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# **Ads and Editorials: How Pretreatment Reduces the Persuasiveness of Interest Group Advertisements**

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## **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

Advertising studies commonly examine the effects of one-sided treatments. However, political communication campaigns are competitive environments where voters are likely to hear more than one perspective. Because of this dynamic, the persuasive effects of single-sided ads may be less likely to hold in a competitive environment. When respondents are exposed to arguments from both sides of a ballot proposition issue, can the disclosure of a credible group help an advertisement overcome prior opinions? I address this question using a randomized experiment that includes ballot proposition campaign ads. In the experiments, I manipulate the pretreatment environment by exposing some respondents to a newspaper editorial in order to provide them with prior opinions that might cause them to resist subsequent advertisements. I also vary the presence or absence of campaign finance disclosure within the advertisements. In all cases, the presence of a credible editorial is associated with a change in support for the initiative. However, the use of a credible campaign finance disclosure has a far less consistent effect. While campaign finance disclosures from credible groups can help counteract prior beliefs that citizens may hold, I find that the magnitude of these changes is somewhat small.

## **Introduction**

At just over 50 years old, political advertising disclosures are an institution we are still learning about. Since the passage of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, which required that advertisements include text disclosures, researchers have evaluated the effects of small font campaign finance disclosures. This research area dates to the mid-1980's (Garramone, 1984), although research on this topic was largely dormant until the passage of the 2002 Bi-partisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA). Since then, the topic has drawn considerable attention as the Act has been contested in court and advertising strategies have adapted in response to the text disclosure provisions. Specifically, BCRA increased the transparency surrounding federal candidate ads. As a result, experimental studies on disclosure have gained popularity (Brooks and Murov, 2012; Dowling and Wichowsky, 2013).

The growth of this research agenda represents a new frontier in the study of interest group participation in American politics. Questions about the function and effectiveness of campaign

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finance reform efforts are especially relevant to researchers, reformers, and voters. And rightly so, as the decade following BCRA passage has been ominously described as one governed by “dark money” (Fowler, Franz, and Ridout, 2016). However, one concern is that the attitudes formed during issue advertising studies are quite malleable because respondents have, at best, weak prior attitudes about the policy issue at hand. This may suggest that individuals are not processing the treatment stimuli in a manner that is externally valid. The same indictment applies to experimental treatments using candidate advertisements, as they may be just as susceptible to weakly held opinions (especially when they involve fictional or relatively unknown candidates). This likely leads to malleability and effect sizes that would not be observed in a natural environment (Barabas and Jerit, 2010). By using pretreatment communications to provoke deeper consideration, researchers can increase the external validity of lab experiments (which tend to measure short-term effects) and compare the effects of advertisements when people have strong versus weak prior opinions (Druckman and Leeper, 2012).

### **Ballot Initiative Campaign Effects**

In early studies, scholars found that money exerts an asymmetric effect on voting preferences giving the “no” side a marked advantage over “yes” side spending (Lowenstein, 1982; Magleby, 1984). Subsequent research concluded that individual voters favored the status quo position and cast defensive “no” votes when they are confused or uncertain (Bowler and Donovan, 1998). Taken together these results suggest a cautious electorate unmoved by special interest driven policy change. However, this common wisdom was later challenged by results showing that spending for either side of an initiative was linked to increased aggregate voter support (de Figueiredo, Ji, and Kousser, 2011; Stratmann, 2006) and that there is a messaging advantage for the “no” side that is likely due to frame receptivity (Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz, 2019). The Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz team leverage an experiment to disentangle this contradiction of careful voters who follow the advice of monied interests. In doing so, they found no support for the defensive “no” theory, instead arguing that “no” votes tend to come from confident and sophisticated voters. By varying the messaging cues, they found that oppose cues were simply more effective than support cues in the proposition context.

### **Credibility, Competition and Advertisements**

This study rests upon three dimensions: advertising, information competition, and source credibility. The following section unpacks each dimension of the project by highlighting the core findings that inform this research. First, the concept of source credibility is critical to understanding respondents’ reactions to a claim, be it a commercial product advertisement, health advice, or political advice. The degree to which individuals accept an argument depends upon the availability of and cue given by the argument’s speaker. As a concept, source credibility is composed of two dimensions: knowledge and trust (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). If the individual receiving the message does not perceive that the cue-giver is knowledgeable, enlightenment and persuasion are less likely to occur. Likewise, the message receiver should not agree with all speakers perceived as knowledgeable, just those who are perceived as sharing the same interests as the individual hearing their appeal. When a conflict arises between the speaker and individual, the speaker can still be persuasive if an external force, such as a threat of verification or a penalty for lying, forces the speaker to divulge what they know. These external forces can substitute for common interests (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998).

The initiative context provides an important venue for testing source credibility theory. Ballot initiatives represent a dichotomous policy choice with some uncertainty as to the anticipated outcome. Ballot propositions are commonly found on state and local election ballots in the form of legislative referenda, infrastructure bonds, and voter turnout generating “crypto-initiatives” (Kousser and McCubbins, 2005). Extending the source credibility logic to initiatives, it is easy to see how endorsements in political advertisements and elsewhere can lead to voter competence or deception (Lesenyie, 2020). As in Lupia and McCubbins’s (1998) theory, whether voters are enlightened (deceived) depends on whether or not the endorser shares the voter’s interests.

Framing is a useful theory for understanding competing arguments about a particular policy proposal. Schattschneider (1960) emphasized that the nature of political conflict, in particular the structure of issue cleavage, is about who it affects and how it is framed. Drawing from Schattschneider, we should pay particular attention to strategic combinations of arguments and campaign names in the ballot initiative context. This logic has been applied in a number of framing studies to demonstrate that experimentally varying the speaker or source of a claim results in the argument being more (or less) persuasive (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Druckman, 2001). Some aspects that have been examined include frame decay, asymmetrical frame competition, as well as motivated reasoning and respondent political sophistication. For instance, the “rally experiment” varies the frame of a political rally event as either an exercise in liberties or as a potentially violent conflagration (Druckman, 2001). The dependent variable is whether (or not) the rally should be held in light of each consideration. Details such as size, timing, and location are not open for amendment. In many ways this dichotomous choice is made realistic in the ballot proposition context. Voters do not choose the details such as the location of the proposal on a unidimensional scale nor do voters select when the measure appears on the ballot. The campaigner makes both of these choices (Lupia and Gerber 1995, 1999).

