



# Don't Blame the Messenger! Political Advertising, Voter Attributions, and the 2012 Presidential Election

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty years, political advertising has surpassed news and other traditional political sources as the most important source of voting information. Its role has been increasingly critical to election outcomes, as party-based campaigns have been transformed into media-based ones. Political ads work to set the public agenda for a campaign and help candidates shape the impressions voters have of them. Given the effect on public policies and elected officials that voting decisions have, it is important to understand how campaign advertising influences voter attitudes and behaviors.

As political advertising has grown, a substantial body of research has considered the effects of advertising in the political process. However, little research has been undertaken to examine voters' cognitive responses to political advertisements, and, in particular, voter attributions of candidate motives in the political arena.

## PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this study is to investigate how prospective voters process issue-oriented political advertising, what motives they attribute to candidates for both positive and negative ads, and whether message processing and the attributions generated influence their attitudes toward the candidate and voting intentions.

## THE 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

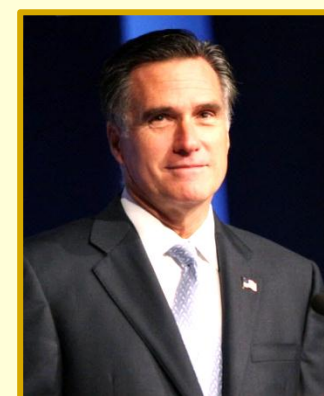
According to the Center for Responsive Politics, at \$2.6 billion, the 2012 Presidential Election was the most expensive in history. With more than 3 million television campaign ads aired between April 1 and Election Day, the 2012 race also set the record for the most negative campaign in history according to the Wesleyan Media Project.

