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What Do We Know about Political Advertising? Not Much! Political Persuasion Knowledge and Advertising Skepticism in the United States

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ABSTRACT

In a democracy, political advertising should offer truthful information so voters can make informed decisions about candidates. Given changes in political advertising (digital media, regulations), voters may not have the requisite political advertising literacy to critically scrutinize and evaluate political messages, leading them to be persuaded by false advertisements. Using the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) as theoretical framework, we compare three forms of persuasion knowledge (PK) about political advertising (objective, subjective, topic) to test how these types of knowledge relate to one another and to a common coping response strategy of PK: skepticism of political advertising. Results of a survey comprised of a national sample of U.S. voters show low objective persuasion knowledge about political advertising, especially for digital messages and regulation and relatively low-middle topic (political knowledge). As predicted, the more knowledge about politics in general (i.e., topic knowledge) the respondents had, the more objective and subjective persuasion knowledge they had about political advertising. Topic knowledge and subjective persuasion knowledge (but not objective persuasion knowledge) predicted skepticism toward political advertising. Ramifications for theory development of PKM and for future political advertising literacy interventions are discussed.

Political advertising through paid media is considered a “staple of communication in democracies around the world” (Kaid 2004, 155) and is one of the main forms of political communication. Despite its primary role as a persuasion agent, political advertising *has* been shown to contribute to civic learning and political information (Goldstein and Ridout 2004) including knowledge about candidate policies (Patterson and McClure 1976) and presidential candidates (Brians and Wattenberg 1996). As compared with debates, advertising is a simpler form of political communication which can “reduce confusion and aid learning for all kinds of viewers” (Just et al. 1990, 131). Thus, one long-held purpose of political advertising is to create an “informed electorate” (Kelley 1960) as a key part of democracy by providing “information which is true and accurate, unambiguous, unclouded by emotion, and which therefore enhances, rather than undermines, the decision-making process” (Kaid 1996, 130).

However, prominent political scientists also present another view, suggesting the “intended effect of political advertising or paid media is to win political battles by creating and delivering biased messages” (Goldstein and Ridout 2004, 205). Indeed, some regard political advertising as

“the most deceptive, misleading, unfair, and untruthful of all advertising” (Spero 1980, 3). Given that the Truth in Advertising laws governing commercial advertising, regulated by the Federal Trade Commission, have not often been applied to political advertising (Fowler, Franz, and Ridout 2016), these critiques may not be unfounded. To what extent are voters aware of this regulatory difference? Some research suggests that the voting public may not know much about how political advertising operates or how it is regulated (Haley 2020; Lang and Krueger 1993). This lack of knowledge may lead to vulnerable audiences: if voters do not know that a false or misleading political advertisement may air on television or come through social media, “they might then perceive that ad as completely truthful and use the information in their decision making about a candidate” (Lang and Krueger 1993, 212). Without knowledge about political advertising, voters may not engage in critical thinking or invoke skepticism.

Knowledge about voters’ understanding of political advertising can be assessed using the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) as a theoretical framework (Friestad and Wright 1994). The PKM outlines how persuasion targets and persuasion agents operate in a given persuasion episode, with a focus on how their knowledge of persuasion may lead to coping mechanisms (accept, counterargue, ignore) and outcomes. Consumers’ persuasion knowledge is developmentally contingent, increasing throughout the life span through discussions with and observations of others, marketplace literacy education, and experience with persuasion tactics. The PKM focuses on three types of knowledge. To cope with a persuasion episode (e.g., political advertisement) individuals need to have knowledge of the subject being discussed (*topic knowledge*: beliefs and knowledge about the topic of the message such as a product, service, social cause, or candidate; Friestad and Wright 1994), knowledge of who is presenting the message (*agent knowledge*) and knowledge about persuasive techniques (*tactic knowledge*; Friestad and Wright 1994). Most studies focus on persuasion knowledge (Ham and Nelson 2019).

Scholars have also defined and operationalized *objective persuasion knowledge* (OPK) as distinct from *subjective persuasion knowledge* (SPK) (e.g., Ham and Nelson 2016; Hardesty, Bearden, and Carlson 2007). *Subjective* PK is an individual self-assessment or perception about how persuasion works (i.e., what they think they know; Ham, Nelson, and Das 2015; typically measured as confidence in knowledge about marketer agents’ persuasion tactics; Bearden, Hardesty, and Rose 2001). *Objective* PK assesses specific knowledge about a persuasion tactic, which is stored in long-term memory, which taps into what the person “actually knows” (Carlson, Bearden, and Hardesty 2007). Only a few studies have measured objective persuasion knowledge (e.g., Ham and Nelson 2016; Hardesty, Bearden, and Carlson 2007) or topic knowledge (e.g., Kachersky and Kim 2010), and no studies have investigated multiple forms of PK in political advertising.

Therefore, our study investigates multiple forms of persuasion knowledge (objective, subjective, topic) and tests their relationships to one another and to one coping mechanism as a result of persuasion knowledge: advertising skepticism (i.e., tendency toward disbelief in advertising; Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998). Skepticism is the outcome variable because it is considered an important critical thinking skill and target coping response mechanism as a result of persuasion knowledge (Campbell and Kirmani 2008; see Gaeth and Heath 1987; Nelson et al. 2020; Roberts et al. 1980). Indeed, “public policy makers, consumer interest groups, and consumer affairs researchers who are concerned with advertisers’ potential to mislead consumers generally believe that consumer skepticism of advertising claims is a necessary, beneficial, and healthy skill that protects consumers from advertisers’ deceit” (Koslow 2000, 245).

The changing media environment and regulatory differences in political advertising make this research on political advertising knowledge particularly timely and important. Whereas political advertising has multiple forms from bumper stickers to yard signs, the majority of media spending and research have historically been focused on “television advertising” (Kaid 2004), where there is question if complex political ideas can be effectively discussed or *understood* in 15- or 30-second TV spots (Jamieson 1996). However, the changes in the digital media environment have

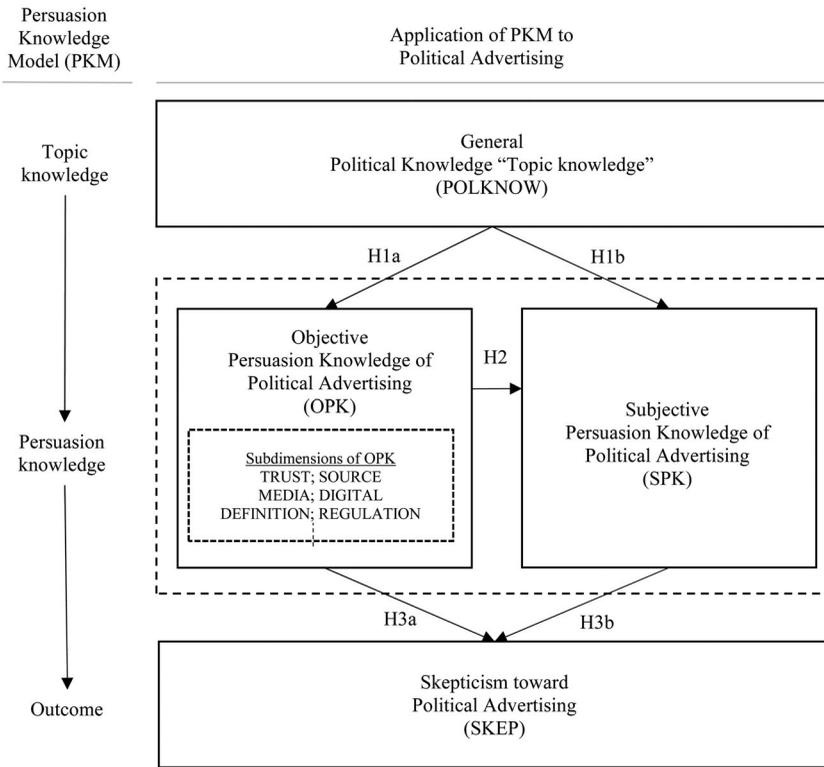


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model: Investigating impact of three types of persuasion knowledge on advertising skepticism.

resulted in a new range of messages and opportunity for citizen confusion. For example, citizens may not know if a sponsored message (e.g., Boerman and Kruijkemeier 2016) or a Facebook meme is a political ad, and the sources (who paid for the ad) in many social media political advertisements are not disclosed (Scott 2020). Further, the volume of political advertisements has increased substantially in the past decade with more targeted messaging (Fulgoni, Lipsman, and Davidsen 2016). Expenditures on political advertising in the U.S. were up to \$10.8 billion for the 2019–2020 election cycle, which presents a 50% increase over the 2016 cycle (Friedman 2020). In 2008, \$22.25 million was spent on online political ads (Nott 2020). Estimates of online spending for the U.S. 2019–2020 election cycle were predicted to reach a record high of more than \$1.34 billion, which represents 19.5% of total political advertising spend (He 2020). These changes in spending have fundamentally changing political advertising (Fowler, Franz and Ridout 2016).