However, Sniderman and Theriault (2004) and Chong and Druckman (2007) criticize the disproportionate number of one-sided framing studies. While these one-sided studies advance our understanding of the persuasive effects of arguments and source credibility, they tell us considerably less about what should occur when we hear from multiple sources. The same can be said for advertising studies on persuasion. Specifically, while advertising studies have brought important empirical extensions to the question of who can frame a political attack advertisement, they typically study only one advertisement in isolation. These studies use experiments to examine campaign finance disclosure within TV political advertisements (Lesenyie, 2020; Groenendyke and Valentino, 2002; Weber, Dunaway, and Johnson, 2012; Ridout et al., 2014; Brooks and Murov, 2012; Dowling and Wichowsky, 2013, 2015). These studies all have experimentally varied the “Paid for by” sponsor within candidate and issue advertisements. Three regularities emerge from these studies that experimentally vary sponsorship cues in single-sided treatments. First, attack ads are generally perceived less favorably when sponsored by the candidate who stands to benefit from the attack (Groenendyke and Valentino, 2002; Weber et al., 2012). Second, candidates may receive a “backlash effect” in which their evaluations suffer along with perceptions of the target of their attack (Brooks and Murov, 2012; Dowling and Wichowsky, 2015). The third regularity is that ads are more persuasive when sponsored by unknown political action committees than when sponsored by candidates. Furthermore, unknown (sometimes fictitious) interest groups are as persuasive as known, credible interest groups (Lesenyie, 2020; Weber et al., 2012). In a classic example, Weber et al. (2012) found that an endorsement by the fictitious group *Citizens for a Safer America* was as persuasive as *National Rifle Association* for individuals with positive priors toward the NRA.

However, these experimental studies suffer from two important drawbacks. First, we have numerous results where participants see just one advertisement and no other campaign stimuli, such as a newspaper, poll, or competing argument.<sup>2</sup> Adding these elements is more likely to increase external validity by mimicking the natural campaign environment (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Pfau, Park, Holbert, and Cho, 2001). Second, in many existing studies participants have, at best, weak prior beliefs about the candidates or policy issues featured in the advertisement. This is because previous studies tend to use advertisements that feature fictitious candidates, policy debates, and/or interest group sponsors. These conditions make it more likely that participants will respond to the experimental treatments because they have no other information on which to base their opinions. In the real world, however, voters are exposed to more familiar candidates and policy issues in campaign advertisements, and their prior beliefs about these candidates and issues may limit their responsiveness to the advertisements.

The real world is likely to feature a competitive information environment. In contested races with considerable ad buys, voters are likely to be exposed to dozens of advertisements over the course of the campaign. They will likely encounter arguments made by credible cue givers, such as those made by broadcast and print media outlets. To understand the theoretical expectations of this environment, we look to Chong and Druckman (2007) and Bullock (2011). An individual learns about an issue when they update their beliefs following exposure to information (Bullock, 2011). How individuals update their beliefs is a function of the appeal being made and the credibility of the source. If the source is not credible, individuals will exhibit a backlash or resistance to the arguments proffered (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Chong and Druckman, 2007).

Prior research points to the persuasiveness of campaign finance disclosures. On one level campaign names, nonthreatening and generic, work so well because they are populist sounding (Groenendyk and Valentino, 2005). On another level, the more specific major donor disclosure regulations are persuasive or create a backlash (Dowling and Wichowsky, 2013; Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2021). In reality, disclosures help voters but the effect sizes are likely smaller in a campaign environment. What is the effect size of a disclosure cue when individuals have begun to form an opinion?

## Hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to examine whether a campaign finance disclosure from a credible source can change attitudes when offered in competition with a standard political editorial. The presence of campaign finance disclosure in a typically short 30-second advertisement represents a small treatment window of just 5-seconds. This assumes that conditions are favorable for the disclosure such as respondent attention, disclosure visibility, and the presence of recognizable donors (Dowling and Wichowsky, 2013). These factors represent the necessary conditions for this information to be of any use to voters. In the lab, researchers commonly satisfy at least two, if not all three, conditions. This increases the likelihood of observing significant effects, but does not guarantee them.

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<sup>2</sup> A limited number of studies use competing advertisements that actually appeared on television as part of a political campaign (Pfau et. al 2001, Iyengar and Valentino 2000). Both of these studies increase the experimental realism to a high degree by placing the real ads into commercial breaks within a program. In one study, participants see an hour of television programming with regularly scheduled commercial breaks and the typical number of ads per hour, (26 commercials/hour). While their work more effectively simulates real-world conditions, it does not isolate an individual campaign. Overall, research designs where respondents see multiple ads, or ads and other media stimuli are rare.

This design provides a test of three assumptions. The first is that opinions on these issues are generally weak. Therefore, an ad alone should move opinion. Drawing on the logic of source credibility, I expect that an ad displaying a credible endorser in the campaign finance disclosure should be no less persuasive than an ad without disclosure (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). These conditions are shown in Table 1 (cells 1 & 3). They represent the typical advertising experiment where the pretreatment environment is ignored. The purpose of this test is to isolate and compare these two versions of the ad (with and without disclosure) to establish that the disclosure does not reduce the ad's persuasiveness (and may actually increase it, depending on respondents' initial level of support or opposition). If confirmed, then any decrease in support for the ad's argument in the editorial pretreatment conditions is attributed to the pretreatment. If this assumption fails, this treatment is creating a backlash, meaning the endorser cue is not credible.

**H<sub>1</sub>** Respondents will follow an endorser's advice when they perceive the endorser to be both knowledgeable and trustworthy.

Second, the design assumes that a pretreatment editorial will induce strong opinions about the issue. The purpose of the second test is to demonstrate that the pretreatment was successful, meaning that respondents are updating their opinions upon reading the editorial. This updated attitude should persist and therefore make individuals more resistant to the ad. This expectation follows from the logic of a communication pretreatment. According to Druckman and Leeper (2013), if the pretreatment is of similar strength as a treatment we should expect it to shape opinions before the treatment, and that the effect should persist until the treatment is administered. If confirmed, there will be a decrease in the advertisement's persuasiveness when the pretreatment editorial is present.

**H<sub>2</sub>** After exposure to a pretreatment editorial, respondents will update their opinions on these issues. These updated opinions will persist and reduce the persuasiveness of subsequent advertisements.

