
Article:
Stafford, T. orcid.org/0000-0002-8089-9479, Gordon, H. orcid.org/0000-0003-4053-6419, Zhu, J. orcid.org/0000-0002-2869-824X et al. (1 more author) (2024) Online political adverts: the effect of disclosures and opportunities for clandestine campaigning. Political Psychology. ISSN 0162-895X

https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.13034

DOI: 10.1111/pops.13034

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Political Psychology

Online political adverts: The effect of disclosures and opportunities for clandestine campaigning

Tom Stafford [1] | **Hazel Gordon** [1] | **Junyan Zhu** [2] | **Katharine Dommett** [3]

[1]Department of Psychology, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

[2]Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

[3]Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Correspondence
Tom Stafford, Department of Psychology, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S1 4DP, UK.
Email: t.stafford@sheffield.ac.uk

Funding information
Leverhulme Trust, Grant/Award Number: RPG-2020-148; Economic and Social Research Council

Abstract

The use of digital technology has become an increasingly prominent feature of election campaigns. While many of those using online tools are familiar partisan actors, many others are not. As concerns about electoral transparency have grown, policy makers have moved to implement regulation designed to help citizens recognize the identity of campaigners. In this paper, we test the rationale behind such regulations by asking how disclosures on online adverts—both informal badging and formal imprints—affect evaluation by UK voters. Using experimental survey design, we test the reactions of participants to real Facebook adverts, labeled as originating from both partisan and apparently non-partisan sources. Across three experiments, we consistently find evidence to support concerns about what we term "clandestine campaigning"; a phenomenon whereby apparently non-partisan groups can receive a more favorable reception for incongruous partisan advert content than overtly incongruous partisan-badged campaign material.

KEYWORDS

adverting, elections, imprints, party identity, persuasion, survey experiment

INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital campaigning and the regulatory response

The rise of digital technology has had a seismic impact on the information landscape (Bimber, 2003; Jungherr et al., 2020, p. 108), creating new and often preeminent forums for online

Highlights

- Experimental evidence that source disclosures on political adverts affect voter attitudes.
- Non-informative disclosures create the opportunity to circumvent partisan censor of political adverts: clandestine campaigning.
- Findings have direct relevance to current policy discussions around badging and imprint regimes for online political adverts.

discussion and information sharing (Goodman et al., 2017, p. 5). The extensive range of different ideas and sources to which citizens are exposed presents particular challenges. It becomes difficult for citizens to recognize and navigate different sources of information (Schmitt et al., 2018). In the specific context of elections, it becomes unclear whom to listen to and whom to trust. Reacting to this challenge, policy makers have begun to call for kite marks, flags, and imprints intended to help people identify and interpret different sources of information (Electoral Commission, 2019). This is seen as an important means of promoting transparency and boosting citizens' trust and confidence (Cabinet Office, 2020, p. 13). It is, however, far from clear how citizens respond to information from different sources, as well as what additional information would be needed to inform citizens about the sources of these materials.

The relatively recent and now widespread practice of online political advertising—particularly on Facebook—has become a key tool in election campaigns (Barnard & Kreiss, 2013; Edelson et al., 2018). Unlike traditional means of electoral campaigning, such as doorstep canvassing or television coverage, which are resource-intensive and costly, online advertising allows communication at a fraction of the cost (Bodó et al., 2017, p. 4). One consequence of this has been the lowering of barriers to new actors interested in engaging in campaigns, allowing a range of new and often unfamiliar actors to participate. While this trend can be seen as a positive indicator of political engagement, it can also be viewed in more negative terms (Jamieson, 2013; Kim et al., 2018). In the United Kingdom, for example, the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Electoral Campaigning Transparency (2020) have argued that individuals are increasingly "noticing adverts online and wondering who is behind them. They instinctively feel that this goes against the notion of fair play, and this erosion of trust will in time further damage the integrity of our democracy, possibly beyond repair" (2020, p. 2).

While concerns about the democratic implications of online political advertising are not new, existing scholarship has tended to focus on the threat posed by microtargeting (Jamieson, 2013) or the potential for foreign interference in elections (Baines & Jones, 2018; Woolley & Howard, 2019). In contrast, we are interested in the influence that the source of information has on voters' attitudinal and behavioral response to campaign material. Specifically, we are interested in whether adverts from non-partisan groups can gain a more favorable response compared to adverts badged as from apparently partisan sources, even when both sources present the exact same advert content. While there exist myriad reasons why non-party organizations, rather than political parties, may campaign during elections, such as circumventing regulations on campaign finance, our focus is specifically on how the perceived source of campaign material can influence its persuasive potential. This is motivated by a particular phenomenon observed during the 2019 UK general election, where journalists found evidence of non-partisan groups such as "3rd Party Limited" and the "Fair Tax Campaign" being used to promote partisan messages (and having close connections to parties) (Dommett & Power, 2020). This phenomenon, which we term "clandestine campaigning," refers to the potential for individuals to trust, and hence for elections to be potentially influenced by, actors

who promote a partisan message under the guise of a non-partisan group. This is widely seen as a duplicitous campaign practice, but at present we have limited understanding of the impact of such campaign tactics on citizens' perceptions of online adverts, especially beyond the US context (Baum et al. 2021).

By focusing on the question of how voter responses to adverts are affected by the actor perceived to have placed the advert, we draw on an established literature on "source effects" and a smaller US-focused literature on perceptions of "outrider" campaign material (Dowling & Wichowsky, 2015; Franklin Fowler et al., 2019; Rhodes et al., 2019; Weber et al., 2012).

Source effects, trust, and partisanship

Underpinning this line of thought is a large body of scholarship that has explored the significance of advertising source for citizen perceptions (Wathen & Burkell, 2002; Wilson & Sherrell, 1993). Particularly in the context of election campaigns, studies (mostly from the United States) have shown that the source of campaign material can affect citizen responses and that non-party campaign groups in particular are perceived as more credible, trustworthy, and persuasive sources of information than candidates or parties (Brooks & Murov, 2012; Dowling & Wichowsky, 2015; Groenendyk & Valentino, 2002; Ridout et al., 2015; Weber et al., 2012). Weber et al. (2012), for example, found empirical evidence suggesting that interest group adverts from unknown sources are more persuasive than those from known sources or candidate-sponsored adverts. Likewise, Ridout et al. (2015) also found that when an attack ad was backed by an unfamiliar group, the endorsing entity was perceived as significantly more credible and trustworthy compared to when the ad was sponsored by a political candidate. These findings have led to the belief that "unknown political groups can be a powerful force in political communication" and that these lesser-known groups deserve careful scholarly scrutiny due to their enhanced capacity to persuade voters (Weber et al., 2012, p. 579).

Although evidence from the United States suggests that non-party groups are more likely to be trusted by citizens (and hence gain an audience for their messaging), there is a lack of empirical evidence in other democratic countries, highlighting the need for further research in varied political contexts. For instance, when it comes to generalizable insights, the findings from the US context may not apply to countries with multi-party systems and coalition governments and characterized by different campaign regulatory measures (Dommett & Zhu, 2022; Dowling & Wichowsky, 2013). Our paper aims to fill in this gap by investigating the UK context, a country with a multi-party political system and ongoing debates surrounding the regulation of online political advertising.

Source effects are worth investigating, particularly in light of concerns about misleading or potentially deceptive third-party groups. There is an adjacent literature that explores labels for fact checking' on news stories, showing inconsistent effects on citizen trust in response to such labels (Koch et al., 2023; Oeldorf-Hirsch et al., 2020). Perceptions of the source may indeed influence how truthful a message is perceived to be, however the role of disclosures in alerting citizens to misinformation is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we focus on the impact of the perceived source on the persuasive potential of a message, regardless of its objective truth.

Particularly, we draw on a rich body of work that reveals the significance of partisan identity in the reception of messages. Numerous studies have shown that partisan identity has a powerful effect on how citizens process information and behave (Bartels, 2000; Campbell et al., 1960; Henderson & Theodoridis, 2018; Suhay et al., 2018). The theory of partisan motivated reasoning suggests that individuals are driven by their partisan motives when evaluating political information, often relying on partisan heuristics that prompt them to align their judgment with their party's stance (Petersen et al., 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Studies have shown that partisan motivated reasoning has a powerful cognitive impact on the way

individuals interpret political content, especially when confronted with new information. For example, partisan-consistent online news content is found to be perceived as more plausible than partisan-inconsistent sources (Vegetti & Mancosu, 2020). Wagner et al. (2014) find that in the United Kingdom, the more sophisticated voters are, the stronger the influence of partisan leanings is on their opinion formation. Particularly during elections, partisan cues have been shown to help voters "cut the costs of gathering and processing large quantities of complicated and often contradictory information" (Clarke et al., 2009, p. 18). This can occur by causing voters to attribute more credibility to sources that share their predispositions, leading to the acceptance of congruous messages (Bartels, 2002). The result is that parties and candidates presenting a view congruous with the perspective of an individual tends to be viewed favorably, while those expressing incongruous views are subject to "partisan animus" and are seen negatively, dismissed or ignored (Iyengar et al., 2012; Kofi Annan Foundation, 2020, p. 31). A recent study by Li and Wagner (2020) found that "attaching a partisan source to a statement leads individuals to evaluate the truthfulness of the statement in a partisan congruent way" (p. 657). Elsewhere, Baum et al. (2021) demonstrated that partisan cues and partisan self-interest largely influence whether one would support the regulation of targeted political advertising. These tendencies have been shown to be influential in the reception of micro-targeted advertising, with Lavigne showing that when parties target supporters with a partisan message they can secure electoral support, making a respondent 7.8% points less likely to vote for another party on election day (2021, p. 7; see also Krotzek, 2019).