Second, the U.S. political advertising regulatory environment offers a unique situation in that (1) political candidates and parties and even corporations can purchase virtually unlimited amounts of advertising (Goldstein, Schweidel and Whittenmyler 2012), therefore, expanding the kinds of sources who are creating and funding such messages; and (2) due to the emphasis on free speech rights in the U.S., there is little government regulation of political messages (Kaid 2004). Potential for false advertisements is more problematic in an environment where social media messages are key sources of information for voters (Herrle 2019; Dykhne 2018).

Finally, despite the importance of political advertising for democracy and the solicitation for research (e.g., Weaver Lariscy and Tinkham 2002; Taylor 2010), there have been few studies related to political advertising in the field (Taylor 2010). We hope to inspire research on political advertising, assess the levels of knowledge of political advertising, and investigate how they predict advertising skepticism; for our conceptual model, see Figure 1.

Forms of knowledge within the persuasion knowledge model

Assessing topic knowledge: Political literacy in the U.S

Topic knowledge in the PKM relates to beliefs and knowledge about the topic of the message such as a product, service, social cause, or candidate (Friestad and Wright 1994). Few studies have examined or measured topic knowledge or investigated how people acquire topic knowledge (Campbell and Kirmani 2008; Ham and Nelson 2019), despite the important role that ‘expertise’ or knowledge plays in persuasion, for example in providing a greater knowledge base from which to draw inferences and generate ideas (e.g., Jacoby et al. 1986).

A few studies have explored how topic knowledge interacts with other forms of persuasion knowledge. Lorenzon and Russell (2012) showed evidence of topic, agent, and persuasion knowledge in their analysis of game players’ comments on in-game advertising. When all three knowledge types were used, game players provided more complex thinking and ambivalence about in-game advertising. In a series of experiments, Kachersky and Kim (2010) examined how familiarity with a product (topic knowledge) interacts with persuasion knowledge in judging price fairness. They found a moderating role of topic knowledge on consumer perceptions: the use of persuasion knowledge was greater when consumers lacked topic knowledge. Finally, in focus groups assessing meaning and interpretations of advocacy advertisements with members of a coal mining community, Miller and Sinclair (2009) show that topic knowledge helped community members to perceive industry accountability, which shaped their perceptions of persuasion knowledge, advertising intent, and transparency.

Since we are examining political advertising, the overall topic relates to knowledge about politics, which has been referred to as political literacy (“*the knowledge and understanding of the political process and political issues which enables people to perform their roles as citizens effectively*”; Cassel and Lo 1997). In further details, Carpini and Keeter (1996) have conceptualized political knowledge as “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory” (Carpini and Keeter 1996, 10). More recently, scholars have categorized different types of political knowledge into general or policy-specific knowledge and into static or more contemporary knowledge or facts that may require surveillance of news and information sources (Barabas et al. 2014).

Political knowledge is at the core of democracy and is “the currency of citizenship” (Carpini and Keeter 1996, 8). It is seen as essential for informed political participation and necessary for comprehending the contents of public debate (Cassel and Lo 1997). Research indicates that levels of political knowledge affect the acceptance of democratic principles, attitudes toward specific issues, and political participation (Galston 2001). Those with more political knowledge have been found to make more informed political decision that are consistent with their own attitudes (Carpini and Keeter 1996).

Education level and political involvement are thought to be the best predictors of political literacy (Cassel and Lo 1997), with education predicting general and policy-specific political knowledge especially well (Barabas et al. 2014). Yet even highly educated people can choose to be politically inactive or not pay attention to issues, events or information that could be important in making political decisions. Political scientists agree that the extent of political literacy among mass U.S publics is only modest (Carpini and Keeter 1996; Erikson and Tedin 1995). Despite increases in the formal educational attainment of the U.S. population during from 1950 to 2000, levels of political knowledge barely budged (Galston 2001). Results of a seven-item 2018 Pew Research poll assessing the public’s civic and political knowledge showed that the level of knowledge varied depending on the nature of the question. Specifically, 86% of Americans surveyed knew that free speech was protected by the First Amendment, showing high knowledge of this ‘static’ and general political knowledge and 83% knew that the Republican party held the majority in the Senate at the time of the poll, highlighting good contemporary knowledge. Relatively low

knowledge was found, however, for specific political knowledge or policy questions: only 54% knew that the vice president can cast the tie-breaking vote in the Senate and 41% knew that 60 votes were necessary to end a filibuster in the Senate.

Yet, for many political science scholars, political knowledge serves as an independent, rather than the dependent variable in research studies, so level of knowledge is not always explicitly reported (Barabas et al. 2014). Further, as lamented by Popkin (1991), “the ‘incompetent citizen’ literature is good for telling us the many things voters do not know, it is not so good at providing clues about what they *do* know” (43, emphasis in original). Therefore, we were interested in knowing the current level of topic knowledge of politics and political process.

RQ1: What is the level of general political (“topic”) knowledge (“political literacy”) among U.S. voters?

We predict that topic knowledge about politics will positively relate to knowledge of political advertising. As reported by Thorson et al. (2019), knowledge about politics has been found to be related to the attention citizens pay to political advertising (Eveland and Hively 2009; Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner 1994). We review literature on political advertising next before discussing persuasion knowledge of political advertising.

Political advertising: A unique challenge to persuasion knowledge

Persuasion knowledge about the persuasion context is important; it is thought that adults have fairly high levels of understanding of advertising (John 1999) and high persuasion knowledge of advertising (Friestad and Wright 1994). Commercial product and political advertising are constructed in similar ways: research is conducted, strategy is formulated, concepts are developed, messages are created with testing and then messages are produced and disseminated (Fowler, Franz, and Ridout 2016). Thus, “the same principles that operate in the commercial marketplace hold true in the political marketplace” (Newman and Perloff 2004, 18). However, political advertising in the U.S. presents some unique differences from commercial advertising and challenges to the three areas of persuasion knowledge needed by voters to make informed political decisions. In order to explore these challenges, it is necessary to understand the current media and regulatory environment of political advertising in the U.S. Although a complete review of the regulatory environment and court case decisions is beyond the scope of this research, we provide a summary of relevant changes below.

Political advertising encompasses advertising about political candidates, issues or policies and has been characterized by “control of the message and use of mass communication channels for distribution” (Kaid 1999, 423). Political advertising is subsumed within the U.S. Federal Elections Commission (FEC) definition of “public communication.” Up until 1976, there were strict limitations on the amount of money that candidates could spend on political advertising and from whom they were allowed to receive donations (citizens, political parties, political action committees; Fowler, Franz, and Ridout 2016). This meant voters viewed fewer ads in fewer media from fewer sources in that era. The limitations on media spending, however, were lifted in the U.S. Supreme court case (*Buckley v Valeo*) with the argument that limiting political advertising was limiting free speech (see <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1975/75-436>). This is a key distinction with respect to political and commercial advertising in their classification as noncommercial or commercial speech, respectively, and the ramifications for message content and regulation.

Political advertising is considered to be political speech, which in the U.S. is part of a larger class of speech protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Through case decisions, the U.S. Supreme Court has determined that different types of speech are differentially protected under the First Amendment, thus differentially subject to government regulation. The classification of political advertising as *political speech* under the First Amendment relates to idea that the free flow of political ideas is deemed essential to the functioning of a democracy. Thus,

political advertising in the U.S. is, in all practical purposes, not subjected to content-based governmental restrictions to the same extent as commercial advertising because the threat of government censorship via content regulation would endanger the free-flow of important ideas and debate (Goldman 2008; Richman 1998).

Political advertising as political speech is differentiated from other forms of advertising that the Court has classified as *commercial speech*, which refers to “business advertising that does no more than solicit a commercial transaction or state information relevant thereto” (Jackson and Jeffries 1979, 1). Most advertising has only commercial intent, therefore, most product and service advertising would be viewed as commercial speech. To be protected by the First Amendment, the commercial advertisements must be “lawful and not be misleading” (Kozinski and Banner 1990, 630). Thus, commercial speech has regulations regarding deception through administrative agencies, principally the Federal Trade Commission (established in 1914 to regulate false and deceptive advertising). Laws concerning commercial advertising can also be implemented by each U.S. state. The result of this commercial versus noncommercial speech distinction is that ads for products like soda are often regulated by the government for falsehoods and deception; whereas political advertisements are not (Goldman 2008). Certainly, defamation lawsuits can be filed by a politician in response to a false ad, but that is not the same regulatory mechanism used to address falsehoods found in commercial advertising.

