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Minor language variations in campaign advertisements: The effects of pronoun use and message orientation on voter responses

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ABSTRACT

Campaign slogans such as Barack Obama's 'Yes, we can' in the 2008 US presidential election and Ing-Wen Tsai's 'Light up Taiwan' from her successful 2016 presidential bid, used specific and subtle language choices to affect voters. However, previous studies on campaign advertisements mostly focused on substantial content changes in advertisements. This study explored voters' responses to minor language variations in campaign advertisements, including pronoun use and concrete vs. abstract message orientation. The results of two experiments provide evidence that minor language variations in advertisements affect voter responses. Specifically, concrete messages are more effective than abstract ones. Using 'candidate and you' is more effective for candidates affiliated with specific political parties later in the election campaign period. The use of 'candidate and you' (vs. 'we') weakens the effects of concrete messages. The effects of minor language variations are moderated by advertising timing, advertising valence, and voters' party identification.

1. Introduction

A candidate's campaign advertisements are key to electoral success. Advertisements convey information and ideas and appeal to emotions that can influence voter beliefs and attitudes and shape or alter voting behaviours. Previous campaign advertising studies have mostly focused on how substantial content changes in advertisement type (e.g., positive vs. negative) or advertising appeals (e.g., issue vs. image) affect voters (e.g., Chou and Lien, 2011; Phillips et al., 2008; Roddy and Garramone, 1988; Van Steenburg, 2015). The effects of minor language variations have seldom been studied in the election advertisement context, despite the confirmation of their effects in the commercial marketing context (e.g., Haws and Patrick, 2014; Mayer and Tormala, 2010; Packard and Berger, 2016; Sela et al., 2012).

Observation of modern election campaigning reveals a multitude of examples of minor language variations. For example, in the 2008 US presidential election, the classic slogan, 'Yes, we can' helped the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, win the election. In the 2016 presidential election in Taiwan, the campaign slogan of the winning candidate, Ing-Wen Tsai of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), 'Bring back confidence and light up Taiwan' was framed using verbs.

Tsai's final two campaign commercials, 'Follow the kids' and 'Taiwan arise again,' largely used the pronoun 'we' in the texts.¹ 'You' or adjectives have been part of many advertising slogans, including Ronald Reagan's 1980 question to the US electorate, 'Are you better off than you were four years ago?' During the 2016 US presidential election, slogans were also filled with pronouns, such as Donald Trump's 'We will make America great again!' Interestingly, Trump's campaign chants included more verbs than adjectives, for example, 'Build the wall!', 'can't stump the Trump', and 'drain the swamp'. In contrast, other candidates used more adjectives than verbs, such as Hillary Clinton's 'Stronger together', Bobby Jindal's 'Tanned, rested, ready', and Ted Cruz's 'Trusted'.

Understanding how pronoun choice and other parts of speech affect political communications is important for all stakeholders. Many election advertising claims are designed to facilitate voter perceptions of closeness with the candidate. So, conducting relevant studies on the effects of minor language variations in campaigns remains an important research agenda. Previous research has shown pronoun use might affect satisfaction with interpersonal relationships (e.g., Williams-Baucom et al., 2010; Zimmermann et al., 2013). Menegatti and Rubini (2013) also found that candidates' use of particular words in political speeches

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¹ To provide direct evidence about the prevalence of pronoun use in election campaigns, the authors gathered all of the campaign advertisements from the 2016 Taiwanese presidential and legislative elections (held January 16, 2016) from the four major newspapers in Taiwan, including China Times, Liberty Times, United Daily News, and Apple Daily, from November 23, 2015 to January 16, 2016. A content analysis revealed that among 84 different advertisements used, more than half (52.4%) included the use of pronouns. Among those using pronouns, 29.5% used only 'we', while 31.8% used only 'you.'

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(verbs vs. adjectives; concrete vs. abstract message orientations) can lead to different persuasive effects on voters.

Expanding on these previous findings, the authors explored the effects of two minor language variations (pronouns and message orientation) in campaign advertisements on voter responses. Moreover, the authors also investigated possible moderating variables to further understand the contexts where these minor language variations are effective. One potential moderator is the advertisement's time of release. Given that campaign periods are generally fixed, how to plan election strategies and campaigns for different phases is a key for success. The impact of campaign information on voters' voting decisions usually varies with the campaign schedule (e.g., early or late phases; Nir and Druckman, 2008). Therefore, campaign advertisement release time might affect voters' reactions to the advertised content. Different from Chou and Lien's (2010) and Kim et al.'s (2009) studies, which focused on how advertising/message timing moderates the effects of substantial content changes (i.e., appeal importance, appeal topic, and "why"-laden vs. "how"-laden appeals), the current study examined the moderating role of advertising timing on minor language variation effects. The second variable was voters' party identification, which has been examined in studies of campaign advertisements and has a great impact on voters' political judgment and voting decisions (Chang, 2003; Chou, 2015; Hawkins and Nosek, 2012). Party identification may reflect a voter's political involvement and affect perceived similarity and relationship expectations with the sponsoring candidate, thereby affecting the voter's responses to advertising content. The third variable was campaign advertisement valence, which is either positive or negative (i.e., an ad promotes the sponsoring candidate or criticizes an opponent, respectively). Advertising valence and confirmation (i.e., an ad that confirms or disconfirms prior candidate preferences) conjointly determine the effects of campaign advertisements (Phillips et al., 2008). Additionally, voters interpret positive and negative valence differently (e.g., Garramone, 1984; Pinkleton, 1997), and such difference may affect the influence of minor language variations in advertisements.