This design tests a third assumption, that campaign finance disclosure of credible groups can change opinions in spite of individuals' prior opinions. The leverage for this question is provided by comparing the persuasiveness of advertisements with and without disclosure when a pretreatment editorial is provided (conditions 3 and 4 in Table 1). If there is a difference, the ad with the disclosure of a credible group will be more persuasive than the ad without disclosure and, hence, will be more effective at overcoming the influence of the pretreatment editorial. This test is the motivation for this study.

**H<sub>3</sub>** A credible endorser should draw support away from the pretreatment argument position.

## Method

**Table 1. 2x2 Experimental Design**

	Version of Advertisement (Treatment)	
	No Disclosure	Disclosure
No Pretreatment	(1)	(2)
Editorial	(3)	(4)

*Note:* Experiment uses 2 x 2 factorial design. Each respondent watched an advertisement in favor (opposition) to a proposition. In the “Disclosure” condition, the ad contains a small font text disclosure that includes a “Paid for by” (campaign name) and “Major funding by” (known interest group) style disclaimer. The editorial presents an argument in opposition to the advertisement’s position. The editorial is mocked up to appear written by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Sacramento Bee*, and *Huffington Post* in the respective case studies.

### *Sample*

To examine the effect of pretreatments, I conducted an experiment using undergraduates at a large western public university. Study participants were compensated with extra credit in one of their undergraduate courses. A total of 327 individuals participated in the study. The party affiliation is 217 Democrats, 87 Independents, and 23 Republicans. The ideological composition is 237 liberals, 54 moderates, and 33 conservatives. The sample is more educated and politically sophisticated than the average American, 262 (71%) were able to answer 5 of 6 sophistication questions and 38% of them answered all 6 correctly. Ages range 18-35, with 91% of the sample in the 18-23 range with a mean of 20.4. These sample characteristics were anticipated (from previous trials) and informed the design of the study.

### *Design*

The editorial is designed to generate opinions prior to viewing the ad. This design provides more realistic examination of campaign finance disclosure messages and enables an assessment of whether disclosure from credible groups can increase the persuasiveness of ads in the face of prior opinions, because individuals with prior opinions should be more resistant to the advertisement’s claims.

### *Issues*

To select issues for inclusion in the experiments, a comprehensive list of CA initiatives from the previous ten years was compiled. Anticipating an ideologically liberal convenience sample, initiatives where persuasion could potentially occur were selected as treatment stimuli.<sup>3</sup> Based on

<sup>3</sup> Information was gathered on all ballot propositions in California from 2006-2014 (N=76). In the information gathering, I searched for campaign information as well archived campaign websites. Of the universe of California ballot propositions, 12 propositions had at least one Yes and one No ad. 16 feature just one Yes (or No) ad. And 48 had no advertisement that could be located in the online search. These results are summarized in the supplemental appendices. Proposition 16 failed a statewide vote 47% Yes to 53% No, Proposition 26 passed 53-47%, and Proposition 37 failed 49-51%.

this analysis, three initiatives were chosen for inclusion in this study (amending the vote threshold for tax increases, municipal owned utilities, and labeling genetically modified foods). In Table 2 the first column states the issue, the second column shows the advertisement argument and disclosure. The third column expresses the news source used as pretreatment stimuli. Using real-world issues and campaigns increases the external validity of the study by tapping into the strategy of the campaign, including the campaign name and the content of advertisement.

*Pretest*

In the first part of the study, two survey pretests were administered on separate respondent samples. This was done to generate measures of source credibility for the interest group advertising donors and the news sources associated with the editorial pretreatment. The interest group pre-test (N=160) and news source pre-test (N=115) ask study participants to rate the trustworthiness, expert knowledge, political ideology, and familiarity for the various actors. The second part of the study leverages a randomized experiment described in the section following the pretest results.

**Table 2. Issues, Ads, and Editorials**

Issue	Ad	Editorial
Municipal Electricity Voting Rule	Vote No Sierra Club	Vote Yes Sacramento Bee
Supermajority Vote for Fee Increases	Vote No Nature Conservancy	Vote Yes San Francisco Chronicle
Labeling GMO's	Vote Yes Whole Foods	Vote No Huffington Post

The interest group pre-test survey (N=160) asked about the campaign names and major donors backing these initiatives. The respondents were asked: (1) how familiar the groups were, (2) to assess the group's issue expertise, (3) whether the groups were trustworthy, (4) to place the groups on an ideological scale, and (5) whether the groups shared the same interests as respondents. This paper reports data on the groups' expertise and trustworthy ratings. Both dimensions are key components of source credibility (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). The survey instrument for each interest group/campaign showed roughly five interest group names, the order of which was randomized to reduce order effects. This allowed respondents to rate unknown groups alongside familiar groups. Respondents were asked to rate each group's knowledge within an issue domain. For instance, interest groups associated with the Prop 37 Genetically Modified Organisms campaign were evaluated on the following question, "How would you rate the expertise of the following groups with respect to genetically modified food/organisms/GMO's?" Answers ranged on a 5-point scale from "1" Very low expertise to "5" Very high expertise. A "don't know" response option was included in the response set. The second pre-test question evaluated the trustworthiness of each interest group. The question was, "How trustworthy is (Group name)?" Possible responses followed a 7-point scale from "1" Very untrustworthy to "7" Very trustworthy, the midpoint "4" was marked "Neither trustworthy or untrustworthy." A "don't know" response