The media and regulatory environment for political advertising has changed drastically since 2002 with the advent of online and social media and relevant U.S. Supreme Court cases and legislation. First, changes in the digital landscape mean there is more online and social media advertising (Williams and Gulati 2018) due in part to the ease of creating, testing, and distributing content, and measuring effectiveness (Dommett 2019). Certainly, the rise of online behavioral techniques through ‘big data’ analysis has also led to more precise message political targeting (Fulgoni, Lipsman, and Davidsen 2016). There is some research that suggests that consumers do not have the requisite objective or subjective persuasion knowledge of online behavioral advertising in general (Boerman, Kruikemeier, and Zuiderveen Borgesius 2017; Ham and Nelson 2016; Nill and Aalberts 2014), so it is likely that they also lack knowledge about online political advertising practices.

Further, the regulations for digital and mass media advertising are different in multiple ways (see FEC.gov website). For example, digital political advertising does not always allow for source recognition, which is a key component of advertising literacy. Due to the lack of clear or consistent rules from the FEC, digital political ads can avoid source (who is paying for them) disclosures (Kim et al. 2018). The lack of regulatory focus may be due in part to limited knowledge of the digital media environment among members of the FEC and implications for the way that sources should be disclosed (Haenschen and Wolf 2019; Kim et al. 2018).

There have been a number of relevant U.S. Supreme Court rulings, legislation, and rule changes by the FEC, which have fundamentally shaped political advertising in the U.S. First, is the 2010 case, *Citizens United v Federal Election Commission*, where the majority of justices ruled that “interest-group electioneering” including restrictions on corporations or unions using funds for advertising was considered to be unconstitutional under the First Amendment. A ramification of the court’s decision was to allow a super Political Action Committee (PAC), a new group, that could raise funds and advocate for candidates. The loophole was that if the super PAC was created as a nonprofit (501c group), they were able to collect *unlimited* funds and did not need to disclose the identity of individual donors. As a result, this *Citizens United* decision “significantly empowered interest groups, allowing them to raise and spend unlimited amounts” (Fowler, Franz, and Ridout 2016, 25) with “... a deluge of outside money to enter the election” (Fulgoni, Lipsman, and Davidsen 2016). In the U.S., certain source information must be disclosed in political ads. For example, the *organization* that funds the political ad must be disclosed in the ad. However, since 2010, more outside groups (non-candidates, nonpolitical parties) are now able to

create, fund, and distribute political advertising, and many of the messages are “untraceable”—so citizens do not know the source (beyond PAC name) or individual funders of the messages (Wood 2018). This is an enormous change in the political advertising landscape. As Fowler, Franz, and Ridout (2016) observe, “Not all that long ago, the candidates’ official campaigns paid for most of the ads aired on their behalf, but that is no longer the case in many races” (3).

Source identification requirements also changed with the “Stand by your Ad” provision of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (McCain-Feingold Act) of 2002. Relevant for broadcast advertising, candidates must indicate their approval of the content of political ads sponsored by the candidate. For example: “*I am [candidate’s name], a candidate for [federal office sought], and I approved this advertisement.*” However, there are additional rules for whether or how this disclosure is mandated or not on political communications such as bumper stickers or buttons (FEC 2020). Further, media companies (traditional and social), who might carry political advertising, can enact their own policies regarding whether or not to carry a particular political ad (e.g., CNN sent President Trump a “cease and desist” letter for a misleading political ad; Stelter 2020) or to show political advertising at all (e.g., Twitter announced in November 2019 they would no longer carry political advertising). Other technology companies have also banned political advertising on their social media channels (e.g., TikTok) or instilled fact-checking (e.g., Snapchat), whereas some platforms have remained open for political advertising (e.g., Youtube, Facebook). But the regulatory picture becomes very fuzzy in that political ads are run by organizations other than that of the candidate or the candidate’s political party. Anyone can create and run a political ad, from an advocacy organization, a political action committee (PAC), a Super PAC, a corporation, an individual, or even a foreign government. Social media has exacerbated the regulatory situation in that anyone can contribute content from anywhere, such as with Russia and the 2016 U.S. Presidential and Congressional Elections (Kim et al. 2018). While some social media platforms have attempted to halt political ads (e.g., Twitter, Spotify), others like Facebook, have been resistant to addressing the political information or disinformation circulated through their platforms via advertising or other forms of posts.

Thus, the political advertising landscape has changed much in the last two decades in terms of who is allowed to create, fund, and disseminate messages and whether or not or how the sources are disclosed. Further, the online environment has led to shifts in micro-targeted messages with sophisticated techniques. It is likely that voters may not have the knowledge of these changes in the political advertising landscape (Haley 2020).

Persuasion knowledge of political advertising

There has been little academic research on political advertising knowledge and literacy among the U.S. population (Haley 2020; Lang and Krueger 1993). Most political advertising research has focused on effects of advertising (mostly negative ads) on voter memory, attitudes and behaviors such as voter turnout (e.g., Bradley, Angelini, and Lee 2007; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Pinkleton, Um, and Austin 2002; Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy 1991; Weaver Lariscy and Tinkham 1999). A recent study tracked self-reported political advertising awareness in relation to levels of probable political advertising exposure over time (Thorson et al. 2019). Findings of the study suggest that there are significant correlations between actual political advertising spending and frequency of advertisements and U.S. citizens’ self-reported awareness of political advertising with high awareness for television and online (social media, web). Some attention is being paid to political advertising in social media contexts. For example, the influence of personalized political ads via social media has been explored in relation to persuasion knowledge activation and subsequent evaluation of the message by voters (Kruikemeier, Sezgin, and Boerman 2016). But as Kruikemeier, Sezgin, and Boerman (2016) point out, the consequences of political marketing are understudied.

In term of political advertising literacy, the ability of an individual to understand and interpret a political ad, Haley (2020) found that even among higher educated, politically active adults (those who according to political literacy predictors should be high in political literacy), awareness of political advertising tactics and legalities seemed low. While participants in that interview study were conversant in political issues and current events, they did not understand political advertising tactics such as the lack of regulation for truth, ad financing, source masking, and disclosure laws and other aspects of messaging that would impact how a voter interprets the validity of a political advertising message. There is therefore some suggestion that voters may lack the necessary knowledge of political advertising to be able to critically evaluate and cope with it in their decision making about political candidates. In a study of 269 phone interviews in Washington and Idaho, Lang and Krueger (1993) found that most people in their sample believed that the government would step in and remove a false political advertisement and more than half of the people disagreed that “It is legal for statements in a televised political ad to be false.” Thus, the majority of these adults did not know that political advertising is regulated differently from commercial product advertising. This difference in regulation is directly related to the types of content that voters may encounter and may influence their scrutiny of political messaging. There has not been much research gauging the level of knowledge about political advertising or how it is regulated. Therefore, we seek to address the following research question:

RQ2: What is the level of persuasion knowledge about political advertising among U.S. voters?

We were interested in both actual (objective) knowledge and perceived (subjective) persuasion knowledge of political advertising. Carlson, Bearden, and Hardesty (2007) first proposed that *objective persuasion knowledge* (OPK) should be distinguished from *subjective persuasion knowledge* (SPK) in their study of pricing tactics. *Subjective* PK is an individual’s self-assessed perception about how persuasion works (e.g., “I know when a political advertisement is trying to trick me”) whereas *objective* PK is accurate information about the persuasion tactic or how it operates, which is stored in long-term memory (e.g., “All political advertisements are ‘fact-checked’ before they air in media: false”). The fact that an individual has SPK does not necessarily mean the person has accurate or objective knowledge about a specific persuasion tactic. Alba and Hutchinson (2000) argued that subjective and objective knowledge are distinct and can produce different effects on consumer assessment.

No studies we found have directly measured or examined statistical relationships between topic knowledge and objective and subjective persuasion knowledge. However, as discussed earlier, prior research has found that topic knowledge informed persuasion knowledge and resulted in more complex coping strategies (Miller and Sinclair 2009; Lorenzon and Russell 2012). Other researchers used the term “experience” with the persuasion tactic (rather than topic knowledge; pricing; Carlson, Bearden, and Hardesty 2007); they showed that experience is positively related to subjective and objective persuasion knowledge of the pricing tactics. The ease of accessibility of experience and knowledge resulted in higher feelings of knowledge (subjective knowledge). Therefore, we predict the following positive relationship:

H1: Political literacy (topic knowledge) will be positively related to (a) objective persuasion knowledge (OPK) of political advertising and (b) subjective persuasion knowledge (SPK) of political advertising.

Although objective and subjective knowledge are distinct concepts, there is a body of research that has found the concepts to be positively related (Carlson, Bearden, and Hardesty 2007). In a review of this research, Carlson, Bearden, and Hardesty (2007) reported that positive correlations of subjective and objective *product* knowledge were about .41 on average across more than 40 correlations with products varying from motorcycles to board games. That is, the more actual objective facts and knowledge about motorcycles, the more the consumer feels like they have knowledge about motorcycles. Some of the correlations were not significant or positive, but in the product knowledge domain, several of these correlations were significant and positive. Further, one study that measured both subjective and persuasion knowledge (of online behavioral

advertising, OBA; Ham and Nelson 2016) showed a positive relationship between subjective and objective persuasion knowledge of OBA ($r = .196$). Therefore, based on this research, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Objective persuasion knowledge (OPK) of political advertising will be positively related to subjective persuasion knowledge (SPK) of political advertising.