Less clear from existing work is how citizens will respond to highly partisan advertising from ostensibly non-partisan, unfamiliar sources. Concerns have been expressed regarding what we term "clandestine campaigning." Jamieson has suggested that "[b]ecause sources with low ethos are by all accounts less persuasive than those that have earned wide respect, the masking process forestalls inferences that undercut the persuasiveness of messages" (2013, p. 432). However, given the recent growth of these groups, it appears that parties and campaigners may believe that they can have a net positive effect.

Not all perspectives assume that unrecognized sources will have a larger impact. Theoretical justification for doubting the effectiveness of adverts from unknown actors comes from work on "epistemic vigilance" (Mercier, 2020; Sperber et al., 2010). This perspective, grounded in frameworks of cultural evolution, suggests that humans deploy a range of mechanisms that enable them to sort communications into trustworthy and untrustworthy (mechanisms such as tracking reputation, or plausibility checking). A key claim of this perspective is that, when a search for reasons to trust fails, humans default to a position of skepticism, not credulity. In other words, the epistemic vigilance perspective predicts citizens to be *less* inclined to trust communications from unknown actors. This would predict little benefit, and possible costs, from clandestine campaigning.

It is this context, where different perspectives predict different effects of clandestine campaigning, and where clandestine campaigning may have differential effects depending on partisan context and receiver partisanship, that informs the current study. We are particularly interested in whether apparently non-partisan badging can gain favorable reactions from people who do not share an advert's undisclosed partisan agenda, a "sneaker effect" where non-partisan badging allows adverts to bypass ideological filters informed by party affiliation.

Overview

Noting these possibilities, we designed an experiment to manipulate the overt badging of political adverts, experimentally altering the partisan badging of different online political adverts that participants observed and then rated. Our primary focus was on the magnitude of partisan bias. Therefore, we aimed to investigate the impact of different types of badging

(out-partisan badging, in-partisan badging, or apparently non-partisan badging) on respondents' level of interest, willingness to click, and trust in adverts as indicators of persuasiveness.

Our research questions, across all experiments, were to investigate whether the source of an advert influences how citizens react to it (RQ1) and whether the extent of this effect is mediated by the strength of their partisanship (RQ2) or political knowledge (RQ3). Additionally, we aim to explore whether apparently non-partisan sources can receive a more favorable response when presenting partisan views that contradicts the viewer's own. This inquiry intends to test the potential for what we term "clandestine campaigners" to attract an audience for incongruous partisan messages.

To address recent concerns about research reliability (Munafò et al., 2017; Simmons et al., 2011), we confirm our initial results through replication, which is supported by formal preregistration of hypotheses and data analyses practices. Preregistration ensures that confirmatory and exploratory analyses are correctly identified and enables rigorous testing of statistical significance. Preregistration also provides an opportunity for formal power analysis to ensure sample sizes are adequate to detect the effect sizes of interest (see Stafford et al., 2020 for an extended discussion of statistical power).

EXPERIMENT 1: PARTY BADGING

In order to test these propositions, our first experiment collected an initial sample and developed an analysis strategy, which we term an "exploratory analysis" (experiment 1a). Having refined the analysis strategy and statistical test, we then preregistered a follow-up experiment (experiment 1b), which involved an advanced declaration of our predictions, methods, measures, and analysis strategy (which we term a "confirmatory analysis"). All materials, data and the analysis files are available at https://osf.io/62hef/?view_only=ef4b2c5ee5a141f790417106e3519353.

Methods

Design

We used a within-subjects design, where all participants viewed three adverts, on three separate topics, each badged from a different source. The design was a three (Topic: climate change, sex education and investment) by three (Badge: Labour, Conservative, non-partisan) design which used permutation to ensure that each topic appeared equally with each badge and each participant viewed all three adverts and all three sources. Partial counterbalancing was used to control order effects on the main experimental factor. Following each advert, participants answered specific questions related to that advert, and the survey concluded with demographic questions.

Materials

The experiment involved creating variants of Facebook adverts that were badged in different ways. Using the Facebook advertising archive, we identified three real adverts on different issues fielded in the United Kingdom. The topics were on sex education, investment in ship building and climate change. These were selected to cover topics that different parties were seen to "own" (Green & Jennings, 2019). The association between particular parties and the topics we selected was verified within the survey where participants were asked to rate "How

FIGURE 1 Climate change advert badged as from the Labour Party.

likely would each source be to produce this advert?" We found that climate change and sex education were more closely associated with the Labour Party, while ship building was linked to the Conservative Party.

For each advert, we then created three versions—one badged as from the Labour Party, one badged as from the Conservative Party, and one badged from "clandestine campaigners" (i.e., unfamiliar accounts promoting a partisan message)—with three alternative identities to match the advert topic; that is, Atmospheric Rescue for the climate change advert, Christian Concern for the advert on sex education, and Keep Britain Afloat for the advert on ship building investment (see Figures 1 and 2, full stimulus materials are available at https://osf.io/62hef/?view_only=ef4b2c5ee5a141f790417106e3519353).

In each advert we made changes to the account logo, organization name, and the disclosure text required by Facebook ("Paid for by…"). We also edited the web address on the advert to ensure that consistent information was present to the participant. All other information remained constant. We recognize that the decision to keep as much of the advert as consistent as possible may have created intermediating effects that future research may seek to remove. For example, one of the adverts contained a call to petition the Government. As the party of Government at the time of the experiment was the Conservative Party, this text may have created confusion when this variant was badged as from the Conservative Party. While acknowledging this predicament, we opted to prioritize maximum consistency and acknowledge the artificial nature of online survey environments by retaining as much consistent material as possible.

Procedure

Participants saw three adverts, introduced with text:

FIGURE 2 Climate change advert badged as from the fictional group "Atmospheric Rescue".

> You are about to be shown an advert as you might see it on Facebook. You will only be shown this image once before being asked to click through and answer some questions. You will not be able to come back and see this advert again.

Each participant saw all three adverts (about climate change, sex education, and investment) in a random order. Each participant saw all three partisan badgings (Labour, Conservatives, and non-partisan), which were randomly matched to the adverts.

After viewing each advert, participants responded to three questions on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree":

1. I found this advert interesting
2. I would click on this advert if it appeared in my feed
3. I found this advert trustworthy

After that, participants completed an attention check, testing their free recall of a detail from the advert they had just seen. After viewing and rating the three adverts, participants proceeded to complete basic demographic and self-report items which contained no experimental manipulations. These included declaring their party affiliation directly ("Which political party do you identify with?"), strength of partisan support ("How strong a supporter of that party do you feel? Very strong, fairly strong, not very strong, don't know"), measures of political engagement ("In the last 12 months, have you done any of the following to influence decisions, laws, or policies? Select all that apply: donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organization; voted in an election; created or signed a petition; contacted a local councillor or MP/MSP/Welsh Assembly Member; boycotted certain products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons; attended political meetings; donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party; taken part in a demonstration, picket, or march; none of these"), political knowledge, and perception of party involvement ("How likely do

you think it is that the following sources would produce each advert? The Labour Party; The Conservative Party; An independent group," on a 7-point Likert scale from extremely likely to extremely unlikely), and interest in the issues advertised ("Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements on a 7-point scale: 1. I found this advert interesting; 2. I would click on this advert if it appeared on my feed; 3. I found this advert trustworthy"). The measure of political knowledge involved indicating true/false/"don't know" to five factual statements which tested knowledge of the British democratic system (e.g., "Polling stations close at 10.00pm on election day."). All stimuli, measures and response options are given in full in the supplementary online material https://osf.io/62hef/?view_only=ef4b2c5ee5a141f790417106e3519353.

Participants

We recruited 402 participants on Prolific, an online experiment and survey platform. We use self-reported measures from Prolific to select our custom sample. All participants were adult UK voters, with 201 identifying as "left-wing" and 201 identifying as "right-wing," as declared on the platform. All were paid at the living wage (£9/h in 2019) for participation. The results from these participants are presented as "Experiment 1a." Our exploratory analysis led us to focus our analysis on a subset of participants who explicitly supported the Labour or Conservative parties, in order to maximize their alignment or opposition to the badges used in our experiment. This allowed us, for experiment 1b, to set recruitment and exclusion criteria (detailed in the experiment preregistration) which focused on participants who identified as either Labour or Conservative. These participants were recruited via the Qualtrics platform.

For both experiments 1a and 1b we excluded participants who failed all three attention checks, those who did not identify as Labour or Conservative supporters, or those who completed the whole experiment in less than 180 s (the mean completion time for experiment 1a was 420 s).

After exclusions, our sample for experiment 1b consisted of 404 participants, with 201 identifying as Labour and 203 as Conservative. We present the results from this cohort as "Experiment 1b." Experiment 1a was run in July 2019. Experiment 1b was run in November and December 2019. Full demographic details of participants can be found in Appendix 1 (Table A1).

