflect actual candidates that were running for office during the time of the experiment. The ads themselves also spanned from candidates running for presidential, senatorial, gubernatorial, and mayoral elections. Researchers found that party affiliation played a role in whether or not the tone of the advertisement was effective at persuading the voter to vote for a certain candidate (Ansolabehere and Iyengar). Self-identified Republicans and Independent voters actually viewed negative campaign advertisements as persuasive, but Independents weren’t mobilized enough to actually go and vote for the candidate(Ansolabehere and Iyengar). Ansolabehere and Iyengar noted that the reason for the demobilization of Independent voters could be attributed to the fact that they are least likely to

vote in the first place, so many political candidates don't target this audience since the voting pattern of this group is already established. Further data collected showed that negative advertisements led to a decline in voter turnout, while positive advertisements increased voter's ability to recall the information presented in the advertisement (Ansolabehere and Iyengar).

Researchers also discovered that positive advertisements—ads “in which the candidates promote their own ideas, successes, and abilities”—can increase overall voter turnout by engaging non-partisan voters who would otherwise be left out. This finding is crucial for my study as it is the base for my definition of what a positive advertisement is, but it also leads me to further question if party affiliation will be a prevalent factor for overall voter turnout. Given that most of the research done is based on elections that happened in the early 2000s, it will be interesting to look at more recent data from the 2022 California congressional election to understand what—if anything—has changed in terms of the marketing of a political candidate and the effectiveness at mobilizing voters.

Theory and Argument

When looking at the 2022 California congressional campaign advertisements and their relationship to voter turnout, I suspect that the tone of these ads is going to play a pivotal role in determining whether or not there is a direct correlation. Considering previous literature on this subject, I hypothesize that as the tone of campaign advertisements becomes more negative and promotes false information, the more likely it is for voter turnout to decline. The prediction that negative advertisements will decrease voter turnout stems from the idea that misinformation is similar to gossip and it could change people's perception of a candidate, but it could also make the public lose trust in their government, thus not participating in the elections. Positive advertisements have the possibility of increasing voter turnout because these types of ads will

appeal to a majority of demographics who just want a stable and reliable political candidate in office.

I will be classifying negative advertisements as ads that “involve attacking or criticizing an opponent rather than focusing on one’s own positive attributes” (Hubdialer). I also add a caveat for misinformation in the classification of a negative ad as false information can significantly sway a voter’s decision at the polls. Positive advertisements will be classified as those that are factual and focus on building one’s reputation without tearing down the opponents. This rubric for considering an ad to be positive takes factual information into account because every candidate and voter has a right to a fair election that promotes healthy civic engagement instead of negativity.

The independent variable in this study is the tone—positive, negative, or neutral—of campaign advertisements and the dependent variable is voter turnout for the 2022 congressional campaign election. The demographics and party affiliation of the five districts that I looked at are a causal mechanism for this study because they could help understand what the profile is for people who feel more of an effect with negative or positive campaign advertisements. These variables are amongst some of the major factors that influence a voter’s decision. The observed districts in this study do not include urban cities, therefore, there was a suspicion that there could possibly be a dominant influence from the Republican party in some of the districts which would then affect the opposing candidates. The tone also plays a significant role on the voting population’s emotions and will certainly lead to us seeing an effect given that humans are likely to consider their feelings towards a candidate rather than just thinking about the logic without any other strings attached to it.

Research Design and Methods

In order to understand the relationship between the tone of campaign ads and voter turnout, I am going to be doing a small-n study that observes five competitive congressional districts in California and the Republican and Democrat candidates that were on the 2022 congressional election ballot. These districts include 3, 9, 13, 22, and 27. I specifically chose to look at the 2022 congressional election because it was the most recent congressional election, therefore, it would have the most publicly available advertisements since media has become a large part of the campaigning process. In this context, I defined competitive districts as those that could swing from having a Republican or Democrat representative as there is equal support for each candidate. Because of the increased competitive pressure in these districts, candidates may feel more incentivized to go negative in their approach to campaign advertisements about their opponent. This makes the ideal environment for this study as it demonstrates the effects of certain tones of advertisement on the voting population and poses a question on the health of democracy with these kinds of ads.