Once people have acquired persuasion knowledge, there are a number of coping response mechanisms they can enact, depending on their persuasion goals (Campbell and Kirmani 2008). For example, people can ignore, counterargue, or accept persuasion messages. Some researchers suggest that the more extensive the persuasion knowledge, the more consumers can become suspicious about deceptive marketing activities (Kirmani and Zhu 2007). A few intervention studies designed to increase advertising understanding and persuasion knowledge have shown an increased level of advertising skepticism after the intervention (Gaeth and Heath 1987; Nelson et al. 2020; Roberts et al. 1980). That is, people who have developed a greater knowledge of persuasion tactics become more critical and skeptical toward those tactics. Finally, in one of the few studies to examine the role of PK and political advertising, Boerman and Kruikemeier (2016) demonstrated that people in the Netherlands were more likely to recognize that a promoted tweet was an advertisement (recognition—persuasion knowledge) when it was from a political party. This activated persuasion knowledge then resulted in personal coping behaviors such as increased skepticism. Therefore, based on this body of research and on theoretical implications of the PKM, we predict the following:

H3(a) Objective persuasion knowledge (OPK) of political advertising will be positively related to skepticism of political advertising and (b) Subjective persuasion knowledge (SPK) of political advertising will be positively related to skepticism of political advertising.

Method

Sampling, participants, and procedure

Before data collection, we performed a statistical power analysis for sample size estimation using G Power, a power analysis software. We estimated sample size for a linear multiple regression of a fixed model with maximum of 16 predictors. With the effect size (f^2) of 0.15, $\alpha = .05$, and power ($1 - \beta$ err prob) was 0.95, using Cohen's (1969) criteria, the proposed sample size was $N = 204$. We conducted a survey ($n = 208$) to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses. Only registered U.S. voters were recruited through the Qualtrics sample pool, using quota sampling. Quota sampling is a non-probability sampling method wherein the collected sample has the same proportions to the entire population with respect to known characteristics (Lavrakas 2008). Using U.S. Census data, this study attempts to match our sample profile to the basic demographic proportion of the U.S. population proportionately varying by age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, employment, education, income, area of living, states and religion. Demographic profiles are found in Table 1.

The study was approved by the university research ethics board. Qualtrics recruited registered U.S. voters from their sample pool and screened to match the planned quota. Participants were then invited to the questionnaire on Qualtrics.com and answered a screening question (checking if they were registered U.S. voters). Those who satisfied the screening question completed the survey. They received a small monetary contribution for participation.

Measurement scale development

Political advertising persuasion knowledge: Subjective versus objective knowledge

We measured subjective persuasion knowledge of political advertising (SPK), modifying a pre-established persuasion knowledge scale ("self-confidence of persuasion knowledge"; Bearden,

Table 1. Demographic profiles.

Profile	N	%	Census*	Profile	N	%	Census*
Age^a				Employment			
20 to 24 years	27	12.9%	9.1%	Labor force-employed	116	55.8%	59.6%
25 to 34 years	35	16.9%	18.6%	Labor force-unemployed	15	7.2%	3.4%
35 to 44 years	36	17.2%	16.9%	Armed forces	2	1.0%	0.4%
45 to 54 years	38	18.2%	17.3%	Not in labor force	75	36.1%	36.6%
55 to 64 years	34	16.3%	17.2%	Total	208	100%	100%
65 years and over	38	18.5%	20.9%	Income			
Total	208	100%	100%	Less than \$25,000	32	15.4%	19.2%
Gender				\$25,000 to \$34,999	26	12.5%	8.9%
Female	106	51.0%	50.8%	\$35,000 to \$49,999	27	13.0%	12.4%
Male	102	49.0%	49.2%	\$50,000 to \$74,999	44	21.2%	17.2%
Total	208	100%	100%	\$75,000 to \$99,999	24	11.5%	12.7%
Ethnicity				\$100,000 to \$149,999	31	14.9%	15.1%
White	169	81.3%	60.7%	\$150,000 or more	24	11.5%	14.5%
African American	14	6.7%	12.3%	Total	208	100%	100%
Asian American	6	2.9%	5.5%	Living area^b			
American Indian	1	0.5%	0.7%	Urban area	168	80.8%	79.0%
Pacific Islander	2	1.0%	0.2%	Rural area	40	19.2%	21.0%
Hispanic or Latino	12	5.8%	18.0%	Total	208	100%	100%
Two + races	4	1.9%	2.6%	States^c			
Total	208	100%	100%	Northwest	38	18.3%	17.1%
Education				Midwest	42	20.2%	20.8%
Less than high	3	1.4%	12.0%	South	72	34.6%	38.3%
High sch graduate	43	20.7%	27.0%	West	55	26.4%	23.9%
College, no degree	40	19.2%	20.4%	Others	1	0.5%	
Associate (2-yrs)	29	13.9%	8.5%	Total	208	100%	100%
Bachelor's (4-yrs)	46	22.1%	19.8%	Religion^d			
Graduate	47	22.7%	12.4%	Christian	150	72.1%	76.0%
Total	208	100%	100%	Judaism	6	2.9%	1.2%
Political affiliate^e				Islam	3	1.4%	0.6%
Independent	46	22.1%	38.0%	Buddhism	1	0.5%	0.5%
Democrat	79	38.0%	34.0%	Other religions	3	1.5%	3.4%
Republican	83	39.9%	28.0%	Nonreligious	45	21.6%	18.3%
Total	208	100%	100%	Total	208	100%	100%

Note. Total N = 208; *2018 Census data.

^aAge were combined into six groups for convenience.

^bData from 2010 Census.

^cCombined to four regions following the U.S. Census standard.

^dData from 2008 Census.

^ePew research data 2016.

Hardesty, and Rose 2001) to the context of political advertising (6 items; e.g., *I know when the offer in political advertising is too good to be true*). This scale has been used consistently for assessing persuasion knowledge in past research due to the conceptual appropriateness to measure 'overall knowledge of how persuasion works' (Ham, Nelson, and Das 2015). Reliability was satisfied (Cronbach's $\alpha = .913$).

Upon finding no existing tool in the advertising or political science literature to assess political advertising knowledge, we developed a measurement scale of Objective Persuasion Knowledge of political advertising (OPK). OPK of political advertising was operationalized as the number of correct answers from the number of questions that tested respondents' objective knowledge of political advertising (multiple choice questions: correct; wrong; I don't know). A "don't know" option was included to reduce the forced choice and help us to see where respondents lacked knowledge. To develop the scale, first, we reviewed extensive literature to collect an initial set of OPK items (e.g., Factcheck.org; FEC.gov, Thorson, McKinney, and Shah 2016). Items to measure general political advertising knowledge were assembled from various existing instruments and actual legislation and laws. Second, we streamlined the number of items by combining or deleting redundant items and grouped them into six categories. Third, the selected items were reviewed

Table 2. Objective persuasion knowledge (OPK) of political advertising.