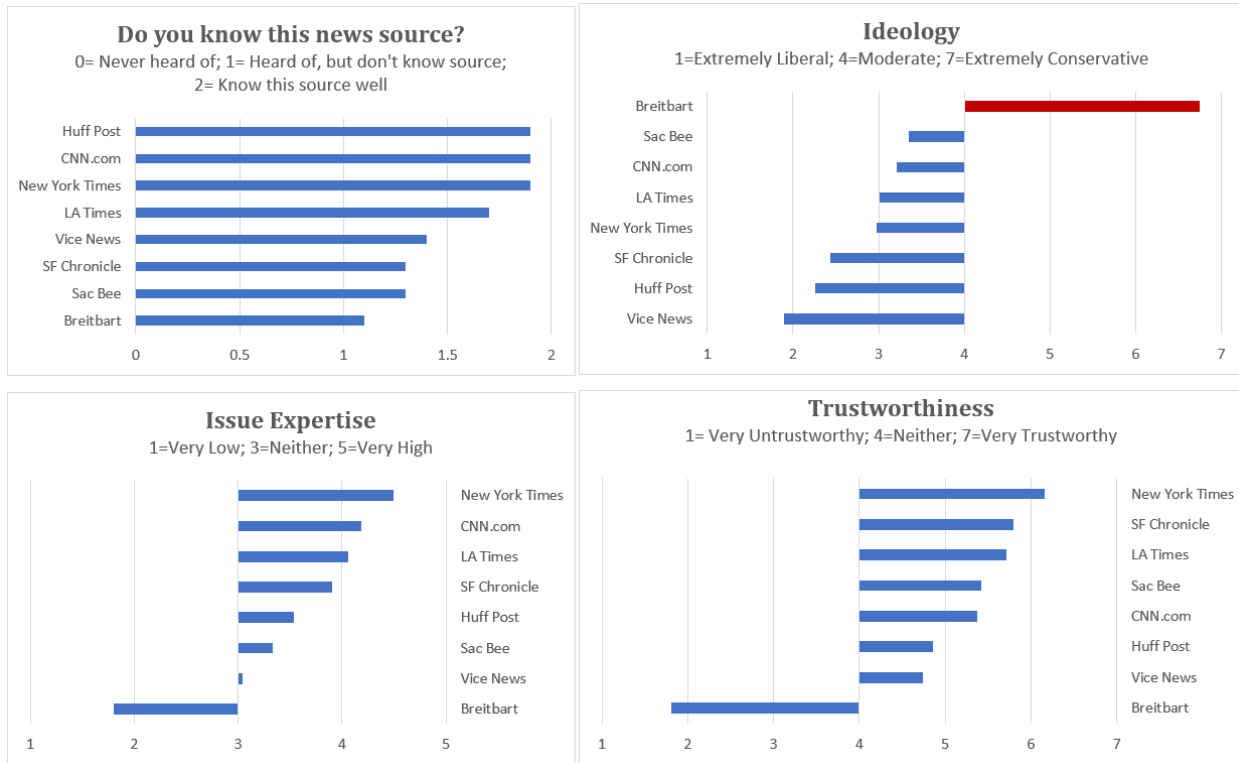
was available for this question as well. In both analyses, the don't know responses were excluded rather than placed at the midpoint.

A similar procedure was undertaken to obtain attitudes toward various news sources that covered these initiative campaigns. The pre-test (N=115) asked respondents to rate the familiarity, knowledge, and trustworthiness of ten news sources. Unlike the interest group pretest above, the news sources were evaluated generally and not with respect to any political issue. This was done to provide flexibility later in the design. When evaluating the news sources, respondents were asked, "How would you rate the expertise of the following news sources with respect to political news coverage?" and "How would you rate the trustworthiness of the following news sources?" Both questions use identical response sets as the interest group pretest. After identifying interest groups, campaigns, and news sources for this design, the study systematically varied (1) the presence or absence of the disclosure of a credible group within an advertisement, as well as (2) whether respondents read an editorial from a credible news source before viewing the advertisement. This allows for an isolated examination of whether individuals respond to advertisements and disclosures differently after they have formed a strong opinion. The news source pretest established perceptions of 10 news media sources. The results of the pre-test show that *The Huffington Post*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Sacramento Bee* are perceived as familiar, trustworthy, knowledgeable, and liberal sources (since the sample is overwhelmingly liberal). The most variation between the three sources is in the areas of trust and ideology.<sup>4</sup> The takeaway in Figure 1 is that these news outlets exhibit similar values of source credibility and familiarity. The selection of source preceded the selection of the editorial content.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Sacramento Bee* is 3.3 on a 7pt ideology scale, *Huffington Post* is 2.3 on the same scale. *The Huffington Post* is less trustworthy than the other sources, rating 4.8 of 7, whereas the *San Francisco Chronicle* scored 5.8 and *Sacramento Bee* at 5.4.

**Figure 1 Pre-Test Results: Media Credibility**



Liberal respondents:  $N= 115$

This choice was made to strengthen the linkage to source credibility theory, while conceding the authenticity of the original newspapers. Researchers have stylized aspects of decision-making studies, for instance Lau and Redlawsk (1997) used an information wall technique, which emulated voter's search for information, even as such a thing does not literally exist outside the lab. Boudreau (2009) used mathematics as the stimuli of a lab study about expert advice, making a generalization about when we seek the advice of experts (political or otherwise). Following that tradition, I sought news sources that were recognizable and credible for a regionally specific respondent sample. I then selected editorials that made a thoughtful non-partisan argument. The opinion pieces are signed by the editorial board in two cases (*The Huffington Post* and *San Francisco Chronicle*) and Kevin Fagan (*The Sacramento Bee*). Because the election had occurred years earlier, I was not concerned with the limited deception related to switching newspapers.<sup>5</sup> This study was approved by the University of California, Davis Institutional Review Board.

<sup>5</sup> Given the relative familiarity and trust of the *Sacramento Bee*, I suspect the sources that were not used, *Merced Sun Star* and *Orange County Register*, would have been rated as having less familiarity and source credibility than the *Sacramento Bee* paper.

## Experimental Manipulations

Three experiments were conducted using ballot proposition issues that appeared in California: taxes, municipal owned utilities, and labeling genetically modified food.<sup>6</sup> The design is a 2 x 2 factorial. The first factor (shown in Table 1) is the presence or absence of a campaign finance disclosure that appears at the end of the advertisement. The disclosure reads “Paid for by (campaign name) with Major funding from (name of interest group)”.<sup>7</sup> The second factor in this design is the presence or absence of a pretreatment editorial designed to provide respondents with prior beliefs about the policy issue that will be featured in the advertisement that they later view. When present, the editorial always opposes the argument that will be presented in the advertisement. It is designed to influence respondents’ prior beliefs in a way that might limit the influence of the subsequent advertisement. There are two questions of interest (1) whether the advertisement will influence respondents’ opinions even in the face of their competing prior beliefs and (2) whether the ad will be more likely to do so when a credible group sponsorship is present.

The first two experimental conditions resemble a typical advertising experiment where the pretreatment environment is ignored. These conditions simply manipulate whether or not a disclosure appears at the end of the advertisements.<sup>8</sup> In the two editorial conditions, the pretreatment environment is also manipulated to encourage respondents to form strong opinions about the issue at hand (in a way that should increase resistance to the subsequent advertisement). Thus, in editorial conditions, respondents read an editorial that disagrees with the advertisement that they will subsequently view. In one editorial condition, the subsequent advertisement does not include a disclosure, while in the other editorial condition the advertisement includes a disclosure from a credible group.