The collected demographic characteristics were not sufficient to fully determine representativeness, but suggest a sample which is broadly representative of UK voters without excess distortion with respect to sex or age (participants in Experiment 1a were 60% female with an age range of 18–84; in experiment 1b participants were 55% female with an age 18–85+).

Results

Experiment 1a

Badging effects are real, and large

Instead of presenting separate analyses for left-wing and right-wing participants, we coded participant ratings according to whether they viewed politically in-partisan or out-partisan badged adverts. For example, ratings from left-wing participants judging an advert badged from the Labour Party and ratings from right-wing participants judging an advert badged from the Conservative Party were considered "in-partisan." Ratings where participant identity was opposite to the badging were labeled "out-partisan." Ratings of adverts with non-party badging were labeled "non-partisan."

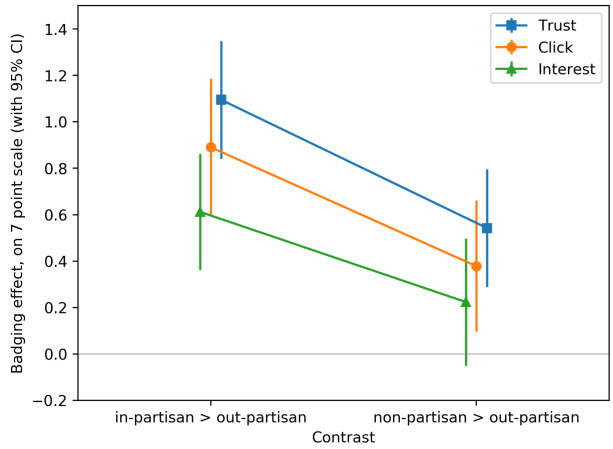

FIGURE 3 Experiment 1a—difference in evaluations due to advert badging, compared to a baseline where adverts are badged as originating from an ideologically out-partisan party.

This approach allows us to gain clearer insights into how the source affects reactions to adverts. Additionally, in line with partisan theory, it enables us to examine whether adverts badged as from a source the respondent agrees with receive higher trust, liking, and engagement ratings than when badged as from a party they do not hold congruous views with. It also allows us to examine the difference between responses to adverts badged as from an apparently non-partisan source and those badged as from an incongruous partisan source.

Taking only participants who supported the Labour or Conservative parties (95 and 106 participants respectively), the effect of badging, averaged over all adverts, is shown in Figure 3. Two contrasts are shown: the effect of in-partisan over out-partisan badging (i.e., the advantage gained from an advert being badged as from the party favored by the participant compared to it being badged as from the party they oppose), and the effect of non-partisan badging against the out-partisan badging (i.e., taking the rating when the badging is from the party the participant opposes as a baseline). Figure 3 includes 95% confidence intervals around these mean differences, as well as the baseline of 0 (the gray line), which reflects the "no effect" baseline, around which observed effects would vary if badging did not affect participant's ratings of interest, willingness to click, and trust in the adverts.

A secondary analysis confirmed that a qualitatively similar pattern of results held if only data from Labour supporters was analyzed. This controls for the possibility that the stimuli did not make sense for Conservative party supporters (the party of government at the time) and hence produced nonsensical responses.

It is important to interpret the significance of these differences. The confidence intervals show that the observed means are significantly different from zero. In absolute terms, these differences of estimated size are on a 1 to 7 rating scale, so an average difference of 1 (as can be observed here for the average trust of an in-partisan badged advert over an out-partisan badged advert), reflects a shift of approximately 15%, or the movement of 1 point on the scale (from "somewhat agree" to "agree," or "strongly disagree" to "disagree"). The results suggest that in-partisan and non-partisan badging lifts advert response, across all three measures, above that the same adverts receive when badged as out-partisan with partisan loyalty. Further, the size of this lift was numerically greater, for in-partisan rather than non-partisan badging.

The preceding analysis shows that badging effects are statistically significant, and that they have an absolute effect size which could be considered consequential. Another question is to understand the magnitude of badging effects in relation to other factors influencing responses to political adverts. Figure 4 shows the differences in ratings between the three adverts,

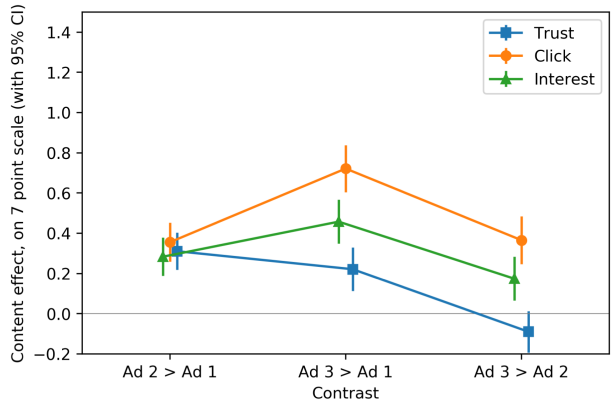

FIGURE 4 Experiment 1a—difference in evaluations due to advert content. Ad 1: Sex education (see online supplementary material), Ad 2 Ship building (see Figure 6), Ad 3 Climate (see Figure 2).

averaged over all badging conditions. This shows the "content effect," the relative effect of the different adverts being centered around distinct topics (schools, climate, and industry) and these different topics naturally eliciting different ratings from the participants. By demonstrating non-zero content effects we show that participants respond to the dominant purpose of the adverts (which would be expected, but confirms participant engagement), as well as helping us calibrate reasonable expectations about the size of other contrasts which could be made.

Partisan loyalty, but not political knowledge, moderates the size of the badging effect

These analyses demonstrate a non-zero size of the badging effect. To determine the interaction between these effects and participant party loyalty we use regression models to measure how the size of the out-partisan—in-partisan badging effect for all three judgments is associated with party loyalty.

To support ease of interpretation, we recoded party loyalty as loyalty with respect to the Labour party, so Conservative supporters were coded as having negative scores. To illustrate: a +3 score represents the party loyalty of Labour supporters who rated themselves "Very Strong" supporters, whereas Conservative supporters who rated themselves "Very Strong" are represented by values of −3. The effect of the badging condition is the difference between the Labour badged and Conservative badged adverts, so that positive values represent a pro-Labour badging effect, and negative values represent a pro-Conservative badging effect. Data for one participant are omitted from the analysis as their party loyalty was not recorded. The model statistics and regression coefficients are shown in Table 1.

Note the coding of the badging effect for the three dependent variables (described above) is such that positive coefficients mean greater party loyalty (for both Labour and Conservative supporters) is associated with greater benefit of in-partisan compared to out-partisan badging. This re-coding takes account of the fact that Labour badging will tend to increase absolute ratings for Labour supporters but decrease absolute ratings for Conservative supporters (and vice versa for Conservative badging).

We can test the effect of political knowledge by adding this variable to the regression models. Including political knowledge does not add to their overall predictive power, nor does this particular variable positively or significantly affect the size of the badging effect. Therefore, there was no evidence to support that having more or less political knowledge altered the

TABLE 1 Regression analysis of partisan loyalty on size of the badging effect.

Variable	Partisan loyalty beta coefficient (*SE*)	Model R^2	Model *F* (*df*)
Interest	.33 (.07)***	.11	23.90 (1198)***
Willingness to click	.49 (.08)***	.16	37.67 (1198)***
Trust	.59 (.07)***	.27	74.47 (1198)***

***$p < .001$.

TABLE 2 Regression analysis of partisan loyalty and political knowledge on size of the badging effect.

Variable	Political knowledge beta coefficient (*SE*)	Partisan loyalty beta coefficient (*SE*)	Model R^2	Model *F* (*df*)
Interest	−.02 (.09)	.33 (.07)***	.11	11.92 (2197)***
Willingness to click	−.08 (.11)	.48 (.08)***	.16	19.06 (2197)***
Trust	−.05 (.60)	.59 (.07)***	.27	37.23 (2197)***

***$p < .001$.

impact had by the congruous and non-partisan source label, compared to an incongruous one. The model statistics and regression coefficients are shown in Table 2.

Experiment 1b: Preregistered confirmation of primary results

To confirm these patterns, a second sample, experiment 1b, was collected and the intended measures and tests of statistical significance were preregistered. This approach aimed to conduct a "severe test" to ensure that the findings from the first experiment were not due to random variation. In short, this preregistered experiment replicated the major results of 1a (see Appendix 2 for details), including the benefit to evaluations from non-partisan badged content over out-partisan partisan content and the significance of partisan loyalty (but not political knowledge) in predicting trust.

The badging effect from the preregistered confirmatory experiment is shown in Figure 5. Note that the effects are qualitatively similar to those shown in Figure 3, albeit smaller in effect size. Specifically, the badging of adverts interacted with party loyalty such that in-partisan badged adverts were, on average, trusted more than out-partisan or non-partisan badged adverts.

Exploratory analysis: Advert level effects

The above results are aggregated across all three adverts/topics. To understand our results we also conducted a by-advert analysis. This sheds light on the extent of issue ownership (Green & Jennings, 2019), in which certain topics may be viewed as associated with particular parties. Overall, in this analysis the pattern of results was similar for our other variables (*willingness to click* and *expressed interest*), so for this, and the analyses which follow we present only the effects of party support on trust only.