Barack Obama



- Spent \$396 million
- 85% negative commercials

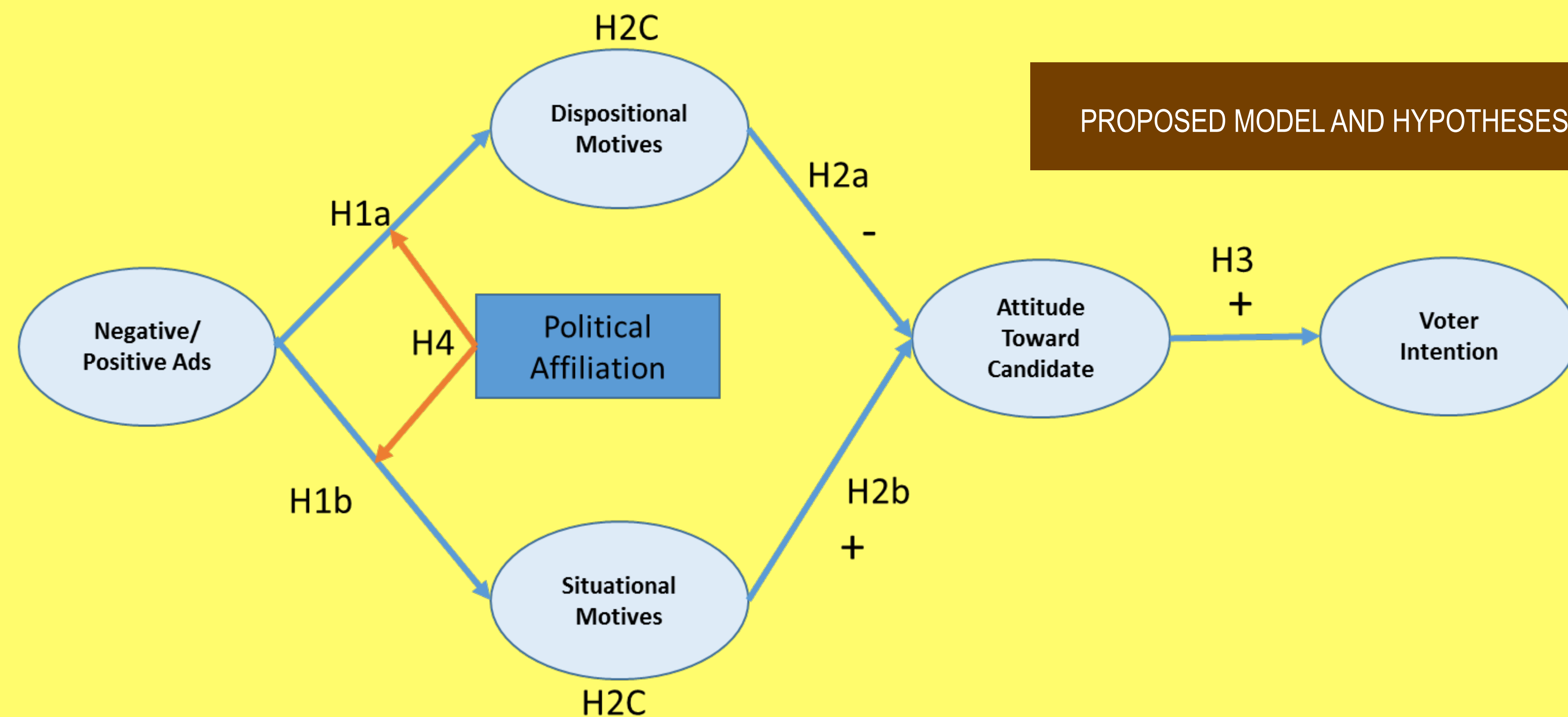
Mitt Romney



- Spent \$479 million
- 91% negative commercials

## METHOD AND SAMPLE

- Participants: Registered U.S. voters
  - 1077 responses → 922 responses (after cleaning)
  - 56.2% male; 43.8% female
  - Mean age: 49
  - Democrats (45.2%), Republicans (38.4%) and Independents (16.4%)
- Procedures:
  - On-line experimental design
  - Random assignment to one of four conditions
  - Attribution scale items from previous research
- Stimulus Commercials: 2 spots each for 2012 presidential candidates Barack Obama and Mitt Romney (one positive and one negative for each).



## RESULTS

**H1a:** Prospective voters who are exposed to negative candidate advertisements will be more likely to attribute candidate motives to dispositional factors than voters exposed to positive candidate advertisements.

- Independent samples t-test: dispositional attributions ( $M=8.54$ ,  $SD=3.68$ ,  $N=430$ ) about negative advertisements were significantly greater than the dispositional attributions ( $M=8.02$ ,  $SD=3.71$ ,  $N=492$ ) about positive advertisements ( $t(922)=2.96$ ,  $P<.001$ )

**Supported.**

**H1b:** Prospective voters who are exposed to negative candidate advertisements will be less likely to attribute candidate motives to situational factors than voters exposed to positive candidate advertisements.

- Independent samples t-test: situational attributions ( $M=8.89$ ,  $SD=3.05$ ,  $N=430$ ) for negative advertisements were significantly lower than dispositional attributions ( $M=8.92$ ,  $SD=3.36$ ,  $N=492$ ) for positive advertisements ( $t(922)=0.72$ ,  $P<.001$ )

**NOT Supported.**

**H2a:** Dispositional attributions of the sponsoring candidate advertisements will have a negative impact on voter attitude toward the sponsoring candidate.

- Path Analysis: Romney-sponsored ads ( $\beta = -.06$ ,  $p<.05$ )
- Obama-sponsored ads ( $\beta = -.17$ ,  $p<.01$ )

**Supported.**

**H2b:** Situational attributions of the sponsoring candidate advertisements will have a positive impact on voter attitude toward the sponsoring candidate.

- Path Analysis: Romney-sponsored ads ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p<.05$ )
- Obama-sponsored ads : NS

**Partially Supported.**

**H2c:** Attributions of candidate motive (both dispositional and situational) for the sponsoring candidate will mediate the relationship between exposure to political advertising and voter attitudes toward the sponsoring candidate.

**Path Analyses: Partially Supported.**

**H3:** Voter attitudes toward the sponsoring candidate will be positively related to intentions to vote for that candidate.