The editorial pre-treatments were drawn from real editorials from major California newspapers. They were slightly stylized for the experiment, but they were originally printed in *The Merced Sun Star*, *The Orange County Register*, and *The Sacramento Bee*. The editorials were selected for their language and their pro/con orientation so that they opposed the ads. Our prior studies on these issues suggest that respondents are likely to accept the arguments made in the advertisements. Thus, the editorials were selected to provide a good reason *not* to accept the arguments in the advertisements. Specifically, the interest groups that are disclosed in the advertisements are perceived as credible speakers and endorse a liberal position on each issue. Therefore, the editorials present an ideologically moderate to conservative view of these issues under the auspices of a credible newspaper.

It is important to note that although the editorials were actually drawn from *The Merced Sun Star*, *The Orange County Register*, and *The Sacramento Bee*, in the treatments they were presented as

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<sup>6</sup> Rather than select particular issues that are common to political debates (Chong and Druckman 2007), I selected the cases from a population of ballot proposition campaigns in 2010-2012. It seemed less likely that respondents would change their opinion on a high salience issue after viewing an advertisement, so I sought political issues with lower salience. I argue that these ads concern political intricacies that voters know little about. Therefore, these are cases where we would expect people to search out credible information sources to guide their decisions. Following a pre-test of interest group names for five issues, I chose these three issues for these experiments in part because they featured multiple ads from each campaign and potentially recognizable interest groups for the disclosed speaker conditions. In the following sections, I will describe the treatment stimuli and other details of the experimental design.

<sup>7</sup> The campaign names and interest groups can be found in Table 2. Their pretest evaluations are in Figures 1-3.

<sup>8</sup> The advertisements were all edited to have a specific disclosure (or none at all) by the author using FinalCut Pro X software. This required using a mask to cover existing disclosures and then inserting new, readable, disclosure language. The newspaper editorials were mocked up using Microsoft Word.

being from *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Huffington Post*, and *The Sacramento Bee*. These changes were made so that the news sources would be recognizable to a locally based convenience sample. *The Huffington Post* was selected as representative of online news sources that a liberal convenience sample might trust. The following section provides a context of the issues and the pre-test results.

## **The Ballot Propositions, Arguments, and Sources**

### *Taxes Issue*

Proposition 26 appeared on California's statewide ballot in 2010 and falls into the perennial political discussion about taxation. Tax rates are a highly contested political issue relevant to all jurisdictions and levels of government. The pretreatment editorial for this issue argued that the state legislature is enacting new taxes under the guise of "service fee" legislation and that a "yes" vote on Prop 26 would correct this problem by requiring the same vote threshold (a 2/3's supermajority of the legislature) for levying new taxes or fees.<sup>9</sup> The editorial emphasized the number of taxes already levied (property, income, sales, gasoline, electricity, cigarettes, beer, and wine) and that these taxes simply prop up bloated government payrolls. The advertisement advocated a no vote and claimed that Prop 26 is backed by "big oil" and would allow corporate polluters to pass the costs of oil spill clean-up and prevention to California taxpayers.

The disclosure treatment for this ad read "Paid for by Californians for Clean Air & Clean Energy Jobs with Major funding by Nature Conservancy." The pre-test found that Nature Conservancy and Californians for Clean Air & Clean Energy Jobs were rated knowledgeable (3.2 of 5) and trustworthy (5.3 of 7). Whereas *The San Francisco Chronicle*, scores 3.9 on the knowledge scale and at 5.8 is rated a very trustworthy source. In short, the newspaper in which the editorial appears for this issue also has a high credibility rating.

### *Genetically Modified Organisms*

Proposition 37 (2012) proposed that genetically modified foods be labeled for consumers. The initiative would have required California's Department of Public Health regulate labeling and would allow individuals to sue manufacturers for incorrect product labeling. The initiative had support from organic food producers and Whole Foods, a high-end grocery chain. The "Yes on 37" ad made three claims: 1) that adding GMO labeling "would not cost a dime," 2) that there are no loopholes in the proposal because it follows the same requirements as other food ingredient labels, and 3) that a majority of family farmers supported the initiative. The "No on 37" editorial argued that the proposal is costly, an overreach, is inconsistent, and creates opportunities for frivolous lawsuits against food manufacturers. For example, in order to highlight Prop 37's inconsistencies, the editorial claimed that restaurant food, meats, and alcohol are exempt from GMO labeling while dog food is not. The editorial suggested new costs to food producers and consumers, as well as new expenses to cover government implementation.

The pretest assessing speaker credibility found that the speakers of the advertisement, Californians for Truth in Labeling and Whole Foods, were rated similarly with respect to trustworthiness (4.6 and 4.7 respectively). With respect to expertise, Californians for Truth in Labeling and Whole

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<sup>9</sup> From the editorial – "Generally, **fees** are paid to cover the cost of a service received by the payer, contingent on receiving a benefit. **Taxes** are paid for any service that generally benefits the public, and can be any among regardless of whether the payer receives a benefit.

Foods scored 3.9 and 3.8. *The Huffington Post* was used as the source of the editorial, and the news website rated 4.9 out of 7 on the trustworthiness scale. *The Huffington Post* rated 3.5 on the 5-pt knowledge scale. In sum, the disclosed interest groups and the editorial source are knowledgeable and trustworthy.