The independent variable in this study is the tone—positive, neutral, or negative—of congressional campaign advertisements for the 2022 election cycle. I operationalized my independent variable by creating a numerical ranking scale where 1 represents an absolutely positive ad, 0 represents a neutral ad, and -1 represents an absolutely negative ad. An ad that is categorized as absolutely positive—in this context—is one in which the candidate only focuses on discussing their plans and goals for their time as representative of their district with no mention of the opposing candidate. An example of an ad that is categorized as a 1 (absolutely positive) can be seen in Figure 1. For an ad to get categorized as -1 (absolutely negative), it must promote

false information and have a negative tone overall. An example of this type of ad can be seen in Figure 2. While there weren't any ads categorized as neutral (0), there were several ads categorized as 0.5 or -0.5. In both of these cases, an ad receives a .5 or -.5 when the content isn't extreme enough to be considered absolutely positive or negative, but it does have an underlying tone that is slightly positive or negative. An example of an ad categorized as -0.5 (somewhat negative) can be noted in Figure 3. In total, I looked at 10 video advertisements and 10 still image advertisements which breaks down to one video and one image per candidate. The video advertisements came from Youtube and the still image ads were directly from each candidate's campaign website.

The dependent variable in this study is voter turnout for each of the observed races in the 2022 California congressional elections. To measure voter turnout, I looked at voter registration by party affiliation for the observed districts and the overall voter turnout by party for each of the observed races. For reference, I also collected census data from each district to get a sense of how many individuals voted in the 2022 congressional elections. There was no publicly available data demonstrating the voter-eligible population, therefore, I just used census data to get a general idea of the portion of the population that is voting. The data on voter registration by party came from the Secretary of State Report of Registration as of September 2022 by US California congressional districts. For overall voter turnout data, the information came from Ballotpedia's analysis of each of the California congressional districts during the 2022 election.

In addition to my independent and dependent variables, I took into account two confounding variables—PACs and the type of media in which the ads were presented. In 2002, Congress rolled out the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act which had a provision that specifically required each candidate to publicly approve the communication message that was being

promoted in advertisements(Federal Election Commission). The idea behind this piece of legislation was that candidates would be less incentivized to push out negative advertisements if they had to publicly recognize that they approved of the message and created it. While similar rules are applied to political action committees, these groups have a greater scope of the type of advertisements that they can put out as they can claim that the candidate had no part in it, even if that PAC helps fund that specific candidate's campaign—which is direct support and collaboration. Next to each advertisement that I watched, I took note of who the ad came from—PACs or the candidates themselves— as well as the form of media used to deliver the advertisement. Media forms include videos and still images. These media forms in advertising were taken into account to understand if a certain form of media was more of an effective strategy for increasing viewership and thus convincing a larger audience to vote for a specific candidate.

Under consistent conditions, the procedures can be replicated and should yield similar results. If the election is considered competitive and has an increase in media attention, candidates may feel more inclined to do whatever it takes in order for them to win. If the election isn't competitive and an incumbent is consistently the chosen representative, then the reliability of the study could potentially decrease. The tone of advertisements is a reliable measure of the concepts of this study as campaign advertisements will continuously vary in the way that they convey their message which is telling of the candidate themselves and their political strategies to win a seat in government. Measuring voter turnout and comparing it to voter registration and population is a reliable assessment because it demonstrates how many individuals are partaking in their civic duty of voting and how involved they are in the political process. A weakness of this measurement is that data wasn't available that displayed the voter-eligible population

specifically, so general census data was used as a reference for what portion of the population was voting.

In terms of validity, there are some concerns when considering the ranking of the independent variable—the tone of campaign advertisements. The weakness is that the definitions used to categorize the positive, negative, and neutral advertisements are subjective, so what I considered positive might not be positive to others. This could potentially skew the results for others when replicating this study as the categories could be considered invalid leading them to create their own scale and definitions for these ads. The validity of the measure of the dependent variable—voter turnout in the congressional elections—is strong as the numbers reflect the amount of voters going to vote for each candidate which should be accurate across all districts in California.