- Path Analysis: Romney-sponsored ads ( $\beta = .89$ ,  $p<.01$ )
- Obama-sponsored ads ( $\beta = .90$ ,  $p<.01$ )

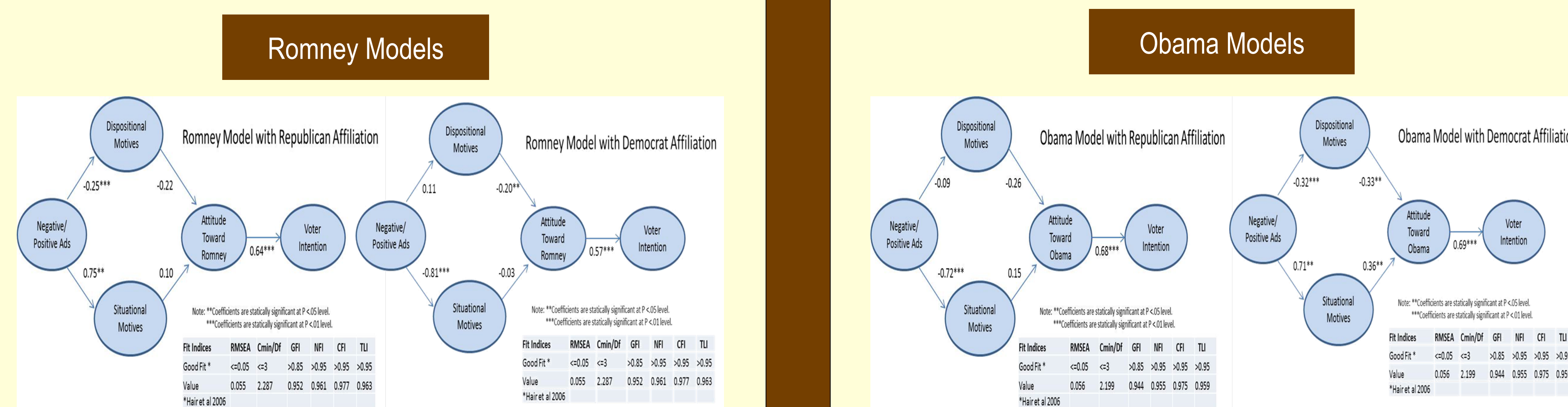
**Supported.**

**H4:** Political affiliation will moderate the effects of advertising exposure on the type of attributions made and on attitudes toward the sponsoring candidate

- Chi-Square Difference:
  - Romney-sponsored ads :  $\chi^2(2, N=421)=107.25$   $P<.01$
  - Obama-sponsored ads :  $\chi^2(2, N=388)=100.61$   $P<.05$

**Supported.**

## POLITICAL PARTY-BASED MULTIPLE COMPARISON ANALYSIS



## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

- Individuals attribute motives to candidates for political advertising messages.
  - Overall individuals more likely to hold candidate responsible for ad content.
  - Individuals who saw negative ads "blamed" candidate for the negative advertising
  - Implication:** Political consultants and candidates should remember this propensity for "blame" by voters when preparing political messages.

- Dispositional attributions affected attitudes toward the candidate and voting, while situational attributions did not.
- Ultimately, when voters make situational attributions, the candidate does not reap any benefit, but neither does the candidate pay a price.
  - Implication:** Negative political ads should be independently sponsored.

- Political party affiliation moderated the effect of the attributions on voter attitudes and intentions, but not in the same way for both candidates.
  - When Democrats were exposed to Romney ads saying negative things about Obama, their attitude toward Romney worsened.
  - However, the voter attitude toward Romney was not significantly affected when either Democrats or Republicans endorsed situational attributions.
  - Voter attitudes toward the sponsoring candidate, Obama, became significantly unfavorable particularly when dispositional attributions were endorsed by Democratic rather than Republican voters.
  - Democrats held Obama to a higher standard than they did Romney in that they "blamed" Obama for running a negative campaign.

## CONCLUSIONS

- Political campaigns and advertising can have an influence on individual voting behavior and electoral outcomes.
- Attribution theory can be used to evaluate voter responses to political advertising
- Dispositional attributions of candidate motive directly affect voters' evaluations of the sponsoring candidate, while mediating the effects of political advertising on voter attitudes and behaviors.
- Is using negative political advertising still viable as an automatic "go to" strategy?

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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