### *Municipal Owned Electricity Generation*

Proposition 16 (2010) proposed raising the vote threshold, from a simple majority to two-thirds, in order for citizens to form publicly owned electricity plants. This issue represented an ongoing conflict between California's largest electricity provider Pacific Gas & Electric Co. (PG&E) and municipal governments who sought to procure electricity from other providers. As such, Prop 16 was solely funded by PG&E, while the opposition was made up of the few local governments who wanted to opt out of PG&E service. The "No" side had limited campaign resources, chiefly because it was composed of a disparate group of local governments, the group "Stop the PG&E Powergrab" was only able to afford internet advertising. The most recognizable donor to the No on 16 campaign was Sierra Club. The No 16 ad uses roughly a dozen citizens, each framed in an isolated testimonial style headshot.<sup>10</sup> Each testimonial statement emphasizes that increasing from a majority to supermajority vote makes it harder for voters to have a choice. The ad also claims that the Yes side is being dishonest by characterizing the initiative as providing the "right to choose," since it is a right that voters already possess. In reality, Prop 16 makes it harder to form a municipal owned utility. Normatively, we can assume voters would prefer the most democratic and more responsive option, which is not to support the proposal. Because of this fact, the ad (which advocates a "no" vote) points to the fact that voters already have the right to choose and that this proposal's supermajority standard is undemocratic. In contrast, the editorial advocates a "yes" vote and made the case that voters should have the right to choose how their energy is procured, emphasizing democratic responsiveness. The editorial framed Prop 16 as a "right to choose" and pro-democratic policy. It also made the case that governments have problems like budget cuts, deficits, and public park closings. It further argued that despite budget woes, local governments want to take on the burden of managing an electricity system. The editorial concluded that because of these problems, voters should have a say in whether governments get into the electricity business.

The pre-test shows that the advertisement's sponsors were perceived as trustworthy with Sierra Club rating 5.1 on a 7-pt scale and the campaign name Stop the PG&E Powergrab rating a 4.3. Stop the PG&E Powergrab is perceived as having more knowledge (3.6) on this issue than the Sierra Club (2.8), but both are relatively knowledgeable. Thus, all the sources are credible for this issue.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the editorial source, *The Sacramento Bee*, which is the major local newspaper, is perceived as knowledgeable (4.3) and trustworthy (5.4 of 7).

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<sup>10</sup> Not unlike The Brady Bunch television program's opening credits

<sup>11</sup> In the Pre-test I found that Sierra Club is perceived as less knowledgeable on the issue of electricity than the group Stop the PG&E Powergrab. This is a great example of groups' ability to veil and cover up credibility deficiencies, even when they are a credible source.

## Results

The results of this study provide important findings regarding the effects of disclosure and the usage of experimental pretreatments.<sup>12</sup>First, this experiment replicates existing work on single-sided advertisements. As expected, the results show that an advertisement that is unchallenged by other stimuli tends to be convincing. When a credible speaker is added, the ad continues to be convincing. Second, this experiment demonstrates that pretreatment influences how respondents react to a subsequent stimulus. In all cases, the pretreatment editorial shaped individuals' opinions and created some resistance to the subsequent advertisements. Third, the results show that disclosure effects are conditioned by how much citizens know about the issue. The results that follow below are grouped by issue.

### *Municipal Electricity Issue*

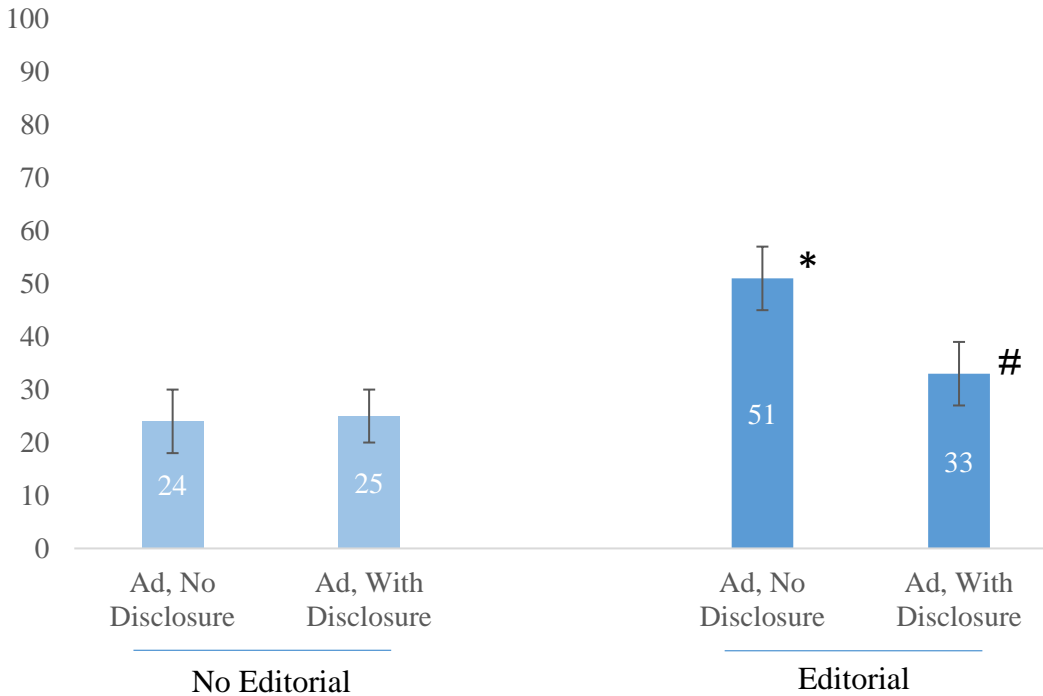
The results show there is no difference between the two versions of the advertisement by itself. Figure 2 displays the results for the electricity issue. The ad with disclosure (which read "Paid for by Stop the PG&E Powergrab with Major funding by Sierra Club") elicited 25% support for Prop 16, while the ad without disclosure elicited 24% support. This null result is important because it shows that when the campaigner is credible, respondents tend to have a similar reaction to the message, and accept it as useful information. Because the ad advocated a "no vote," 25% support can be interpreted as 75% agreement with the ad.

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<sup>12</sup> In a similar study, I found that using pretreatment that is subtler than a sourced editorial (explored in this paper) produced opinions that were no different from an ad without pretreatment. Specifically, I measured reactions to a policy detail oriented issue synopsis from California's non-partisan Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO). The pretreatment was not attributed to the LAO, because the state bureau is a highly credible source of information. Instead, the statement was not attributed to any speaker but is clearly written as an informed issue description. This result, showing no difference between "Ad, No Disclosure, No LAO Statement" and "Ad, No Disclosure with LAO Statement" held for all three cases so the results are omitted here. Even though the information in the LAO statement is accurate, without identifying the source, it appears respondents do not give it the same weight and consideration as the sourced editorial.

**Figure 2. Support for Prop 16 (Municipal Electricity Voting Rule)**

Advertisement recommends “oppose”; Editorial recommends “support”



\* indicates a significant difference between the “Ad, No Disclosure” conditions, with and without the pretreatment editorial ( $p < 0.05$ )

# indicates a significant difference between the “Ad, No Disclosure” and “Ad, With Disclosure” conditions when a pretreatment editorial is present ( $p < 0.05$ ).