Advert 2 focused on ship building (Figure 6). We start with this advert since this advertisement was selected as a real world example of what we believed constitutes "clandestine campaigning" as the organization placing this advert "Keep Britain Afloat" has connections to the Trade Union Unite and, through it, to the Labour Party. The advertiser accordingly communicated pro-Labour messages, but this partisan allegiance was not readily evident.

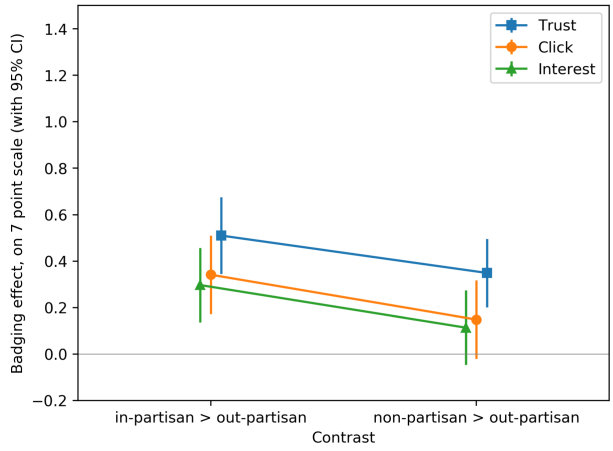

FIGURE 5 Experiment 1b (confirmatory replication)—difference in evaluations due to advert badging, compared to a baseline where adverts are badged as originating from an ideologically out-partisan party.

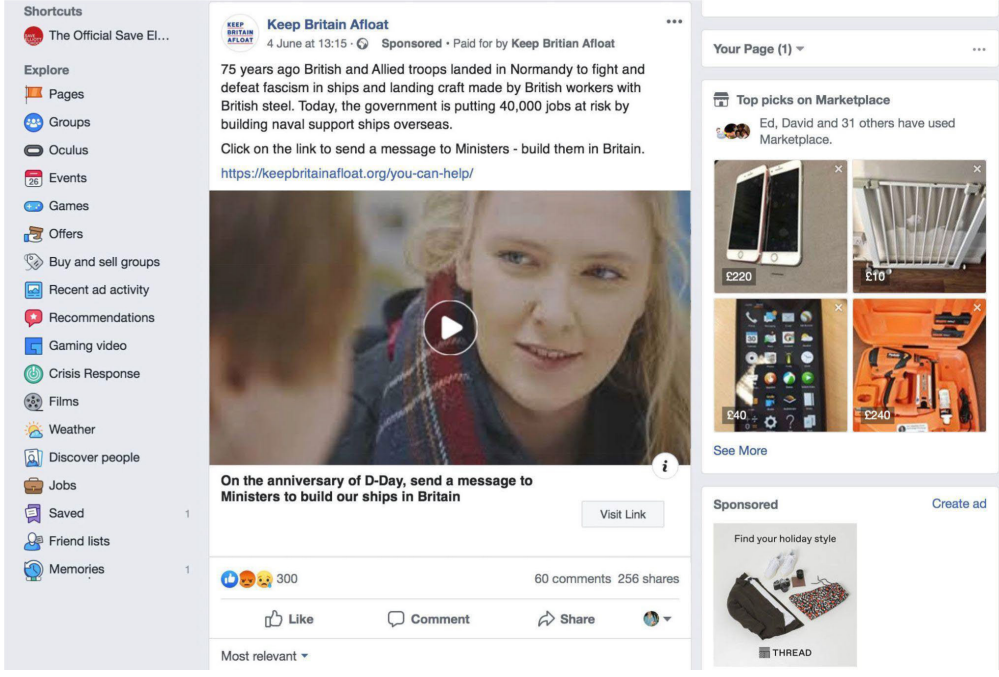

FIGURE 6 Ship building advert, in non-party badged version.

Indeed, when asked to what extent the Labour or Conservative Party would take action on the issues raised in each advert, the message fielded by Keep Britain Afloat (on investment in Shipbuilding) was seen to be most likely associated with the Conservatives.

In Figure 7, we present trust responses to this one advert (as opposed to the aggregate data offered above). We find that partisanship has a powerful influence on advert reception. Labour supporters are more likely to trust this advert when it's badged as from the Labour Party, and less likely to trust exactly the same advert when badged as from the Conservative Party. This finding is exactly reversed when looking at Conservative supporters. What is interesting,

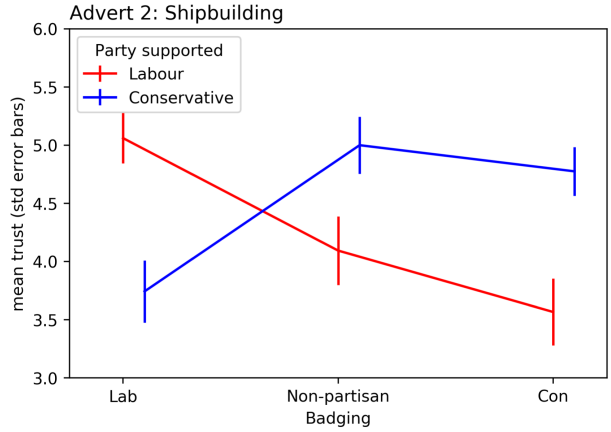

FIGURE 7 Trust evaluations to Advert 2 (Ship-building) in all three badged versions.

however, is the reactions when the advert is badged as from a non-partisan campaign group. In this case we see Labour supporters showing lower levels of trust than when branded as Labour, but higher levels of trust than when badged as from the Conservatives. This is perhaps to be expected as we know that the source of the advertisement is sympathetic to Labour (although the respondent does not know this).

What is perhaps most interesting is the response of Conservative party identifiers. In this graph we can see that this group is actually more likely to trust this advert when it's badged as from a non-partisan source than when it's badged as from the Labour Party (overturning the previously evident partisan effect). It is as likely to be trusted when badged as from a non-partisan source than when it's badged as from the Conservative Party. This suggests that apparently non-partisan badging can gain favorable reactions from people who do not share an advert's undisclosed partisan agenda, achieving what we call a "sneaker effect." This data also suggests that such badging can even gain more favorable reactions than those prompted by partisan cues.

The same trend of partisanship is depicted in Figure 8 which shows the breakdown of responses to the sex education advert, a topic respondents viewed as more closely aligned with the Conservative Party. It therefore appears that fielding partisan messages from apparently non-partisan sources can help to overcome the partisan reactions that emerge when an advert is badged as from a party with incongruous views.

In the third variant of our advert, climate change, which was viewed by participants as aligned with the Labour Party, this "sneaker effect" was not apparent; Figure 9. Conservative supporters were not more likely to trust the advert when it was badged as non-partisan as opposed to Labour. This effect was found with the replication (experiment 1b), so it is not clear if this is an advert/topic specific issue or merely an anomalous result resulting from sampling error (which is higher when viewing measures for individual adverts).

This qualitative pattern of effects was the same for all adverts in preregistered experiment 1b.

EXPERIMENT 2: TESTING THE EFFECTS OF DIGITAL IMPRINTS

In the context of the findings of experiment 1 and in light of concerns about the potential for citizens to be "deceived" about the source and intent of an advert via clandestine campaigning, it is

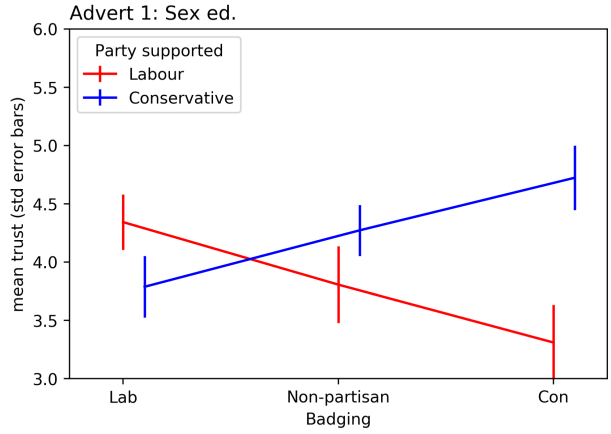

FIGURE 8 Trust evaluations to Advert 1 (Sex education) in all three badged versions.