Category and items	Correct	Wrong	Don't know
Truth			
T1. The truth-in-advertising regulations enforced by the Federal Trade Commission for commercial advertising do not apply to political advertising. (true)	86 41.3%	48 23.1%	74 35.6%
T2. The law requires that political ads be truthful and non-misleading. (false)	79 38.0%	75 36.1%	54 26.0%
T3. All political advertisements are 'fact-checked' before they air in media. (false)	107 51.4%	79 38.0%	22 10.6%
T4. The "Stand by Your Ad" (SBYA, enacted in 2002) part of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act means that the political advertisement has been fact-checked and presents true and accurate information. (false)	169 81.3%	15 7.2%	24 11.5%
<i>Category total (out of N = 208)</i>	110.25	54.25	43.50
<i>Category total (%)</i>	53.0%	26.1%	20.9%
Source disclosure and spending			
S1. The 2010 U.S. Supreme Court decision (Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission) regarding campaign finance means that corporations are permitted virtually unlimited spending on advertising. (true)	103 49.5%	32 15.4%	73 35.1%
S2. Ads that are run by, and sponsored by, a political action committee (e.g., PAC) must disclose who the donors are and whom they support. (false)	56 26.9%	103 49.5%	49 23.6%
S3. Corporations do not have to disclose the sources of their funds to federal elections officials. (true)	103 49.5%	49 23.6%	56 26.9%
S4. Who pays for the political ad must be noted in the ad. (true)	13 66.3%	35 16.8%	35 16.8%
S5. There are legal limits on the amount of money corporations can spend on political ads. (false)	69 33.2%	84 40.4%	55 26.4%
S6. Candidates must approve political ads for which their campaign pays to run on television and radio. (true)	132 63.5%	42 20.2%	34 16.3%
S7. If the candidate or campaign authorizes and finances a communication, the notice must state that the communication was paid for by the authorized committee (true)	125 60.1%	30 14.4%	53 25.5%
<i>Category total (out of N = 208)</i>	103.71	53.57	50.71
<i>Category total (%)</i>	49.9%	25.8%	24.4%
Media			
M1. Media must give equal time to all political candidates' advertising. (false)	60 28.8%	104 50.0%	44 21.2%
M2. Rates charged by newspapers and magazines for campaign advertising must be comparable to those charged for non-campaign advertisements (true)	87 41.8%	35 16.8%	86 41.3%
M3. Candidates can purchase advertising time on public television. (false)	31 14.9%	134 64.4%	43 20.7%
M4. If a television station finds a political commercial to contain false information, the station can edit the commercial before it airs (false)	60 28.8%	74 35.6%	74 35.6%
M5. Free political advertising time is provided to the candidate. (false)	77 37.0%	69 33.2%	62 29.8%
M6. Candidates must be charged the least expensive rate that is normally offered by the broadcaster for the requested airtime. (true)	66 31.7%	51 24.5%	91 43.8%
<i>Category total (out of N = 208)</i>	63.50	77.83	66.67
<i>Category total (%)</i>	30.5%	37.4%	32.1%
Digital			
D1. In digital, political advertisers, such as political parties, are allowed to use information from individuals' online behaviors to guess his/her political leanings and interests (true)	97 46.6%	31 14.9%	80 38.5%
D2. Digital political advertising is personalized to each individual and changing often, so hard to monitor, track, or check for misleading information. (true)	109 52.4%	31 14.9%	68 32.7%
D3. Currently political advertising is not allowed on Twitter. (true)	60 28.8%	58 27.9%	90 43.3%
D4. Currently political advertising is not allowed on Facebook. (false)	95 45.7%	60 28.8%	53 25.5%
<i>Category total (out of N = 208)</i>	90.25	45.00	72.75
<i>Category total (%)</i>	43.4%	21.6%	35.0%
Definition of political advertising			
DF1. Political ads are just about candidates who are running for office. (false)	107 51.4%	79 38.0%	22 10.6%
DF2. Political ads can be about issue and legislation. (true)	169 81.3%	15 7.2%	24 11.5%

(continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Category and items	Correct	Wrong	Don't know
DF3. Political ads are only run during elections. (false)	103	85	20
	49.5%	40.9%	9.6%
Category total (out of N = 208)	126.33	59.67	22.00
Category total (%)	60.7%	28.7%	10.6%
General regulation			
GR1. Regulation/rules for political advertising are different depending on the media (e.g., television, Internet, bumper stickers). (true)	114	26	68
	54.8%	12.5%	32.7%
GR2. There is no governmental regulatory body that reviews political advertising before it is aired on television. (true)	109	38	61
	52.4%	18.3%	29.3%
GR3. Political ads and product ads are regulated in the same way. (false)	89	66	53
	42.8%	31.7%	25.5%
GR4. Political advertising on bumper stickers and t-shirts is regulated the same way as advertising on social media and television. (false)	91	72	45
	43.8%	34.6%	21.6%
Category total (out of N = 208)	100.75	50.50	56.75
Category total (%)	48.4%	24.3%	27.3%
Total	2691	1620	1513
All category total (out of N = 208)	96.11	57.86	54.04
All category total (%)	46.2%	27.8%	26.0%

Note. Numbers in Correct, Wrong, and Don't know columns represent number of respondents who answered as such.

by domain experts (e.g., academicians and lawyers with expertise in political communication/advertising). Fourth, we conducted a pretest (college students who were registered U.S. voters; $n = 107$), excluded three extremely knowledgeable items, and finalized a total of 28 items under six categories. We included both “static” (non-changing civic facts that rarely change) and “temporal” (recent developments) types of knowledge (Barabas et al. 2014). The final items with answers are shown in Table 2.

Development of political knowledge (“topic knowledge”; POLKNOW)

There have been many studies with scales that measure political knowledge (e.g., Thorson, McKinney, and Shah 2016; Carpini and Keeter 1993). Most of the scale items, however, were outdated because they present time-sensitive knowledge; thus, we developed a current political knowledge scale. In developing the scale, we adhered to the classification of political knowledge by Barabas et al. (2014), to ensure a mixture of questions to gauge “static” (non-changing civic facts that rarely change) and “temporal” (recent developments) and knowledge about general (institutions, people) or specific (e.g., public policy) types of knowledge. Similar to other studies (Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl 2019), political knowledge was operationalized as the number of correct answers that examined respondents’ knowledge of current political facts (multiple choice questions).

First, we reviewed extensive literature that measures U.S. citizen’s political knowledge (e.g., Thorson, McKinney, and Shah 2016; American National Election Studies Pilot Study (ANES) and selected appropriate items that matched the current political situation in 2020 February. Additional items that measure general political knowledge were assembled from existing instruments (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela 2012; Factcheck.org; Prior 2003; Stroud 2008; Thorson, McKinney, and Shah 2016) and updated to the current U.S. political context in terms of candidates, issues, and party platforms. Second, we combined or deleted redundant items. To increase face validity, third, the selected items were reviewed by domain experts, including professors and lawyers in political science, communication, or advertising. Next, the same pretest (college students who were U.S. voters; $n = 107$) was used to exclude items that indicated very high

knowledge. After excluding two items, we finalized a total of 18 items. The items and correct answers are listed in [Table 3](#).

Advertising skepticism

We measured one coping mechanism of persuasion knowledge: skepticism toward political advertising (SKEP) as our outcome variable, adjusting (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998) to political advertising (10 items; e.g., ‘*We can depend on getting the truth in most political advertising*; reverse-coded; $M = 4.12$; $SD = 1.79$; Chronbach’s $\alpha = .966$).

Results

RQ1: U.S. voters’ level of general political knowledge (“topic knowledge”)

We developed 19 items of the current POLKNOW (General political knowledge) as referenced above and then we analyzed the respondents’ responses (see [Table 3](#)). Overall, participants scored 59.99% of correct answers on POLKNOW with wrong answers: 24.90%; I don’t know: 15.11%. The most correctly answered item was “*What is current President Donald Trump’s party affiliation?*” (answer: Republican; 91.93% correct) whereas the least correctly answered item was “*On which of the following does the U.S. federal government currently spend the LEAST* (answer: Aid to foreign nations; 27.88% correct).” The overall mean and standard deviation of the correct answers were $M = 11.40$ ($SD = 4.23$). Details are demonstrated in [Table 3](#).

We also explored whether and how U.S. voters’ demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, employment, education, income, area of living, religion) and political party significantly predicted their general political knowledge (“topic knowledge”; POLKNOW). The regression analysis revealed that only age ($\beta = .42$; $p < .001$) and gender ($\beta = .13$; $p < .05$) significantly predicted POLKNOW (see [Table 4](#) POLKNOW column). The older the respondents, the higher POLKNOW they had, and men had higher POLKNOW than women.

RQ2: U.S voters’ level of objective persuasion knowledge (OPK) of political advertising

To answer this question of what and how much people actually know about political advertising, we developed 28 items of OPK of political advertising as discussed above and then we analyzed the participants’ correct answers. Overall, participants scored only 46.21% correct on the 28 OPK scale with 27.82% wrong answers and 25.98% indicating “I don’t know.” The overall mean and standard deviation of the correct answers were $M = 12.40$ ($SD = 4.99$), demonstrating that the respondents selected, on average, 12.40 correct answers (out of 28 questions). The items where respondents showed the most knowledge were: “*The “Stand by Your Ad” (SBYA, enacted in 2002) part of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act means that the political advertisement has been fact-checked and presents true and accurate information*” (false; 81.25% correct) and “*Political ads can be about issue and legislation*” (true; 81.25% correct) whereas the lowest knowledge was found for the item “*Candidates can purchase advertising time on public television*” (false; 14.90% correct). Details are demonstrated in [Table 2](#).

We wanted to know the relative knowledge so we compared different types of knowledge categories next, calculating and comparing the proportions of correct answers. Overall, participants were relatively more knowledgeable about the DEFINITION of political advertising (60.7% correct), followed by regulations about TRUTH (53.0% correct), GENERAL REGULATION information (48.4% correct), identifying the SOURCE (45.2% correct), DIGITAL political advertising (43.4% correct), and MEDIA (30.5% correct); see [Table 2](#). To see the statistical differences between each of these two independent proportions, we calculated z-scores and found that most of the differences between each category were statistically significant (DEFINITION vs. TRUTH:

Table 3. General political knowledge (“topic knowledge”; POLKNOW).