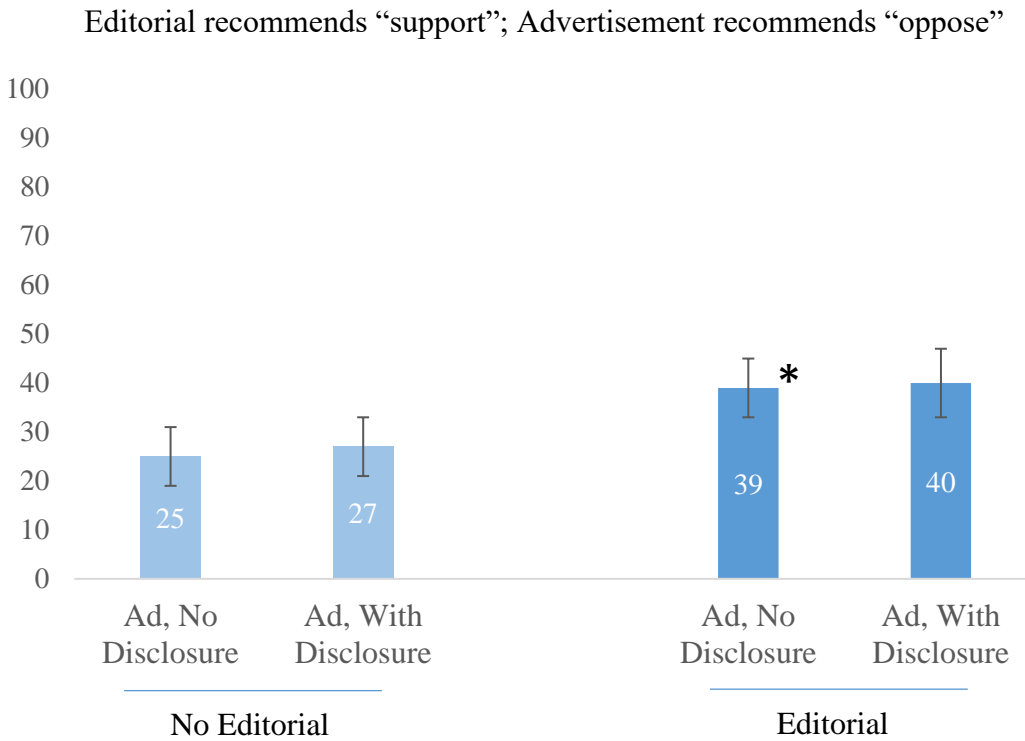
With respect to the effects of the pretreatment editorial, the editorial from *The Sacramento Bee* significantly reduced the persuasive effect of the advertisement when no disclosure is present. Specifically, the ad without disclosure elicited 51% support for Prop 16 following the pretreatment editorial. This is a 27-percentage point reduction in agreement with the ad when the editorial is present ( $p < 0.05$ ). This result makes clear that the editorial pretreatment influences attitude formation. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, the findings suggest the addition of a credible endorser in an advertisement’s disclosure can increase the persuasiveness of the ad in spite of respondents’ prior opinions. Indeed, the ad with disclosure elicited 33% support for Prop 16 following the pretreatment editorial. Thus, the disclosure increased the persuasiveness of the ad by 18 percentage points, relative to the ad without disclosure in the pretreatment condition. It is the only time that Hypothesis 3 is confirmed in the study

#### *Taxes Issue*

Figure 3 shows that when respondents viewed the “No on 26” ad without disclosure approximately 25% supported Prop 26. When treated with the same ad and a disclosure that reads, “Paid for by

Californians for Clean Air and Clean Energy Jobs with Major Funding by Nature Conservancy”, roughly the same number, 27% support Prop 26. Since the ad urged a “no” vote, we can think of them as expressing 75% and 73% support for the advertisement. Because the two values are statistically indistinguishable, we can conclude there is no difference in support between the two advertisements (with and without disclosure).

**Figure 3. Support for Prop 26 (Supermajority Vote for Fee Increases)**



\* Indicates a significant difference between the “Ad, No Disclosure” conditions, with and without the pretreatment editorial ( $p < 0.06$ )

As expected, the pre-treatment editorial reduced the persuasive effect of the advertisement when no disclosure is present. Specifically, the ad without disclosure elicited 39% while the disclosure ad drew 40% support for Prop 26 following the pretreatment editorial. This is a reduction in agreement with the ad from the no pre-treatment conditions, approximately 13-14 percentage points, approaching statistical significance with  $p = 0.06$ . This provides confirmation of Hypothesis 2, that the editorial should reduce the effect of the ad. However, there is no support for Hypothesis 3. On this issue, the disclosure of a credible group did not counteract the pretreatment editorial.

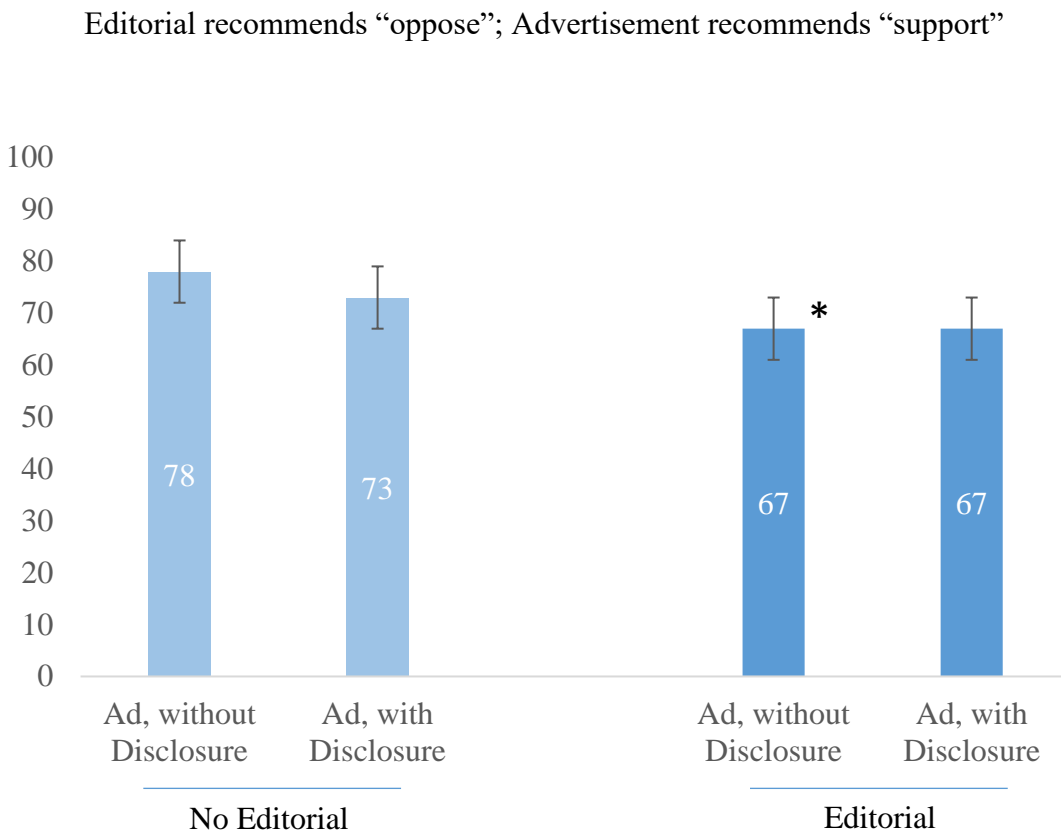
### *Genetically Modified Organisms Labeling*