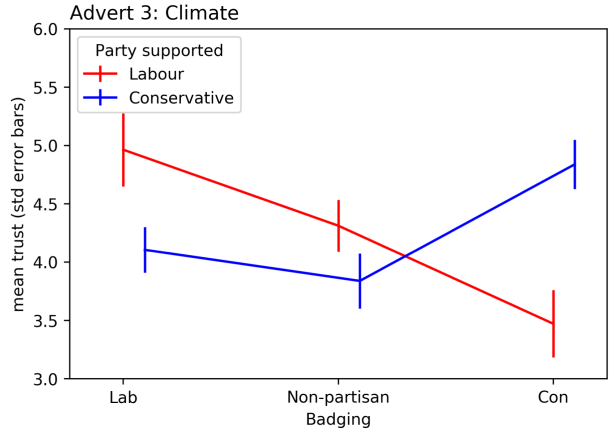

FIGURE 9 Trust evaluations to Advert 3 (Climate) in all three badged versions.

interesting to note the sustained interest in the idea of a digital imprint as a means of providing citizens with further information. Digital imprints are a specific type of disclosure, distinguishable from the badges tested in experiment 1 by the type of information communicated and the format they appear in. Simply put, this policy intervention requires campaigners to specify who is behind a campaign and who created it. In the United Kingdom, this approach has been seen to allow "voters to check the source of election material, and also help the police, prosecutors and the Commission to enforce the spending rules" (Electoral Commission, 2019; see also Harker, 2020, pp. 159–160). This idea is not confined to the UK but, as Harker (2020, p. 163) has detailed, is evident in the United States in the "Honest Ads Act" and the Federal Election Commission consultation (see also Federal Election Committee, 2022), and in Europe through the EU's Code of Practice. Requirements for a "promoter statement" also already exist in New Zealand,[1] and Facebook also requires a "Paid for" disclosure under political adverts. Despite these innovations and policy recommendations, at present there is little understanding of how imprints affect citizens' perceptions of adverts, especially outside the United States (Baum et al. 2021).

[1]https://elections.nz/media-and-news/2011/promoter-statement-requirements/.

This lack of empirical evidence is intriguing because various claims have been made about the effect and importance of imprints. In the United Kingdom, the Minister responsible for this initiative asserted in a recent technical consultation paper on digital imprints that imprints are designed to empower citizens "to make informed decisions in relation to election material online" and to "strengthen public trust and ensure voters are informed about who is behind a campaign" (Cabinet Office, 2020, p. 7). Elsewhere the Minister argued that imprints are needed because "if voters don't know who is responsible for election material they are less able to assess the validity of its claims" (Cabinet Office, 2020, p. 11). Imprints are therefore seen to "help citizens to better understand the origins of campaigning material and thus be able to make a political choice with greater confidence" (p. 13). This initiative is accordingly seen to foster trust, inform citizens, facilitate the assessment of claims, inform vote choice, and enable enforcement. However, despite these assertions, there is currently a lack of studies that have tested and confirmed these anticipated outcomes. Instead of analyzing each of these claims, our primary interest in this paper is to determine whether imprints can mitigate the "sneaker effect" identified above by helping citizens recognize the partisan affiliations of clandestine campaigners. To consider this, we conducted an additional experiment to evaluate the impact of digital imprints, which are now mandatory for online political adverts UK (by the Elections Act 2022). These proposals specify that paid or unpaid material should carry an imprint containing:

- the name and address of the promoter of the material; and
- the name and address of any person on behalf of whom the material is being published (and who is not the promoter).

In the context of Experiment 1, imprints represent a more precise and potentially less obtrusive intervention than the badging manipulation. Imprints are less salient than the badging manipulation we tested in experiment 1, they provide detail of partisan sponsorship of ads in "the small print." There is still the possibility that imprints could enable clandestine campaigning. If the imprint regulations allow for minimally or non-informative imprints, then campaigns can still launder their party-affiliations and/or identities.

To explore these effects, we conducted a survey experiment using the same adverts but with different imprint versions; specifically we used imprints suggesting that the adverts came directly from a party, or a party-affiliated partisan group, or a fictional non-partisan group, invented to appear unaligned.

Predictions

Our second experiment was fully preregistered, with the protocol, prediction and analysis plans declared ahead of data collection (preregistrations are viewable here https://osf.io/keqdn/?view_only=ef4b2c5ee5a141f790417106e3519353). We predicted that for all three measures (interest, willingness to click, and trust), there would be non-zero effects of the digital imprints. Specifically, adverts with the imprint of a politically congruent (in-partisan) party would be judged differently from adverts with the imprint of a politically incongruent party (out-partisan)—a standard "partisan bias" effect, H1; that adverts with imprints of an in-partisan affiliate would be judged differently from adverts with the imprint of an out-partisan affiliate (a partisan bias for affiliates, H2); and that adverts with a neutral, non-informative, label would be judged differently from adverts labeled with the imprint of an out-partisan party (H3, this effect represents the benefit for a party to present their messaging to partisanly opposed voters under the guide of a non-informative imprint—so called "clandestine campaigning" effect).

Further, as with Experiment 1, we predicted that the size of each effect would interact with party loyalty, but not with political knowledge (H4).

Methods

Materials

We took the three advert variants badged as from apparently non-partisan sources from experiment 1 (i.e., as from Atmospheric Rescue, Christian Concern, and Keep Britain Afloat). We then adapted these adverts by adding a "digital imprint" that aligned with the principles specified above.

For each advert, five imprint variants were tested, revealing different degrees of partisan information. The first two imprints contained explicit party identities—with an imprint for the Conservative Party and Labour Party. The next two presented two sources with known partisan affiliations to one of those parties, while the final advert contained no partisan information—citing only a name and address.

To illustrate the variants, the below imprints were placed in on the "Climate Emergency" advert placed by Atmospheric rescue (a fictional clandestine campaigning organization):

- Party Imprint: Promoted by Alan Mabbutt on behalf of the Conservative Party at 4 Matthew Parker Street, London, SW1H 9HQ.
- Party Imprint: Promoted by Jenny Formbie on behalf of the Labour Party at Southside, 105 Victoria Street, London, SW1E 6QT.
- Partisan Imprint: Promoted by Melanie Smallman on behalf of the Labour Environment Campaign Group at 200A Pentonville Road, King's Cross, London, N1 9JP.
- Partisan Imprint: Promoted by Megan Trethewey on behalf of the Conservative Environment Network at 33 Cannon Street, London, England, EC4M 5SB, United Kingdom.
- Non-Partisan Imprint: Promoted by Warren Pearce on behalf of Atmospheric Rescue at 5 Wells Terrace, London, N4 3JU.

All stimuli used, in all variants, are available in the online supplementary material.

The procedure followed that of experiment 1 closely. All participants saw all three adverts in a random order, in three of the five variants. The experimental measures (self-rated interest in, willingness to click, and trust) were the same, as were attention checks, the demographic questions and other participant-level dependent measures (party affiliation, strength of support, political activity, political knowledge, issue concern and perceptions of party interest in the advertised issues).

Participants

We recruited 1307 adult UK voters via the Qualtrics platform. Our agreement with Qualtrics allowed us to continue recruiting participants who passed at least one attention check until we reached our preregistered sample target of 1200. Similar to experiment 1, we excluded individuals who didn't identify as Labour or Conservative supporters or completed the entire experiment in less than 180 s. After applying these exclusions, we were left with 1108 participants.

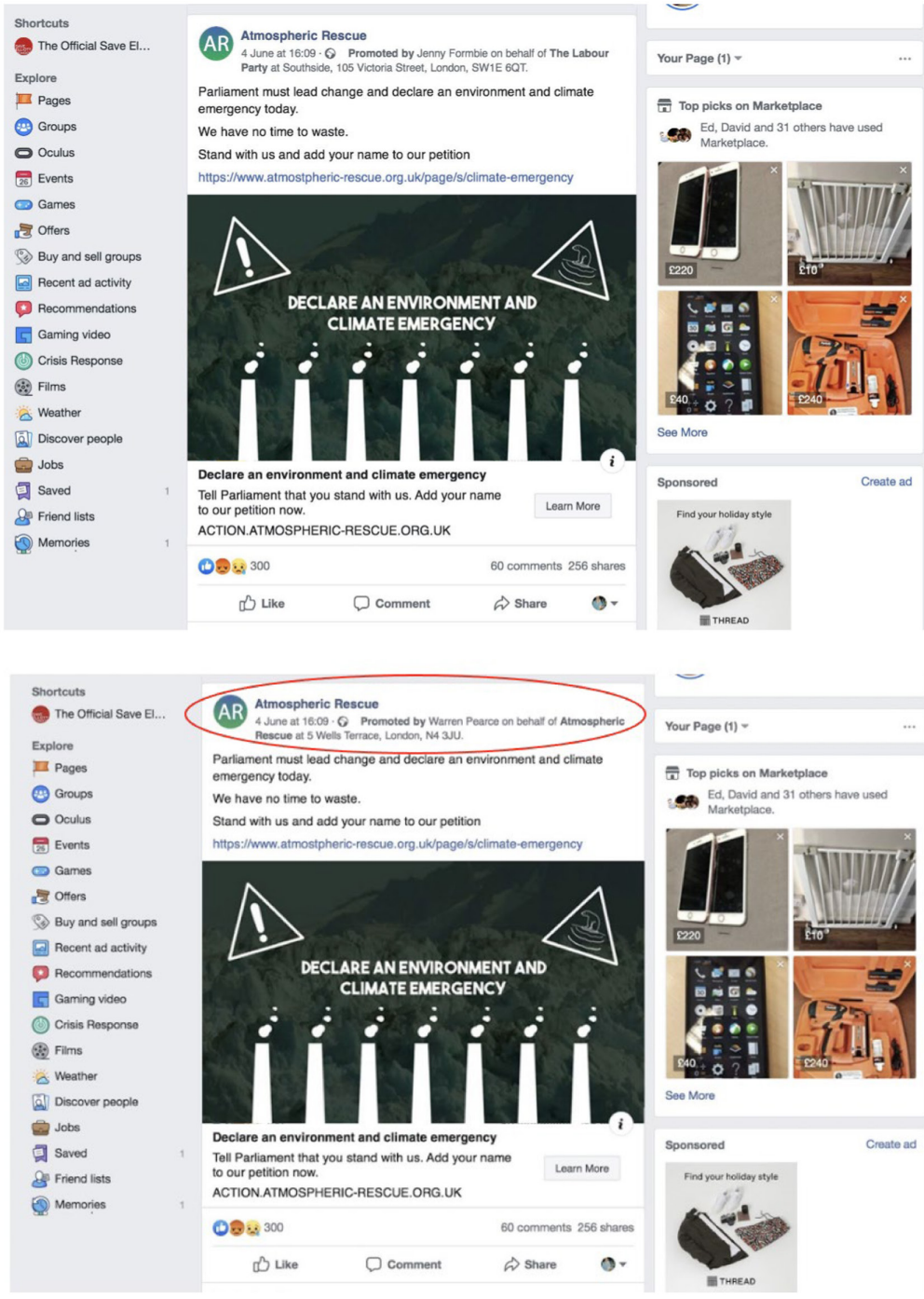

FIGURE 10 Climate change advert with Party (Labour, top) and non-partisan imprint (bottom).