Category and items	Correct	Wrong	Don't know
1. Which US political party is more conservative? (1) Democrat; (2) <u>Republican</u> ; (3) I don't know	152 73.08%	37 17.79%	19 9.13%
2. Do you happen to know which political party currently has a majority in the U.S. Senate? (1) <u>Republican party</u> ; (2) Democratic party; (3) I don't know	150 72.12%	31 14.90%	27 12.98%
3. Do you happen to know which political party currently has a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives? (1) Republican party; (2) <u>Democratic party</u> ; (3) I don't know	69 33.17%	116 55.77%	23 11.06%
4. What is former President Bill Clinton's party affiliation? (1) <u>Democrat</u> ; (2) Republican; (3) I don't know	161 77.40%	34 16.35%	13 6.25%
5. What is former President George W. Bush's party affiliation? (1) Democrat; (2) <u>Republican</u> ; (3) I don't know	165 79.33%	29 13.94%	14 6.73%
6. What is current President Donald Trump's party affiliation? (1) Democrat; (2) <u>Republican</u> ; (3) I don't know	191 91.83%	15 7.21%	2 0.96%
7. Who is the current vice president of the United States? (1) John McCain; (2) Mike Pompeo; (3) Mike Pence; (4) I don't know	157 75.48%	38 18.27%	13 6.25%
8. In the case of a tied vote in the U.S. Senate, the deciding vote is cast by ... (1) <u>The vice-president</u> ; (2) The president; (3) The Senate majority leader; (4) I don't know	87 41.83%	81 38.94%	40 19.23%
9. A filibuster in the U.S. Senate can be used to prevent legislation from coming to a vote. Of the 100 U.S. senators, how many votes are needed to end a filibuster? (1) 51; (2) <u>60</u> ; (3) 70; (4) I don't know	65 31.25%	72 34.62%	71 34.13%
10. How is the number of terms a president can serve determined? (1) There is no limitation of the number of terms a president can serve; (2) Article II of the US Constitution; (3) <u>The 22nd Amendment to the Constitution</u> ; (4) I don't know	84 40.38%	79 37.98%	45 21.63%
11. The U.S. Electoral College ... (1) Trains those who run for political office; (2) Is another name for the US Congress; (3) <u>formally elects the president</u> ; (4) I don't know	121 58.17%	54 25.96%	33 15.87%
12. Which of the following rights is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution? (1) <u>The right of free speech</u> ; (2) The right to bear arms; (3) The right to privacy; (4) I don't know	157 75.48%	35 16.83%	16 7.69%
13. Which of the following is one of the three branches of federal government? (1) United Nations; (2) <u>Senate and House of Representatives of the U.S.</u> ; (3) U.S. Federal Reserve Bank; (4) I don't know	151 72.60%	34 16.35%	23 11.06%
14. Who is the current speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives? (1) <u>Nancy Pelosi</u> ; (2) Paul Ryan; (3) Chuck Schumer; (4) I don't know	157 75.48%	27 12.98%	24 11.54%
15. Neil Gorsuch is ... (1) a senator; (2) <u>a Supreme Court Justice</u> ; (3) the head of the EPA; (4) I don't know	90 28.80%	36 35.60%	82 35.60%
16. Who lead the Justice Department's investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 US election? (1) <u>Robert Mueller</u> ; (2) James Comey; (3) Sean Spicer; (4) I don't know	129 62.02%	38 18.27%	41 19.71%
17. Which party members advocate for “Medicaid for all”? (1) <u>Democratic party</u> ; (2) Republican party; (3) None of the above; (4) I don't know	128 61.54%	51 24.52%	29 13.94%
18. For how many years is a United States Senator elected—that is, how many years are there in one full term of office for a U.S. senator? (1) <u>6 years</u> ; (2) 4 years; (3) 2 years; (4) I don't know	99 47.60%	87 41.83%	22 10.58%
19. On which of the following does the U.S. federal government currently spend the LEAST? (1) <u>Aid to foreign nations</u> ; (2) Medicare; (3) National defense; (4) I don't know	58 27.88%	90 43.27%	60 28.85%
Total	2371	984	597
All items total (out of N = 208)	124.79	51.79	31.42
All items total (%)	59.99%	24.90%	15.11%

Note. Numbers in Correct, Wrong, and Don't know columns represent number of respondents who answered as such; underlined choices are correct answers.

$z = -2.94$; $p < .001$; TRUST vs. REGULATION: $z = 1.86$; $p < .05$; DIGITAL vs. MEDIA: $z = 5.10$; $p < .001$, but not in between REGULATION and SOURCE ($z = 1.49$ $p > .1$) and SOURCE and DIGITAL ($z = .08$; $p > .1$).

We also tested statistical differences between knowledge (correct answer) and ‘no knowledge’ (incorrect plus ‘I don't know’ answers) to see to what extent respondents were knowledgeable about each category. The results of the z-score tests revealed that respondents were statistically

Table 4. Results of Hierarchical Regression Analyses on OPK, SPK, and SKEP.

M	Predictors (Hypotheses)	POLKNOW	OPK (H1a)	SPK (H1b; H2)	SKEP (H3a&b)
		β	β	B	β
1	Age	0.42***	0.27***	0.14	0.34***
	Gender	0.13*	0.13	0.18*	-0.27***
	Ethnicity	0.08	-0.03	-0.05	0.09
	Marital status	-0.08	-0.14	-0.01	0.04
	Employment	0.09	-0.10	0.09	0.09
	Education	0.06	0.20*	0.09	0.04
	Income	0.04	0.07	0.11	-0.05
	Area	0.17	0.01	-0.02	-0.15*
	Religion	0.02	0.00	0.02	-0.19**
	Political party	0.09	-0.06	0.01	-0.10
	R ²	0.26	0.18	0.11	0.36
F	7.66***	4.78***	2.66**	12.39***	
2	POLKNOW		0.48***	0.27***	0.20***
	R ²		0.35	0.16	0.39
	F		10.46***	3.75***	12.52***
3	OPK			0.06	0.01
	R ²			0.16	0.39
	F			3.45***	11.32***
4	SPK				0.14*
	R ²				0.41
	F				11.06***

Note. POLKNOW: General Political knowledge or "topic knowledge"; OPK: Objective persuasion knowledge of political advertising; SPK: Subjective persuasion knowledge of political advertising; SKEP: skepticism toward political advertising. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

more knowledgeable about TRUTH in political advertising (correct: 53% vs. incorrect: 47%; $z = 2.45$; $p < .05$) and about the DEFINITION of political advertising (correct: 60.7% vs. incorrect: 39.3%; $z = 7.59$; $p < .001$) but were statistically less knowledgeable about the SOURCE (correct: 45.2% vs. incorrect: 54.8%; $z = -5.00$; $p < .001$); MEDIA (correct: 30.5% vs. incorrect: 69.5%; $z = 19.46$; $p < .001$), and DIGITAL political advertising (correct: 43.4% vs. incorrect: 56.6%; $z = -5.39$; $p < .001$). The difference between correct (48.4%) and incorrect (51.6%) answers, however, was not statistically different ($z = -1.28$; $p > .1$) in REGULATION.

Out of interest, we examined if demographics or party affiliation related to objective persuasion knowledge (OPK) of political advertising. The regression analysis revealed that only age ($\beta = .27$; $p < .001$) and education ($\beta = .20$; $p < .01$) significantly predicted OPK. The older and the more educated, the higher OPK the respondents had (see Table 4, OPK column). A series of post-hoc regression analyses followed to test how demographic profiles predicted each of the six subdimension of objective persuasion knowledge about advertising. First, only age ($\beta = .31$; $p < .001$) significantly predicted TRUTH. The older the respondent, the more knowledgeable about TRUTH in political advertising. Second, only age ($\beta = .24$; $p < .01$) and gender ($\beta = .14$; $p < .05$) significantly predicted SOURCE. The older and male (vs. female), the more knowledgeable about SOURCE issues in political advertising. Third, none of the demographic profiles significantly predicted MEDIA. Fourth, only education ($\beta = .18$; $p < .05$) significantly predicted knowledge about DIGITAL advertising. The more educated, the more knowledgeable in DIGITAL political advertising. Fifth, only political affiliation ($\beta = -.19$; $p < .05$) significantly predicted knowledge about the DEFINITION of political advertising. A post-hoc ANOVA with LSD revealed that Democrats ($M = 1.94$; $SE = .11$) and the Independent group ($M = 2.02$; $SE = .14$) were equal and more knowledgeable than Republican voters for matters related to the DEFINITION of political advertising. Finally, only age ($\beta = .25$; $p < .001$) and education ($\beta = .25$; $p < .001$) significantly predicted knowledge about political advertising REGULATION. The older and the more educated, the more knowledgeable about REGULATION.