In the following sections, the authors develop several hypotheses that describe the predicted relationships. Then they report the results of two experiments conducted to test these hypotheses. Finally, they conclude with several implications that are important to political advertising theory and practice.

2. Literature review, research hypotheses, and framework

2.1. Minor language variations

Minor language variations refer to subtle alterations in wording or changes in speech that do not change the meaning of the overall passage and are not directly noticed by the audience (Menegatti and Rubini, 2013). Words can be classified as content words (e.g., nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) and function words (e.g., pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and auxiliary verbs). Usually, function words convey a small amount of information; however, they are closely related to content words. Moreover, function words generally exert powerful influence over readers, mostly without being perceived or noticed (Chung and Pennebaker, 2007).

In this study, the use of pronouns (i.e., function words) was combined with the use of adjectives and verbs (i.e., content words) to construct abstract or concrete messages. The intent of these manipulations was to explore how voters are affected by these two types of minor language variations that are commonly used in election campaign advertisements.

2.1.1. Effects of pronoun use

There are few studies on the effects of pronoun use in political advertisements. However, studies have examined pronoun use in other political contexts, such as in European Union meetings (Cramer, 2010), interviews of politicians during the UK general election (Fetzer and

Bull, 2008), and election speeches in the Commonwealth of Australia (Steffens and Haslam, 2013). All these studies found a common trend: leaders/politicians mostly use the pronouns 'our' and 'we' to emphasize their relationship with the organization or voters and to enhance the validity of their arguments.

Pronouns not only specifically indicate the central object of the narrative, they also strengthen relationship cognition in conversation (Gordon et al., 1993). 'We' and 'you and I' express the same meaning, but 'we' indicates a stronger emotional connection and sense of unity, whereas 'you and I' implies two independent individuals (Bull and Fetzer, 2006; Fitzsimons and Kay, 2004). In a related study, Sela et al. (2012) confirmed that consumers' preference for pronoun use varies with their level of brand involvement and their perceived relationship with the brand. Nieuwbeerta and Flap (2000) found that a higher level of interpersonal closeness can strongly affect individuals' voting behaviours. Therefore, candidates that use the pronoun 'we' to convey a sense of unity in the candidate–voter relationship rather than 'candidate (I) and you,' which implies alienation, should be able to increase voters' perceived closeness and improve relationship satisfaction, thus creating more favourable voter responses. This concept is stated in the following hypothesis:

H1. Using the pronoun 'we' (vs. 'candidate and you') in campaign advertisements evokes more favourable voter responses.

2.1.2. Effects of message orientation

By keeping the content of a message constant, a behaviour can be analysed at different levels of abstraction (Semin, 2000). Message orientation (also known as language abstraction) refers to the level of abstraction or concreteness in messages that results from variations in speech. Many studies investigating message orientation have focused on how senders purposely adjust the level of abstraction of their messages to match receiver characteristics (e.g., de Montes et al., 2003; Wigboldus et al., 2005). Surprisingly, few studies have explored the effects of language abstraction on recipients. A review on the strategic role of language abstraction in achieving symbolic and practical goals is available in Rubini et al. (2014).

In a political communications study, Menegatti and Rubini (2013) adopted the linguistic category model (Semin and Fiedler, 1988, 1989) to define message abstractness and concreteness. Specifically, they identified the following four categories of words with increasing levels of abstraction: descriptive action verbs, interpretative action verbs, state verbs, and adjectives. According to this model, messages framed with more adjectives are more abstract, and messages framed using more verbs are more concrete.²

Concrete messages are more accurate and detailed, as well as provide more verifiable and clearer information that improves truth judgments and thus credibility and persuasiveness (Menegatti and Rubini, 2013). Concrete language/messages also increase speakers' accountability (Semin, 2007) and are better at conveying the meanings of actions (Kim et al., 2009). Concrete utterances are also perceived as more likely to be true than abstract ones (Hansen and Wänke, 2010). Chang et al. (2000) also indicated that using verbs to frame a message has a greater ability to clearly express the concept and the implications of the event. Therefore, the current authors inferred that candidates should be able to evoke more favourable voter responses if they appeal to voters with concrete messages, as stated in the following hypothesis:

H2. Using concrete (vs. abstract) messages in campaign advertisements evokes more favourable voter responses.

² For example, 'Lightning (ADJ) strikes are adverse (ADJ) to rules, but the Government became hostile (ADJ) and it was not willing (ADJ) to understand the causes' is the abstract message used in Menegatti and Rubini's (2013) message orientation manipulation. 'Strikes called (IAV) without notice go (IAV) against rules, but the Government opposed (IAV) them and did not ask (IAV) itself what caused (IAV) them' is the concrete one.

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