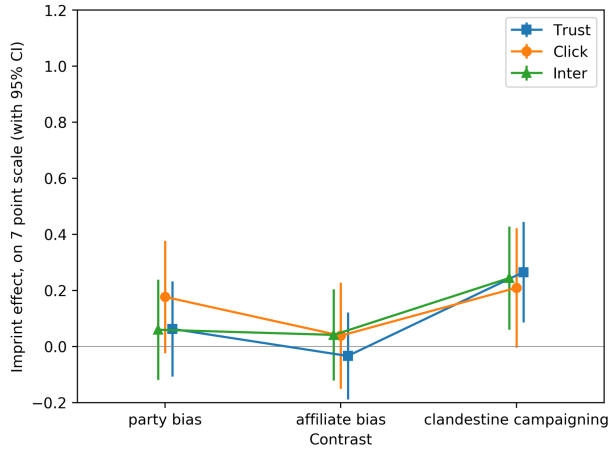

FIGURE 11 Size of contrast effects for experiment 2, averaged over all participants. Party bias is the difference between the in-partisan party imprint and the out-partisan party imprint. Affiliate bias is the difference between the in-partisan affiliate imprint and the out-partisan affiliate imprint. "Clandestine campaigning" is the difference between the non-partisan imprint and the out-partisan party imprint.

Results: Experiment 2

Imprint effects

Our first predictions, H1, H2, and H3, concerned the size of the effects shown in Figure 11. The party bias is the size of the difference between ratings of adverts with the imprint from the party which a participant supports versus of adverts with the imprint from the party that the participant opposes. The affiliate bias is the contrast between imprints from a group aligned with the party the participant supports versus imprints from a group aligned with the party the participant opposes. The clandestine campaigning effect is the rating of adverts with a non-informative/non-partisan imprint compared to an imprint from the party that the participant opposes.

Tests of statistical significance, comparing the mean effect to zero, are equivalent to asking if the 95% confidence interval overlaps with zero, which can be visually inferred from the figure. None of the three party effects nor the three affiliate bias effects were statistically significant. For the clandestine campaigning effects, the effects on interest and trust were statistically significant ($t(285) = 2.61$, $p = .010$; $t(285) = 2.91$, $p = .004$ respectively). The clandestine campaigning effect on willingness to click was not significant ($t(285) = 1.93$, $p = .054$).

This suggests that the imprint effects are smaller and/or less robust than the badging effects shown in experiment 1. Although the numerical differences for the party and affiliate biases were in the expected direction, they were not statistically distinguishable from chance variation. The clandestine campaigning effects were distinguishable from zero, perhaps driven by a higher trust in the non-informative imprints than either party/affiliate in-partisan or out-partisan imprints.

It could be that a larger sample would reveal reliable non-zero effects of partisan imprints on participants' judgments. For now, all we are safe to conclude is that there is potential for clandestine campaigning—in terms of more positive evaluations—for non-informative imprints compared to out-partisan imprints.

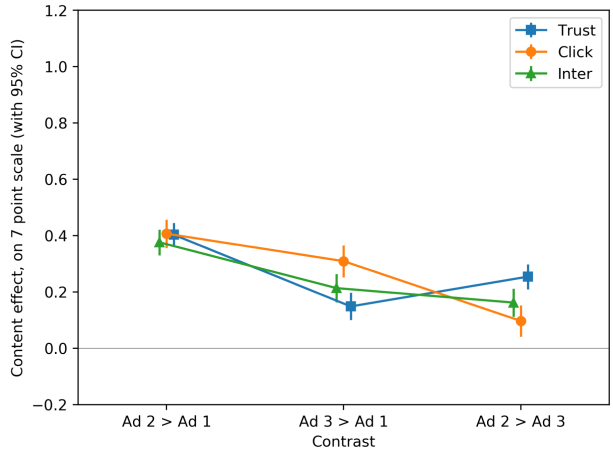

FIGURE 12 Experiment 2—difference in evaluations due to advert content.

Interaction effects

Our second prediction, H4, concerns the interaction of these main effects with party loyalty and political knowledge, tested in the same way as with experiment 1. These regression analyses, for all three main effects, for all three ratings (i.e., nine models), were not significant. The overall models did not significantly predict outcomes, and the coefficients on the party loyalty as a predictor were small and statistically non-significant. Full details of these analyses are available in the online repository for the paper.

The lack of significant effects is not surprising given the lack of main effects.

Exploratory analysis

The strength of experiment preregistration is that it clearly demarks predicted effects, and establishes the exact statistical tests necessary for their confirmation. This value is not reduced by the augmentation of analysis with exploratory analysis, as long as they are clearly labeled as such. Below we discuss some additional qualities of the results of experiment 2 which inform its interpretation.

As with experiment 1, we present the size of the content effects (Figure 12). These are of comparable magnitude to those found in experiment 1 (see Figure 5), and similarly suggest that our participants are attending to the content of the adverts, altering the evaluations based on what they see.

Looking at the trust ratings by imprint variations, we can see that those with a neutral imprint were most trusted. This is a somewhat surprising result, as we would expect that adverts containing an imprint from a favored party would be more trusted. On the one hand, this suggests that people may not be reading the imprints to extract partisan information (Jost et al., 2023), and may instead gather this information from the presence of a graphic or logo (as in the earlier experiment). And yet, the presence of variations in trust levels suggest that people are extracting some information from these imprints, otherwise we would expect all ratings to be constant. While we cannot therefore draw concrete conclusions about the ability of the imprint to overcome the "sneaker effect" that emerges when clandestine campaigners promote partisan messages, these results suggest that the content of an imprint may matter. It is, however, important to remain conscious of the fact that the absolute differences here are

small, suggesting that further investigation is essential to verify the effect of imprint variations before moving to recommend a specific policy response.

Interim discussion

Evidently, any imprint effects are less strong than badging effects, which might be expected given the relative subtly of imprints.

The clandestine campaigning effect was the only one which was statistically distinguishable from zero. This effect is potentially of greatest concern since it reflects a way unscrupulous campaigners could exploit legislation on imprints.

The clandestine campaigning effect with imprints effects was comparable in size but far less consistent than the average size of the content effect.

As might be expected from smaller and less reliable effects, it was not possible to discern any relation to participant party loyalty or political knowledge.

DISCUSSION

Summary

Our results show that, in line with research from the United States (Baum et al. 2021), voters interpret political adverts through a partisan lens—congruency between advert disclosures (badging or imprints) and voter loyalty was as large an effect on our measures, such as advert trust, as the effect of advert content. Importantly, for our current purposes, even when the disclosures indicated advert origin was an organization for which voters could not have prior partisan associations, there was a benefit relative to disclosures which indicated an origin incongruous to voters' party loyalties. Non-identifiable disclosures allowed adverts to escape the censure that can stem from ideological incongruency with voters—enabling clandestine campaigning. Statistically, these effects were predicted by the strength of individuals' partisan loyalty, for badging disclosures in experiment 1, but not by the extent of their political knowledge. In experiment 2 the effects were not predicted by partisan loyalty or knowledge. Voter attention to disclosures was confirmed across three studies (two preregistered, with experiment 1b being a formal replication of experiment 1a). We also explored these effects at disaggregated, individual advert level. The benefit of clandestine campaigning was typical, but not universal, for different advert/topic-partisan position combinations.

Context and interpretation

The results stand in contrast to the predictions of the "epistemic vigilance" perspective. Voters do not reject out of hand communications from unknown—and so untrusted—sources. Rather, such unknown sources are viewed more favorably than incongruent, but known, partisan sources. To make sense of this within a bounded rationality framework (which originated with Herbert Simon, this perspective is reviewed in the current context by Jones, 1999), we might speculate that the information environment of political campaigning is so abundant that voters fall back on crude short-cuts or heuristics to filter campaign adverts, first sorting adverts by ideological affiliation, and *then* applying epistemic vigilance or other mechanisms to determine trust. In this way, non-partisan adverts are excused from skeptical evaluation that is reserved for out-partisan communications. Another possibility is that the benefit of clandestine campaigning appears due to active distrust of adverts from ideological opponents,

rather than positive trust of apparently non-partisan sources. More research would be needed to distinguish these two possibilities.