Testing hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 posits that topic knowledge about politics (POLKNOW) will be positively related to (a) objective persuasion knowledge of political advertising and (b) subjective persuasion knowledge of political advertising. To test H1a, we ran the first hierarchical regression analysis (model 1: demographic profiles; model 2: POLKNOW; DV: OPK). Among the demographic factors, only age and education were positively related to OPK (the older and the more educated, the more knowledgeable in OPK) but these variables were controlled in the analysis. The result of the regression analysis revealed that POLKNOW was positively associated with OPK ($\beta = .48$; $p < .001$; see Table 4, OPK column; model 2). The more topic knowledge or knowledge about politics in general, the higher the objective political advertising persuasion knowledge the respondents had. Thus, H1a was successfully supported.

To test H1b, we ran the second hierarchical regression analysis (model 1: demographic profiles; model 2: political/topic knowledge: POLKNOW; DV: subjective persuasion knowledge—SPK of political advertising). Among the demographic factors, gender was the only variable that was positively related to SPK (males indicated more subjective PK than females) but this variable was controlled in the analysis. The results showed that POLKNOW was positively associated with SPK ($\beta = .27$; $p < .001$). The more topic knowledge or knowledge about politics in general, the higher the subjective political advertising persuasion knowledge the respondents had. Thus, H1b was successfully supported.

Second, hypothesis 2 (H2) posits that objective persuasion knowledge of political advertising will be positively related to subjective persuasion knowledge of political advertising. To test H2, we ran the third hierarchical regression analysis. Among the demographic variables, gender was the only one positively related to subjective PK (males indicated a higher subjective PK than females) but this variable was controlled in the analysis. The result of the regression showed that objective PK of political advertising was not significantly associated with subjective PK of political advertising ($\beta = .06$; $p > .1$; see Table 4, SPK column; model 3). Thus, H2 was not supported.

Third, hypothesis 3ab (H3ab) posits that (a) Objective persuasion knowledge (OPK) of political advertising and (b) Subjective persuasion knowledge (SPK) of political advertising will be positively associated with SKEP (skepticism toward political advertising). To test H3a, we ran a hierarchical regression analysis (model 1: demographic profiles; model 2: POLKNOW; model 3: OPK; DV: SKEP). Among the demographic factors, age was positively related to skepticism about political advertising (i.e., older people were more skeptical), but gender, area, and religion were negatively related to skepticism (males were less skeptical than females, rural respondents were less skeptical than urban respondents, and nonreligious were less skeptical than religious people about political ads), but these variables were controlled in the analysis. The result of the regression revealed that objective persuasion knowledge (OPK) of political advertising was *not* significantly associated with skepticism about political advertising ($\beta = .01$; $p > .1$; see Table 4, SKEP column). Thus, H3a was not supported.

To test H3b, we ran another hierarchical regression analysis (model 1: demographic profiles; model 2: POLKNOW; model 3: OPK; model 4: SPK; DV: SKEP). The result revealed that subjective persuasion knowledge of political advertising was positively associated with advertising skepticism of political advertising SKEP ($\beta = .014$; $p < .05$; see Table 4, SKEP column; model 4). Thus, H3b was successfully supported.

Finally, although no predictions were made, we also found that topic knowledge was significantly related to SKEP ($\beta = .020$; $p < .001$; see Table 4, SKEP column; model 2). The more topic knowledge or knowledge about politics in general (POLKNOW), the higher the skepticism toward political advertising the respondents had.

Discussion

Using the theoretical framework of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright 1994), our research set out to assess what U.S. eligible voters know about politics (topic knowledge), political advertising (objective persuasion knowledge) and what they think they know about political advertising (subjective persuasion knowledge). We also tested how these types of knowledge relate to one another and to one common coping mechanism as a result of persuasion knowledge: advertising skepticism. As there is very little research on this area of advertising, our study offers several unique contributions.

First, our findings suggest a mid-level of topic knowledge (information about politics) and a low level of political advertising literacy or persuasion knowledge about political advertising, especially when assessed as ‘objective persuasion knowledge’ (what people actually know). Second, we show new relationships between three forms of persuasion knowledge in this persuasion context of political advertising, highlighting the important role of ‘topic knowledge’ in predicting other forms of persuasion knowledge (subjective, objective) and skepticism. Third, we develop and test scales to measure topic knowledge (knowledge about politics) and objective persuasion knowledge about political advertising for the contemporary media environment.

Assessing the knowledge of politics and political advertising

Knowledge of politics (topic knowledge) was above average, overall, on the 19 items assessing different types of knowledge about politics (average 60% correct). Respondents scored higher on items related to current knowledge about politicians in power (e.g., almost 92% knew President Trump’s political party, 75% knew that Nancy Pelosi was current Speaker of the House and 75% could identify that Mike Pence was the Vice President from a list of three people). Respondents also scored fairly high on some questions related to “static knowledge” about institutions and doctrine (e.g., 75% knew the First Amendment allowed free speech; 72% could identify one of the three branches of government out of a list). Yet, respondents scored much lower on items related to specific policy (e.g., federal spending allocation—27%) or political practice (e.g., 47% knew a Senator’s term in office). Overall, we found that age (older) and gender (male) were positively related to more knowledge about politics. Our findings with respect to knowledge about politics adhered to past reports showing political knowledge depends on types of questions posed and demographic factors (e.g., Barabas et al. 2014; Pew Research 2018). Past research has shown consistent gendered effects: women tend to have lower political knowledge scores than men (e.g., Dassonneville and McAllister 2018); however, this gender gap may shrink when questions are related to gender-related issues and policies (Barabas et al. 2014).

Our study also set out to explore what is the level of knowledge about political advertising. Interestingly, respondents scored relatively lower on this type of political knowledge as compared with their overall topic knowledge about politics. That is, across the 28 items, overall respondents scored 46% correct. People were relatively more knowledgeable about what constitutes political advertising (definition 60%, e.g., “political ads can be about issue and legislation”). For all other categories, respondents scored just over 50% (e.g., truth) or below 50% for the categories of digital advertising, general regulation, truth, and source disclosure/spending). Whereas political party affiliation did not seem to influence knowledge about political advertising, results showed some demographic influences including age (older) and education (higher) were linked to higher objective persuasion knowledge about political advertising. No demographic differences were found in a previous study of public perceptions and knowledge about political advertising in 1993 (Lang and Krueger 1993). However, our results are in line with past research on political (not advertising) knowledge (e.g., Pew Research 2018; older and more educated adults knew more than younger/less-well educated adults). Education has long been found to be *the*

explanatory variable in political knowledge showing both direct effects and indirect effects through political engagement or occupation and income (Carpini and Keeter 1996). Next, we highlight three areas of knowledge that are particularly necessary for evaluating political advertising messages critically in the contemporary media environment: (1) regulation of truth; (2) source identification; and (3) digital advertising.

Understanding that political advertising is regulated differently from commercial advertising is important so that voters can better scrutinize message content. Responses to items about ‘general regulation’ and about ‘truth in advertising’ are relevant. Whereas a little more than half of respondents knew that political ads are not required to be fact-checked before airing, and there is no governmental body to check the content of ads for truth, responses to all other questions garnered lower knowledge. For example, less than half of the people surveyed knew that the FTC rules for truth and deception in product ads do not apply to political ads and that political ads do not need to be true. The majority of eligible voters sampled here do not know that the U.S. law does not regulate for truth in political advertising. The potential implications for this finding are that the voters do not have the prerequisite knowledge to invoke critical thinking or skepticism about the political ads they view. This finding is troubling to the extent that political candidates use false information in their advertising and voters may not be able to recognize what is false and what is true. There hasn’t been much research done in this area, but our results here are consistent with those reported in a 1993 study by Lang and Krueger (1993). Results of their study showed that the majority of people interviewed believed that the government would remove an untrue ad if people complained and disagreed with the statement that the “Government will take no action against an untrue political ad.” The authors conclude that respondents did not understand that political advertisements are not regulated for content. Thirty years later, our results are similar.