Findings

Firstly, the data demonstrated that registered Republican voters had a higher overall voter turnout compared to the registered Democrat voters in the competitive California congressional districts observed in 2022. In Figure 4, the graph displays the percent of voter turnout by party and the percent of vote share by candidate in the five congressional districts observed. The district with the lowest voter turnout for the Republican candidate had a vote share of 67.89% which is much higher than the lowest voter turnout for the Democrat candidate which was a vote share of 38.21%. The highest recorded number for vote share and voter turnout can be seen in Figure 4 with a Republican candidate receiving 91.87% of the vote share. This data suggests that registered Republican voters are voting at a higher overall percentage compared to the registered Democrat voters. This brings into question if having a smaller support base for Republicans

leads to higher voter turnout since there aren't as many Republicans in California, which is known for being a blue, Democrat state.

Secondly, the data for the tone of campaign advertisements indicated that ads with a positive tone—categorized as 1—yielded higher voter turnout for the candidate that came out with that ad specifically. Figure 5 demonstrates the percentage of voter turnout for the election in each of the five districts as well as the tone of campaign advertisements. In Figure 5, the graph suggests that the positive ads had a higher percentage of voter turnout for both the Republican and Democrat candidates. The Democrat candidates with the positive tone ads had a higher voter turnout for which ranged from about 14% to 18.5%. The Republican candidates with the positive-toned ads had a lower voter turnout which began at about 10% and ranged to slightly over 18%. The data presented in Figure 5 confirms my hypothesis that ads promoting a negative tone and misinformation would lead to a decline in voter turnout. Other factors may play a role in voter decline such as party affiliation or demographics, but the tone of campaign ads should be observed in order to fill in some of the gaps in literature about its role in voter turnout.

It is also important to note that the data doesn't show a difference between the Republican or Democrat candidates engaging in negative advertising. As seen in Figure 5, two Republican candidates and two Democrat candidates participated in negative-toned ads. This suggests that party affiliation doesn't play a role in a candidate's likelihood of attacking their opponent through an ad.

Thirdly, in the competitive districts observed, Republican candidates won more seats in Congress than the Democrat candidates. Figure 6 represents the winning congressional candidates along with the tone of their campaign advertisements and the number of individuals who voted for each one of them. The Republicans from Districts 27, 3, and 22 won their seats

while the Democrats from Districts 13 and 9 won those seats in Congress. In Figure 6, we should note that three of the winning candidates used positive advertisements when campaigning and had much higher voter turnout compared to those who won their district even with a negative ad. The Republican candidate with a positive ad from District 3 had the highest number of votes being 181, 438 while the Republican candidate that used a negative ad from District 22 only had 52, 994. This drastic difference in votes suggests that while candidates who use negative ads can still win the election, it puts them at a higher risk of having a lower voter turnout and thus not having a secure grip at the polls.

While not demonstrated in any graphs because of their qualitative form, it is still important to mention the findings of the confounding variables—advertisements paid by political action committees and the form of media in which the ads were displayed. After watching advertisements for all the candidates in the elections for the observed districts, I noticed that still image ads were all positive and tended to display a similar message saying “[n] candidate for Congress” (David Valadao for Congress). Because there was no variation in the still images, I moved on to watching video advertisements on YouTube and that is where I saw the most diversity in tone and content. The figures that show the advertisements are screenshots of the video and not just still images produced by the candidates themselves. In particular, the advertisements that were paid by special interest groups were the ones that used more negative tones and had more creativity in painting the opposing candidate in a negative light. In Figure 2, for example, a PAC supporting John Duarte claims that Adam Gray took part in “lavish trips, special interest gifts, and played the system”(KCRA 3). As KCRA 3 explained, however, the lavish trips that the PAC was mentioning were fictional and subjective as everyone has a different opinion on what is considered lavish(KCRA 3). The advertisements that were paid by