These results align with findings in the US context (e.g., Ridout et al., 2015), but extend them to the UK context and directly and experimentally test the interaction between voter partisan loyalty and source, while holding advert content constant. The results confirm that disclosures which contain indicators of advert source are attended to and affect the reaction to the advert. Our findings contrast somewhat with the results of Binder et al. (2022), who also tested the effect of partisan congruence and incongruence on political advert reception, but reported no effect of targeting disclosures alone. The latter study did not, however, test the effect of disclaimers on adverts from non-partisan sources, using Facebook posts from well-known and easily identifiable political parties. As partisan congruence or incongruence could have been inferred through means other than the disclosure, this may explain the lack of effect. In the experiments presented in this paper, the disclosures alternatively communicated partisan information that was otherwise difficult to infer from the content of the adverts alone. Disclosures may therefore be expected to have greater impact when their presence or absence on adverts directly alters how clearly partisan cues are communicated. Alternatively, the statistical power of their study was lower, raising the possibility of a failure to find a true effect.

We studied two forms of disclosure, informal badging and formal imprints. These vary by their degree of visual salience, as well as the information contained. The badging manipulation involved the party name in three separate locations on the ad, the imprint only one (Contrast Figures 1 and 10). The form of these disclosures was informed by specific platform and legal policy suggestions for disclosures, rather than to explicitly test the effects of visual salience and the specific information a disclosure could contain. These item factors could be explicitly manipulated and combined with manipulation checks which allow measurement of awareness or recall in future experiments.

Across both experiments, reactions of our participants to the adverts will have been governed by both the implicit associations between the content and political parties and by the disclosure—and in particular, as our analysis demonstrated, by the congruence with existing partisan loyalties. The power of an experimental approach is that, since advert topics were mixed independently of disclosure, we are able to make a strong causal inference around the effect of disclosure beyond and independent of existing associations. The conclusion that congruence of advert source—as indicated by the disclosure—and voter partisan identity drives the reported effect is strengthened by the analysis which demonstrates that *extent* of partisan loyalty is a predictor of the size of the effect (for experiment 1). The lack of a significant influence of the extent of political knowledge acts as a control analysis, suggesting that it really is motivational factors which drive the effect, rather than a side effect of more loyal partisans also being more politically informed.

Limitations

A major limitation of the current studies is the reliance of self-report measures. Although we have demonstrated differences in evaluations, it is not clear how differential evaluations would feed into behavior (such as campaign donations or voting behavior). Additionally, momentary differences in evaluations are not guaranteed to reflect the long-term effect of particular types of adverts. It is plausible, for example, that clandestine campaigning could momentarily raise trust from ideologically skeptical voters, but long-term, once the tactic becomes familiar, decrease trust, both in the specific party and in political campaigning in general. These concerns establish as a priority research which extends the investigation of clandestine campaigning to either direct behavioral measure or longer term effects, or both.

Additionally, we note that there is a distinction between (1) the alignment between the advert source and the party affiliation of the receiver and (2) the alignment between the advert content and the ideological position of the receiver. However, fully disentangling these distinctions is not possible given the experimental manipulation we did—in the current study we essentially treat partisan alignment as shorthand for ideology, and while it is possible there is divergence we do not examine that here.

Nor are we able to examine the associations held by our participants between the fictional organizations and existing political parties. Certainly each participant would have intuitions around which party a supposedly non-partisan organization might be closer to. It would be hard to retain the ecological validity of the experimental materials, such that it is, and also find alternative identities which do not have some connotations with existing parties. Because our samples are ideologically balanced (left–right), to the extent that perceived associations are equal and opposite they will cancel out in the aggregate results on which the main claims of this study are based.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these results suggest not only that badging matters for citizens' reactions to adverts, but also that partisan information cues affect how adverts are viewed. These trends are particularly interesting given the presence of apparently non-partisan campaigners who can be used to advance partisan messages and goals. This experiment shows the potential for the emergence of what we term "clandestine campaigning."

Although the effects are diminished for imprints rather than full advert badging, they are analogous—there is a clandestine campaigning benefit to presenting the same advert with a non-informative imprint rather than an imprint which reveals an incongruent partisan origin. The results are double-edge. The non-zero effect of imprints suggests they are noticed and can affect voters' response to adverts, even during the brief and information saturated exposures of the online social media environment. The evidence for a clandestine campaigning effect suggests that careful regulation of the content of online imprints, and ongoing monitoring of their use and—potential misuse—is necessary (Dommett, 2020).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In addition to anonymous reviewers, we thank Todd Hartman for reading an earlier version of this manuscript. Who Targets Me and Sam Jeffers generated the stimulus materials. Nathaniel Daw provided some experimental design advice over Twitter. Tony Grimes kindly advised on the advertising literature.

ORCID

Tom Stafford https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8089-9479
Hazel Gordon https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4053-6419
Junyan Zhu https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2869-824X
Katharine Dommett https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0624-6610

REFERENCES

All Party Parliamentary Group on Electoral Campaigning Transparency. (2020). Defending our democracy in the digital age. *Fair Vote*. https://fairvote.uk/defending-our-democracy-in-the-digital-age-new-report-launched/

Baines, P., & Jones, N. (2018). Influence and interference in foreign elections. *The RUSI Journal, 163*(1), 12–19.

Barnard, L., & Kreiss, D. (2013). A research agenda for online advertising: Surveying campaign practices, 2000-2012. *International Journal of Communication, 7,* 2046–2066.

Bartels, L. (2000). Partisanship and voting behavior, 1952-1996. *American Journal of Political Science, 44*(1), 35–50.
Bartels, L. M. (2002). Beyond the running tally: Partisan bias in political perceptions. *Political Behavior, 24*(2), 117–150.
Baum, K., Meissner, S., & Krasnova, H. (2021). Partisan self-interest is an important driver for people's support for the regulation of targeted political advertising. *PLoS One, 16*(5), e0250506.
Bimber, B. (2003). *Information and American democracy: Technology in the evolution of political power*. Cambridge University Press.
Binder, A., Stubenvoll, M., Hirsch, M., & Matthes, J. (2022). Why am i getting this ad? How the degree of targeting disclosures and political fit affect persuasion knowledge, party evaluation, and online privacy behaviors. *Journal of Advertising, 51*(2), 206–222. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.2015727
Bodó, B., Helberger, N., & de Vreese, C. (2017). Political micro-targeting: A Manchurian candidate or just a dark horse? *Internet Policy Review, 6*(4). https://doi.org/10.14763/2017.4.776
Brooks, D. J., & Murov, M. (2012). Assessing accountability in a post-Citizens United era: The effects of attack ad sponsorship by unknown independent groups. *American Politics Research, 40*(3), 383–418.
Cabinet Office. (2020). *Transparency in digital campaigning: Technical consultation on digital imprints*. Cabinet Office.
Campbell, A., Converse, P. E., Miller, W. E., & Stokes, D. E. (1960). *The American voter*. Wiley.
Clarke, H. D., Sanders, D., Stewart, M. C., & Whiteley, P. F. (2009). *Performance politics and the British voter*. Cambridge University Press.
Dommett, K. (2020). Regulating digital campaigning: The need for precision in calls for transparency. *Policy & Internet, 12*(4), 432–449.
Dommett, K., & Power, S. (2020). Democracy in the dark, electoral reform society. https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Democracy-in-the-Dark-FINAL.pdf
Dommett, K., & Zhu, J. (2022). The barriers to regulating the online world: Insights from UK debates on online political advertising. *Policy & Internet, 14*(4), 772–787.
Dowling, C., & Wichowsky, A. (2015). Attacks without consequence? Candidates, parties, groups, and the changing face of negative advertising. *American Journal of Political Science, 59*(1), 19–36.
Dowling, C. M., & Wichowsky, A. (2013). Does it matter who's behind the curtain? Anonymity in political advertising and the effects of campaign finance disclosure. *American Politics Research, 41*(6), 965–996.
Edelson, L., Sakhuja, S., & McCoy, D. (2018). *An analysis of Facebook's archive of ads with political content*. https://c3media.vsos.ethz.ch/congress/2018/slides-pdf/35c3-9419-explaining_online_us_political_advertising.pdf
Electoral Commission. (2019). *Referendums (Scotland) bill written submission from the electoral commission*. https://www.parliament.scot/S5_Finance/General%20Documents/006_Electoral_Commission.pdf
Federal Election Committee. (2022). *REG 2011-02 (final rule and explanation and justification for Internet communication disclaimers)—Draft B*. https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/mtgdoc-22-52-B.pdf
Franklin Fowler, E., Franz, M., & Ridout, R. (2019). The blue wave: Assessing political advertising trends and democratic advantages in 2018. *PS: Political Science and Politics, 53*(1), 57–63.
Goodman, E., Labo, S., Moore, M., & Tambini, D. (2017). *The new political campaigning. Media Policy Brief 19*. Media Policy Project, London School of Economics and Political Science.
Green, J., & Jennings, W. (2019). Party reputations and policy priorities: How issue ownership shapes executive and legislative agendas. *British Journal of Political Science, 49*(2), 443–466.
Groenendyk, E. W., & Valentino, N. A. (2002). Of dark clouds and silver linings: Effects of exposure to issue versus candidate advertising on persuasion, information retention, and issue salience. *Communication Research, 29*(3), 295–319.
Harker, M. (2020). Political advertising revisited: Digital campaigning and protecting democratic discourse. *Legal Studies, 40,* 151–171.
Henderson, J. A., & Theodoridis, A. G. (2018). Seeing spots: Partisanship, negativity and the conditional receipt of campaign advertisements. *Political Behavior, 40,* 965–987.
Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, not ideology: A social identity perspective on polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 76*(3), 405–431.
Jamieson, K. H. (2013). Messages, micro-targeting, and new media technologies. *The Forum, 11*(3), 429–435.
Jones, B. D. (1999). Bounded rationality. *Annual Review of Political Science, 2*(1), 297–321.
Jost, P., Kruschinski, S., Sülflow, M., Haßler, J., & Maurer, M. (2023). Invisible transparency: How different types of ad disclaimers on facebook affect whether and how digital political advertising is perceived. *Policy & Internet, 15,* 204–222. https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.333
Jungherr, A., Rivero, G., & Gayo-Avello, F. (2020). *Retooling politics: How digital media are shaping democracy*. CUP.
Kim, Y. M., Hsu, J., Kou, C., Bankston, L., Kim, S. Y., Baragwanath, R., & Raskutti, G. (2018). The stealth media? Groups and targets behind divisive issue campaigns on Facebook. *Political Communication, 35*(4), 515–541.

