

Persuading novice voters with abstract or concrete messages: Timing is everything

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When Barack Obama began his Presidential campaign, his rhetoric emphasized abstract notions of hope, change, and judgment. In contrast, Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, and other candidates frequently presented detailed, concrete proposals on a host of topics ranging from foreign policy issues such as the Iraq War to domestic issues such as the economy and health care reform. Political commentators and opinion page writers criticized Obama for his lack of specifics, yet voters continued to respond to his message. Obama's reliance on lofty rhetoric has succeeded thus far, and in a study forthcoming in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, Hakkyun Kim (Concordia University), Akshay Rao (University of Minnesota), and Angela Lee (Northwestern University) provide research evidence for why this strategy works.

The researchers used the following analogy to make their point. Imagine taking a vacation to Cancun sometime in the future. If the vacation is six months away, the traveler is probably thinking about beaches, sunsets, and other abstract information. On the other hand, if the vacation begins the following week, the traveler is thinking about taxi cabs, boarding passes, and specific, concrete concerns.

In similar fashion, a voter facing a choice in the distant future is less interested in particular plans and policies than in broad, abstract themes. It is only as the election gets closer do voters start paying attention to details of the candidate's positions on issues of importance to them. The study authors demonstrate this effect in a series of studies and further observe that it is relatively uninformed voters who are subject to this

effect. That is, while informed voters are not affected by abstract or concrete information nor how distant the election is, political novices tend to be more persuaded by abstract messages when the choice is far in the future, and by concrete messages when the choice is in the near future.

The researchers observe that, while their experiments focused on political contexts, the underlying argument applies equally well to many consumption contexts such as deciding which college to attend, which automobile to purchase when one graduates from college, or where to live when one retires.

Citation: Hakkyun Kim, Akshay R. Rao, Angela Y. Lee, "It's Time to Vote: The Effect of Matching Message Orientation and Temporal Frame on Political Persuasion" *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2009.

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