the candidate's campaign, on the other hand, reflected a different story. In Figure 1, which has been coded as an absolutely positive advertisement, we can see that Dr. Kermit only discusses his agenda of what he plans to do if chosen for representative. This suggests that political candidates are more reluctant to partake in negative attacking ads when they have publicly displayed that they paid and approved for them. As mentioned before, PACs are still subject to the same rules in terms of candidates having to publicly approve of the ads, but there seem to be loopholes that would confuse voters into believing that the candidate's campaign team made the ad or approved of it.

Implications

Overall, this research brings up the question of potentially regulating free speech in campaign advertisements in order to mitigate the confusion that happens for voters during election season. The Federal Communications Commission currently does not ensure the accuracy of statements made in political ads nor do they review or pre-approve the content before it is broadcasted(FCC). Some might argue that the government shouldn't have a role in fact-checking the statements made in political ads because it is an intrusion on an individual's free speech right, however, history demonstrates the consequences of this inaction. During the 2020 presidential election, candidate Donald Trump claimed that the results of the election were rigged and that President-elect Biden was not the winner (PBS NewsHour). Trump began his "Stop the Steal" campaign slogan that he blasted all over advertisements and social media, thus creating a distrust in the government (PBS NewsHour). The Trump fanbase truly believed that the election had been stolen from them—even though no evidence reflected this belief—so they stormed the capitol on January 6th and caused an insurrection (American Oversight). This event truly embodies the disaster that can come about when misinformation is not promptly clarified

and spread around to the point of no return. If regulation legislation for negative and false information is not implemented, then we should continue to expect to see the tragedies of January 6th. As a country, we should work towards promoting information that is backed up by evidence especially during election seasons as it can totally impact a voter's decision at the polls.

Conclusion

In this research analysis, I observed the relationship between the tone of campaign advertising and overall voter turnout in California's most competitive congressional districts in the 2022 election. I hypothesized that as the tone of campaign advertisements became more negative and promoted false information, the more likely it was for voter turnout to decline. The findings in this study overall demonstrated that when political candidates use positive campaign advertisements, voter turnout increases for the candidate who made the ad. In addition, the qualitative data showed that when political action committees paid for the advertisements, the ads tended to have a negative attacking tone toward the opposing candidate.

Taking into consideration these findings, further research should be conducted in presidential elections to understand at a larger scale how advertisements and other factors play a role in a voter's decision to vote for a particular candidate. The 2020 presidential election, for example, resulted in the highest voter turnout in the 21st century which just goes to show how much media attention follows these high-profile elections (Fabina). Presidential elections are known for having the largest campaign budgets out of all the elections in the United States, therefore, it would be interesting to see if money plays a role in the effectiveness of ads and social outreach. To quantify some of the numbers of campaign budgets during presidential elections, data showed that Senator John Kerry and President George Bush spent a total of \$522 million on their 2004 presidential campaign, "with over \$365 million of this amount spent on

negative advertising” (Gandhi et al.). If researchers can understand the factors that are needed and to what capacity, then political candidates would be able to use this information to win elections in a way that is fair and democratic. As citizens of the US, we have the right to free and fair elections, but if campaign advertisements are constantly pushing out false information that has serious consequences on our elections, then we need to advocate for a change in the system.

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Appendix

Figure 1:



Figure 1. Example of an ad that has been coded as 1

Figure 2:

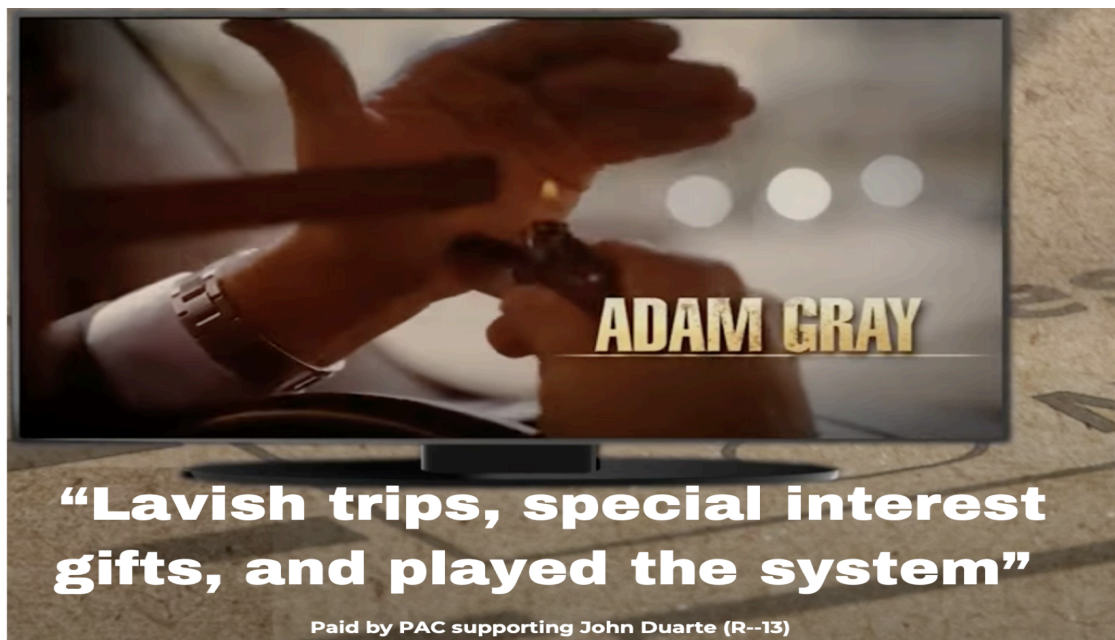


Figure 3. Example of an ad that has been coded as -1

Figure 3:

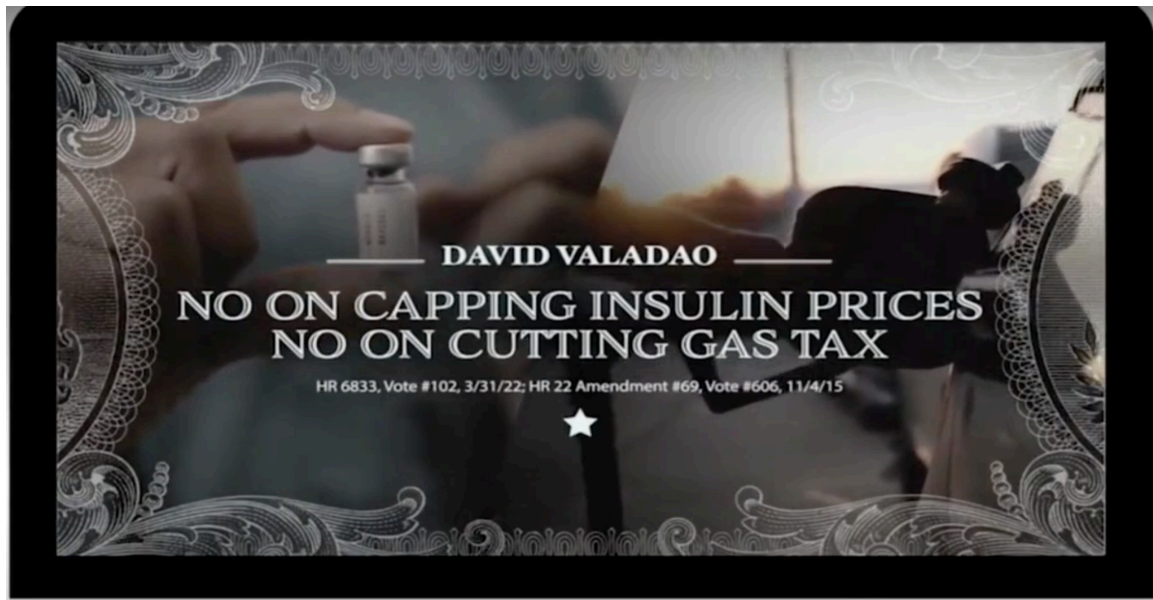


Figure 2. Example of an ad that has been coded as -.05

Figure 4:

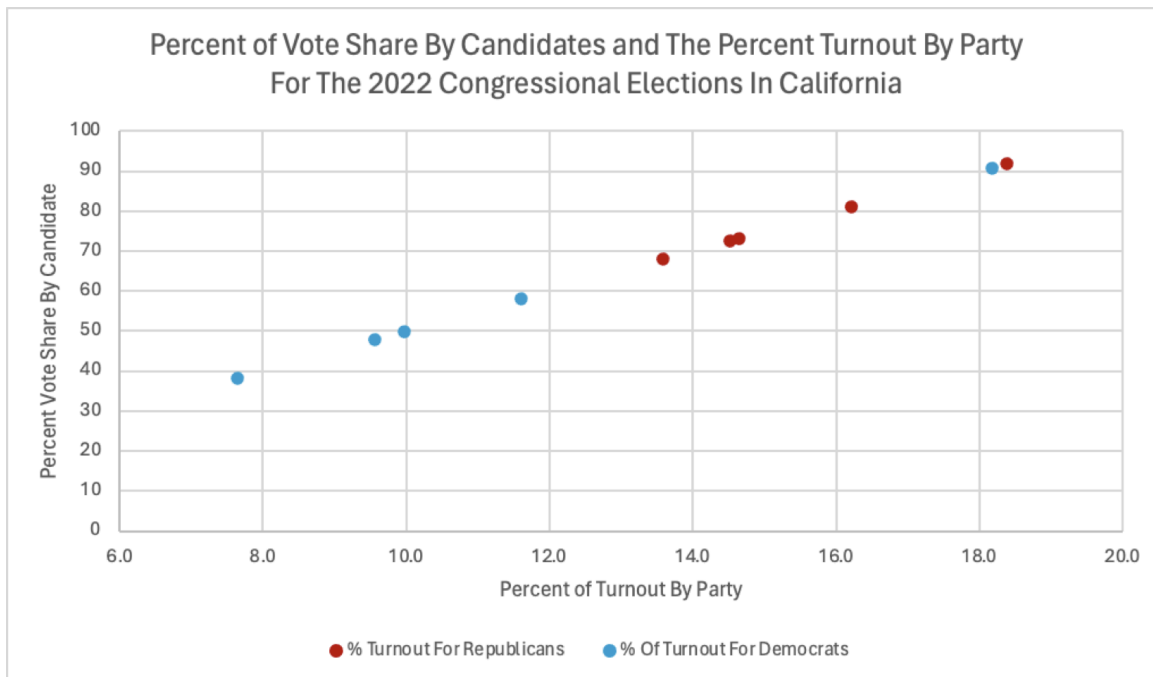


Figure 4. Graph demonstrating vote share by voter turnout by party in 2022 elections

Figure 5:

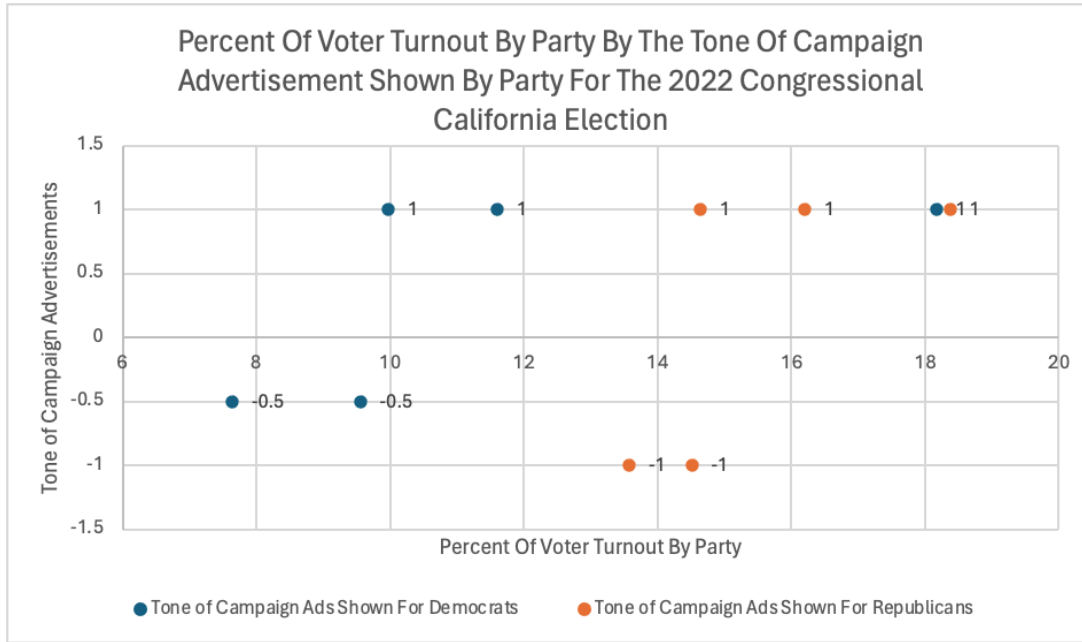


Figure 5. Graph demonstrating voter turnout by political party and tone of ads by political party

Figure 6:

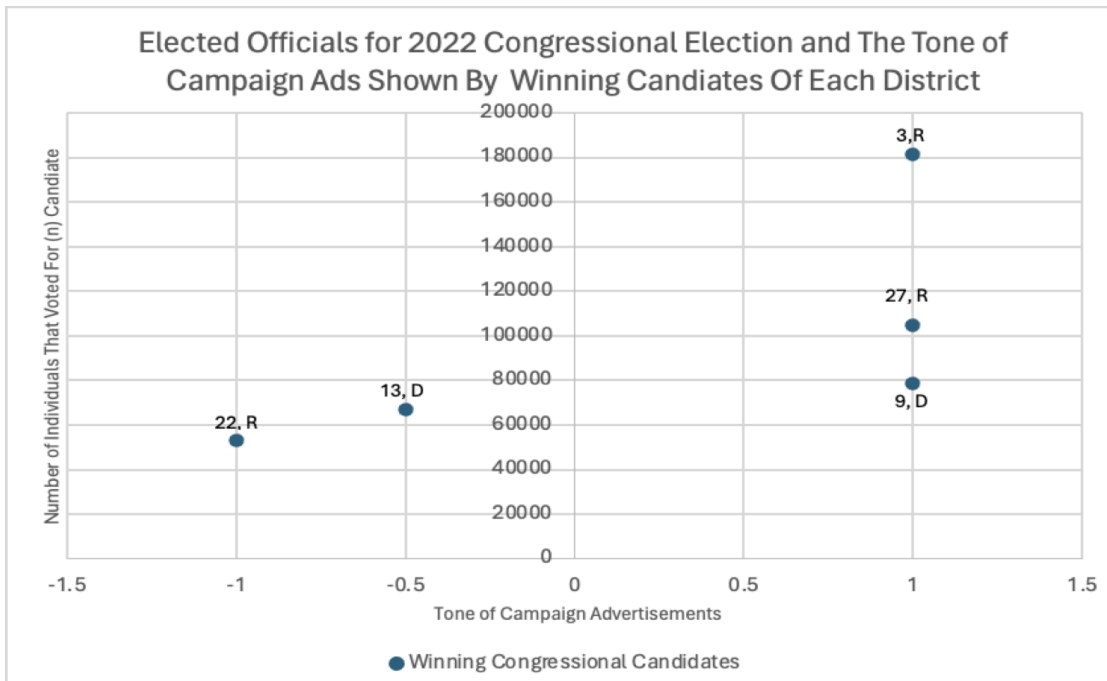


Figure 6. Graph demonstrating winning candidates and the tone of their ads