Similar to previous cases, there was no significant difference between the two versions of the “Yes on Prop 37” advertisement. The ad disclosure for this case read “Paid for by Californians for Truth in Labeling with Major Funding by Whole Foods.” This treatment, as well as the ad without



disclosure, drew 78% and 73% support respectively (Figure 4). This is not a statistically significant difference. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is confirmed. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed with the ad whether or not a credible speaker is present. As expected, the editorial reduced the persuasiveness of the advertisement without disclosure. Specifically, the ad without disclosure elicited 67% support for Prop 37 following the pretreatment editorial. This is a significant reduction in support, relative to when no pretreatment editorial is provided, lending support for Hypothesis 2.<sup>13</sup> However, there is no support for Hypothesis 3. Disclosure of a credible source (Whole Foods) did not increase the persuasiveness of the ad when the editorial pretreatment was present.

**Figure 4. Support for Prop 37 (Labeling Genetically Modified Organisms)**



\* indicates a significant difference between the “Ad, No Disclosure” conditions, with and without the pretreatment editorial ( $p < 0.09$ ).

<sup>13</sup> This could be interpreted as a sort of high-water mark on this issue for this sub-population.

## Discussion

This study examined campaign finance disclosure cue effects when in competition with credible information. Regarding Hypothesis 1 this study found mixed results. In all three cases, the presence of a credibly sourced editorial is associated with a change in support for the initiative. However, the use of credibly sourced campaign finance disclosure has a far less consistent effect. In just one case (Prop. 16), and only in the presence of an editorial, does the disclosure seem to have an effect reaching statistical significance. In three cases, the disclosure cue did not increase proposition support relative to the non-disclosure ad. Consistent with Hypothesis 2 the editorial was persuasive when we compare the control version ad with and without pre-treatment. This was true in all three cases. Hypothesis 3 also produced a mixed result, failing in two of the three cases. Most of the time, the campaign finance disclosure did not overpower or equal the persuasive strength of the editorial. Why the Prop 16 case confirmed Hypotheses 1 and 3, while the other cases did not, likely has something to do with the issue itself. Municipally owned electricity has no partisan cues, pre-existing political norms, or rhetoric to draw upon. This follows the logic of “hard” issues, making it a case where voters are continuously searching for cues to make sense of the topic. The malleability of opinion across treatments for Prop 16 further supports this interpretation.

The strength of this study is that it uses real propositions, ads, donors, and campaign names. By using more than one case, the design shows a consistent reaction across issues. One limitation is that the convenience sample does not include many conservative opinions. The sample has limited variation on income, age, and education. However, these limitations were known at the design stage of the project and informed the selection of stimuli. While the findings are not generalizable to the entire voting population, this oversample provides strong leverage on how an understudied population (aged 18-24yrs old) forms preferences on political issues. It is a demographic that can help explain opinion formation among younger voters more generally, a group known to vote at much lower rates than all other age groups. The study has excellent leverage on California university students who, all else equal, have the highest vote propensity within the demographic. The results are applicable to proposition contests ranging from municipal to statewide. At the city level, proposition campaigns often: lack partisan cues, involve low salience “hard” issues, and produce weakly held opinions. These dynamics are present in many statewide propositions as well, easy issues require little effort because interest groups and parties hold well known positions, while hard issues leave voters scrambling for cues.

Would the results hold up in different contexts like internet campaign media and social media platforms? Yes and no. There has been a sharp increase in political opinion influencers on sites like YouTube, and their presentation is targeted toward young adults. Viewers ideologically self-select into most of these information streams and later agree with many of the ideological positions expressed by influencers. However, these media figures are not likely to opine on low salience, hard issues, leaving young voters to face a similar void of informational cues on some ballot issues. One research extension could test the durability of social media generated opinions in the face of online media from the actual campaigns. My expectations would be that opinions generated from online appeals, memes, and the like will be less durable than those generated from the study detailed above. Campaign advertisements should be as persuasive when prepared for internet media as those prepared for television audiences. Both predictions are conditioned on the credibility of the source. Future work should replicate these findings on a wider population, with a focus on competing cues in different formats, for instance social media video clips and YouTube talking head style videos, since these are more frequent information sources for younger voters.

If issue opinions are either strongly or weakly held (Druckman and Leeper, 2012), municipally owned electricity, vote thresholds for taxes, and labeling GMO's are representative of weakly held opinions. This study exploits that opinion flexibility with credible sources. In three different cases, opinion did not change significantly from the editorial pretreatment. I would conclude that ad disclosures have the strongest effect (work best) when unopposed and credible. When disclosures are unopposed and feature non-credible speakers, a well-documented backlash effect occurs. Future studies might examine whether backlash washes out in a competitive environment (where backlash has the same effect as pretreatment), or if it repels in addition to pretreatment opinions – "I agree with this argument even more now that I find it is opposed by an interest group I dislike." Reformers and opponents of money in politics tend to argue that disclosures provide transparency as well as a tool that helps voters. Disclosures clearly satisfy both goals; however, the research program above delineates some caveats and limitations within the weakly held opinion space.

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