Second, identifying the *source or persuasion agent* of a message is a key part of persuasion knowledge and advertising literacy (Nelson 2016). Yet, there are multiple possible sources in contemporary U.S. political advertising from candidate, political party, political action groups (PACs) or front groups, super PACs, and even corporations. Understanding who created and/or paid for the message is crucial in evaluating the credibility and trust in content. Yet, fewer than half of the survey respondents knew that *corporations* were allowed unlimited spending on political campaigns. With respect to funding disclosure: only 26% knew that PACs are not required to disclose their donors and 50% said they knew corporations do not have to disclose the sources of their ad funds to the *Federal Election Commission*. Rather confusingly, with respect to source disclosure (of the candidate source within the message), the rules are different depending on the source: only 25% knew that candidates for *federal* office (Senate, House, President) are required to disclose by indicating they authorized or approved their TV campaign ads (i.e., 2002 “Stand-By-Your-Ad” policy). Results show that people do not know these important source identification and funding differences. These results in our quantitative survey match with findings from the 52 interviews conducted by Haley (2020) among political savvy Republicans and Democrats. His study showed very low knowledge of these sources, even among college-educated, politically involved people, concluding that “knowledge of the front group sponsors was nonexistent” (168) when people were presented with political ads created by these groups. Only one of the 52 people could identify the source of the political advertisement shown as a ‘front’ ad, and this person was a lawyer and long-time political strategist in Washington D.C. Source is a key component of the PKM and assessing credibility of messages. Without this knowledge, respondents may be unable to invoke any resistance strategies such as counterarguing or “contesting” the content or source (Fransen, Smit, and Verlegh 2015). In Haley’s (2020) study, instead of identifying or scrutinizing the source of political advertisements, the respondents would look at the message and see if it corresponded to their own beliefs and then decide how much or how to process the message.

Finally, given the increased use of digital media in political advertising (He 2020), voters' knowledge of digital political advertising is critical. Past research has found that PK about online behavioral commercial advertising is low (Ham 2017; van Noort, Smit, and Voorveld 2013). Our study also showed that knowledge of digital advertising practices (e.g., targeting in online behaviors and personalizing messages) and policy (e.g., social media use: differences by Facebook and Twitter) were also low. Fewer than half of the participants knew about online targeting and personalization practices. As campaigns expand political advertising in this area, the lack of knowledge is a concern.

Theoretical implications of the PKM

The PKM was used as the theoretical framework for our study. Although the full PKM framework was designed for multiple forms persuasion and persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994), most research conducted over the past twenty years has examined only selected parts of the framework (primarily "persuasion knowledge" as recognition of a persuasion attempt) in commercial advertising (Ham, Nelson, and Das 2015). We do not know how much about "topic knowledge in terms of persuasion" (Campbell and Kirmani 2008) or how the various forms of persuasion knowledge operate together or the ramifications for the ways that consumer targets cope with persuasion attempts. Our research offers novel insights. First, we showed that knowledge about politics (topic knowledge) was positively related to objective persuasion knowledge about advertising (i.e., what people really know of political advertising), subjective persuasion knowledge of political advertising (i.e., what they think they know about political advertising), and skepticism toward political advertising. In fact, topic knowledge (political knowledge) was the most meaningful predictor in our study. These results fit within the scant studies assessing the role of topic knowledge in other persuasion contexts (e.g., Kachersky and Kim 2010; Lorenzon and Russell 2012) and underscore the importance of measuring and allowing for the role of topic or domain knowledge (Haley 2020) in persuasion contexts.

Some studies have shown how objective persuasion knowledge about a persuasion context (e.g., pricing strategies; Carlson, Bearden, and Hardesty 2007; online behavioral advertising; Ham and Nelson 2016) relates to subjective persuasion knowledge. That is, people generally have a good assessment of their own actual knowledge about a persuasion context. Our study showed somewhat different results; objective persuasion knowledge was not related to subjective persuasion knowledge or skepticism in our study. Conversely, subjective persuasion knowledge was actually related to skepticism. This measure of self-confidence in persuasion (Bearden, Hardesty, and Rose 2001) was a better predictor of skepticism than was assessment of what people actually know. This could be because objective knowledge was fairly low. Some consumer research has shown mismatches in objective and subjective product knowledge (Carlson, Bearden, and Hardesty 2007) and there is potential for people to believe they are more informed about candidates and politics than they actually are (Koch 2008). Indeed, our study showed that actual knowledge and subjective beliefs and self-evaluations often do not connect. This can be especially problematic in our context: As Carlson, Bearden, and Hardesty (2007) argue, if consumers believe they have more knowledge (i.e., subjective knowledge) than they actually have (objective knowledge), they are likely to be more susceptible to harm. In other words, if you believe you have pretty good knowledge about how political advertising operates (subjective knowledge), but you actually have relatively low knowledge (objective knowledge) then you probably won't be seeking out additional information or scrutinizing the ads. Thus, political advertising literacy may not be a very effective weapon against incorrect beliefs about self-knowledge (i.e., high subjective persuasion knowledge) and the impact of political messages.

Limitations and future research

Despite a U.S. quota sampling approach, our sample was slightly older than current population estimates for the United States and included fewer African Americans or Hispanics when compared with the U.S. Census. The sample is similar to other studies that use surveys with similar quota sampling strategies (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl 2019). Future research should gauge knowledge among a wider population in the U.S.; given the changing demographics in the U.S. shifting toward an older population and including a greater proportion of Latina/os (Cilluffo and Cohn 2019). Surveys could be offered in multiple languages with targeted recruiting of certain populations. For example, some research suggests that as older adults' cognitive or information processing ability declines, they may be less likely to acquire or activate persuasion knowledge (Campbell and Kirmani 2000).

Our results show medium levels of topic knowledge and relatively lower levels of objective persuasion knowledge about political advertising, highlighting that certain kinds of information garner higher knowledge. In line with conceptualization by Barabas et al. (2014), future research might investigate whether and how policy-specific versus general knowledge is acquired or used in political decision-making with the suggestion that additional motivation is required to acquire policy information. The motivation to be politically involved is an important component for achieving political literacy (Converse 1964). Other studies have shown that low political knowledge is related to low need for cognition (Fording and Schram 2017), proposing that these kinds of citizens may be especially vulnerable to misleading messages. In addition, teasing apart the "don't know" (uninformed) versus the wrong ("misinformed") responses may be a good avenue for exploration in the era of fake news and misleading ads (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017). Finally, assessing which kinds of knowledge about politics and about political advertising are most important for creating an informed citizenry and allowing voters to make the best choices (Popkin 1991) presents important areas of inquiry.

Future research could assess *how* people acquire knowledge about politics and political advertising and gauge how these forms of knowledge operate in a persuasion context assessing situational persuasion knowledge and coping mechanisms (e.g., skepticism). For example, some research has suggested that political novices and political sophisticates may respond differently to advertising (Fowler, Franz, and Ridout 2016). Would those with higher topic knowledge (political knowledge, sophisticates) be more likely to invoke skepticism when exposed to a political ad? And how might their involvement in politics or their exposure to political advertising relate to their topic knowledge and to their political advertising knowledge? Evans and Park (2015) suggest that the greater direct and indirect experience people have with advertising (political advertising in our case), the more persuasion knowledge they can acquire.

Our study showed that increased subjective persuasion knowledge about political advertising was positively related to skepticism about political advertising. Although this relationship suggests that the persuasion knowledge can help creating critical thinkers who are able to better cope with and evaluate advertising so they can make wise decisions in the voting booth, it also may raise further issues and areas for research. For example, what are the consequences of increased skepticism among the electorate? Fowler, Franz, and Ridout (2016) suggest that increased skepticism may lead to less trust and more cynicism. Does cynicism mobilize or demobilize citizens?

Our research discussed the ways that political advertising and commercial advertising are regulated differently. It would be interesting to examine consumers' and voters' relative levels of persuasion knowledge and attitudes toward these forms of advertising. Research by Lang and Krueger (1993) reported that people had stronger opinions about commercial advertising and tended to believe that political advertising was more truthful. A majority of respondents in their interviews disagreed with the statement, "television product commercials are completely truthful", when in fact they are regulated for truth" (216). What are the ethical boundaries for these forms of speech? Do consumers hold political or commercial advertisers to higher standards? What is

the level of *moral* advertising literacy about political advertising (“the skills, abilities, and propensity to morally evaluate advertising, as expressed by the beliefs and judgments people develop about the appropriateness of its tactics”; Zarouali et al. 2019, 198)? Future research could explore these questions.

Our concern and some items on our objective persuasion knowledge scale related to false and misleading political advertising. Yet, we do not know the prevalence of this kind of content. In reality, it may be the case that candidates are reluctant to include clearly false information for fear of defamation lawsuit or negative publicity (Fowler, Franz, and Ridout 2016); however, it may also be the case that misleading ads *are* frequently enacted or that political action groups may engage in false or misleading advertising (e.g., Goldman 2008). This presents an interesting empirical question. Although several studies have explored the use of negativity in political advertising, it would be interesting to examine the content of political advertisements for misleading or false information and discern whether the propensity to mislead varies by source (e.g., candidate, party, PAC).

Our exploratory study suggests that there is enormous opportunity for advertising literacy efforts about political advertising. The results of this initial survey are worrisome in terms of voter understanding of political advertising. Certainly, efforts such as those from the group “adwatch” may help to provide information and transparency about political advertising or the Kids Voting program (Meirick and Wackman 2004) which helps school children. Yet, there are no advertising literacy efforts we found about political advertising beyond the high school classroom that address the current digital advertising context. We hope our scale development and initial study of political advertising and persuasion knowledge will motivate additional research in this area.

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