Koch, T. K., Frischlich, L., & Lermer, E. (2023). Effects of fact-checking warning labels and social endorsement cues on climate change fake news credibility and engagement on social media. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 53*(6), 495–507.

Kofi Annan Foundation. (2020). Protecting electoral integrity in the digital age. https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/01/f035dd8e-kaf_kacedda_report_2019_web.pdf

Krotzek, L. (2019). Inside the voter's mind: The effect of psychometric microtargeting on feelings toward and propensity to vote for a candidate. *International Journal of Communication, 13,* 3609–3629.

Lavigne, M. (2021). Strengthening ties: The influence of microtargeting on partisan attitudes and the vote. *Party Politics, 27*(5), 965–976.

Li, J., & Wagner, M. W. (2020). The value of not knowing: Partisan cue-taking and belief updating of the uninformed, the ambiguous, and the misinformed. *Journal of Communication, 70*(5), 646–669.

Mercier, H. (2020). *Not born yesterday*. Princeton University Press.

Munafò, M. R., Nosek, B. A., Bishop, D. V., Button, K. S., Chambers, C. D., Du Sert, N. P., Simonsohn, U., Wagenmakers, E. J., Ware, J. J., & Ioannidis, J. P. (2017). A manifesto for reproducible science. *Nature Human Behaviour, 1*(1), 1–9.

Oeldorf-Hirsch, A., Schmierbach, M., Appelman, A., & Boyle, M. P. (2020). The ineffectiveness of fact-checking labels on news memes and articles. *Mass Communication and Society, 23*(5), 682–704.

Petersen, M. B., Skov, M., Serritzlew, S., & Ramsøy, T. (2013). Motivated reasoning and political parties: Evidence for increased processing in the face of party cues. *Political Behavior, 35*(4), 831–854.

Rhodes, S. C., Franz, M. M., Fowler, E. F., & Ridout, T. N. (2019). The role of dark money disclosure on candidate evaluations and viability. *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy, 18*(2), 175–190.

Ridout, T. N., Franz, M. M., & Fowler, E. F. (2015). Sponsorship, disclosure, and donors: Limiting the impact of outside group ads. *Political Research Quarterly, 68*(1), 154–166.

Schmitt, J., Debbelt, C., & Schneider, F. (2018). Too much information? Predictors of information overload in the context of online news exposure. *Information, Communication & Society, 21*(8), 1151–1167.

Simmons, J. P., Nelson, L. D., & Simonsohn, U. (2011). False-positive psychology: Undisclosed flexibility in data collection and analysis allows presenting anything as significant. *Psychological Science, 22*(11), 1359–1366.

Sperber, D., Clément, F., Heintz, C., Mascaro, O., Mercier, H., Origgi, G., & Wilson, D. (2010). Epistemic vigilance. *Mind & Language, 25*(4), 359–393.

Stafford, T., Pirrone, A., Croucher, M., & Krystalli, A. (2020). Quantifying the benefits of using decision models with response time and accuracy data. *Behavior Research Methods, 52,* 2142–2155. https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-020-01372-w

Suhay, E., Bello-Pardo, E., & Maurer, B. (2018). The polarizing effects of online partisan criticism: Evidence from two experiments. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 23*(1), 95–115.

Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science, 50*(3), 755–769.

Vegetti, F., & Mancosu, M. (2020). The impact of political sophistication and motivated reasoning on misinformation. *Political Communication, 37*(5), 678–695.

Wagner, M., Tarlov, J., & Vivyan, N. (2014). Partisan bias in opinion formation on episodes of political controversy: Evidence from Great Britain. *Political Studies, 62*(1), 136–158.

Wathen, N., & Burkell, J. (2002). Believe it or not: Factors influencing credibility on the web. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 53*(2), 134–144.

Weber, C., Dunaway, J., & Johnson, T. (2012). It's all in the name: Source cue ambiguity and the persuasive appeal of campaign ads. *Political Behavior, 34*(3), 561–584.

Wilson, E. J., & Sherrell, D. L. (1993). Source effects in communication and persuasion research: A meta-analysis of effect size. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 21,* 101–112.

Woolley, S., & Howard, P. (2019). *Computational propaganda: Political parties, politician and political manipulation on social media*. OUP.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Stafford, T., Gordon, H., Zhu, J., & Dommett, K. (2024). Online political adverts: The effect of disclosures and opportunities for clandestine campaigning. *Political Psychology*, *00*, 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.13034

APPENDIX 1

PARTICIPANTS DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS FOR EACH EXPERIMENT

TABLE A1 Demographic variables for all experiments.

	Experiment 1a	Experiment 1b	Experiment 2
Sex			
Female	241	222	651
Male	158	181	454
Prefer not to say	3	1	3
Age			
18–24	86	36	103
25–34	117	64	267
35–44	80	76	219
45–54	70	69	149
55–64	42	83	180
65–74	6	59	140
75–84	1	16	48
85+		1	2
Education			
GCSEs or equivalent	44	124	303
A-levels or equivalent	128	117	351
Undergraduate degree	156	116	315
Postgraduate degree	69	35	104
None	5	12	39
Party affiliation			
Conservative	106	203	560
Labour	95	201	548
None	56		
Green Party	49		
Brexit Party	43		
Others	53		

APPENDIX 2

EXPERIMENT 1B—PREREGISTERED TEST OF BADGING EFFECTS

RESULTS

Prediction #1: The badging effect, on all three variables measured, would be non-zero, both for the *in-partisan–out-partisan* contrast and the *non-partisan*-versus- *out-partisan* contrast. We used a series of one-sample t-test, contrasting the mean badging effect with zero (i.e., with no effect). The results are shown in Table A2:

Prediction #2: The size of the in-partisan–out-partisan badging effect will be related to loyalty. Our second prediction was concerned with the measure of advert trust only, since in 1a the three outcome measures generally aligned and trust was of primary theoretical interest.

Results of the regression model testing this prediction are shown in Table A3.

Prediction #3: The badging effect for trust would not be influenced by political knowledge, once party loyalty was taken into account. To test this prediction we, again, ran a regression predicting the Labour–Conservative badging effect from party loyalty and political knowledge. The results are shown in Table A4.

TABLE A2 Preregistered tests of badging effects.

Contrast	Measure	Effect (mean)	Effect (*SE*)	*t*	*p*	CI
In-partisan–out-partisan	Interest	.30	.082	3.62	.0003	(.136, .458)
In-partisan–out-partisan	Click	.34	.086	3.96	.0001	(.173, .51)
In-partisan–out-partisan	Trust	.51	.084	6.05	.0000	(.345, .675)
In-partisan–out-partisan	Interest	.11	.082	1.39	.1642	(−.046, .274)
In-partisan–out-partisan	Click	.15	.086	1.73	.0848	(−.02, .317)
In-partisan–out-partisan	Trust	.35	.075	4.64	.0000	(.202, .496)

TABLE A3 Regression model predicting effect of badging on trust from extent of partisan loyalty.

	L-T_Trust
Model R^2	.09
Model *F*	39.85
Model *df*s	[1, 394]
Model *p*	.0000
Beta	.25
Beta *SE*	.04
Coef *p*	.0000
Coef CI	[.172, .328]

TABLE A4 Regression model predicting effect of badging on trust from extent of partisan loyalty and political knowledge.

	L-T_Trust
Model R^2	.05
Model *F*	9.49
Model *df*s	[2, 393]
Model *p*	.0001
Loyalty beta	.17
Loyalty beta *SE*	.04
Loyalty coef *p*	.0000
Loyalty CI	[.092, .249]
Pol. know. beta	.10
Pol. know. beta *SE*	.06
Pol. know. coef *p*	.0820
Pol. know. CI	[−.013, .249]