



### Political Advertising Effectiveness in War-Time Syria

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## Political Advertising Effectiveness in War-Time Syria

### Abstract

This study addresses the effectiveness of political advertising in an extreme context, during a wartime. A self-administered cross-sectional survey was used to collect data during the 2016 parliamentary elections in Syria. Structural equation modelling was utilized to test the hypothetical model and its invariance related to political involvement. The results indicated that beliefs are a four-dimensional structure consisting of information, veracity, sarcasm, and cynicism. Furthermore, wartime perceptions were found to negatively affect attitude towards political advertising via sarcasm among less politically involved voters. Negative attitude was found to be linked to lower levels of veracity among such voters and to higher levels of cynicism for those who are highly involved in politics. Negative attitudes regarding political advertising were found for lowering the chances for watching advertisements, for supporting a candidate, and for willingness to vote. The results also revealed that paying attention to political advertising does not relate to voters' intention to vote. This study is the first of its kind to empirically validate a conceptual model predicting voters' turnout behaviour based on voters' wartime perceptions, beliefs and attitudes regarding political advertising in authoritarian setting. In addition, this study investigates whether the effects of the proposed model may be moderated by voters' political involvement.

### Keywords

Civil war; voting behaviour; political marketing communications; attitudes; Arab uprisings; Syria

## Introduction

Political advertising is defined as “the communication process by which a source (usually a political candidate or party) purchases the opportunity to expose receivers through mass channels to political messages with the intended effect of influencing their political attitudes, beliefs, and/or behaviours.” (Kaid, 1981: 250).

Our review of prior research revealed there is relatively little that is known about voters’ attitudes and behaviour related to political advertising in dictatorships or war-torn nations (such as Syria). This may be a function of the challenges and risks of performing scientific research in the world’s least peaceful region (Global Peace Index, 2017). There is general agreement that Syria is one of the most dangerous countries in the world according to Global Peace Index (2017).

Most research in political advertising to date has addressed effects of political campaigning on voters’ attitudes and beliefs from a Western perspective. A neglected area of academic research interest is the attitudes and beliefs towards political advertising from a Middle Eastern perspective. The Middle East region consists of Arab as well as non-Arab democracies such as Israel and Turkey, neighbouring dictatorships found in Iran and Syria, and Kingdoms in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Within the region, communal alliances play a vital role in understanding political processes. In particular, tribes and clans are influential throughout the Middle East and their members share common attitudes towards political phenomena (Goodarzi, 2009). Western scholars have frequently asked if popular attitudes and beliefs present an obstacle to democratization in the region. These popular beliefs and attitudes result from the religious traditions that are predominant in most Arab countries and may inhibit the emergence of a democratic political culture (Tessler, 2002).

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3 Research into cultural differences suggests that the West is universal, rational, pluralist  
4 and secular, whereas the East is particularistic, traditional, despotic, and religiously  
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Research into cultural differences suggests that the West is universal, rational, pluralist and secular, whereas the East is particularistic, traditional, despotic, and religiously obscurantist (Bromley, 1994). As such, the turbulent and often uncertain nature of Middle East politics provides fertile ground for examining political advertising effectiveness. Accordingly, our study attempts to address this knowledge gap by developing and empirically validating a conceptual model that predicts voters' turnout behaviour based on their wartime perceptions, beliefs and attitudes regarding political advertising in totalitarian settings. Further, we investigate whether or not our proposed model may be moderated by voters' political involvement. Syria, as a modern example of a war-torn dictatorship that is the object of much polemics, has a limited body of scholarly inquiry (Hinnebusch, 2008; Mahmoud and Reisel, 2015). In doing so, we explain why political advertising is still relevant in autocracies such as Syria. We propose and test a research model empirically using time-sensitive data collected during the 2016 parliamentary elections in Syria.

### **Literature Review and Conceptual Model**

#### *The Syrian war and personal experience of wartime crisis*

The Syrian war began in March 2011 over what was then a government crackdown on political dissent leading to arrests and torture of teenagers accused of painting revolutionary graffiti in the city of Daraa (CNN, 2017). Syrian forces fired on protestors leading to several deaths and prompting unrest to spread throughout the country. Since then, more than 400,000 Syrians have been killed and over half of the 22 million population of Syria has been displaced from their homes either throughout Syria or to neighbouring countries (United Nations, 2016). By studying political advertising in war-torn Syria, we collected primary data to better understand how this context influences beliefs and attitudes about political advertising.

### *The Syrian parliamentary elections*

Promoted by the regime as a ‘democratic wedding’, the parliamentary elections were organised in Syria on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 2016. More than seven thousand polling stations, i.e., voting offices, were opened all over the country for the voters to cast their votes. However, those stations were only located in the state-held territories at that time (CNN, 2016). Out of nearly eleven thousand applicants, over 3,500 remained as candidates (from 15 constituencies) and they competed for 250 seats in Syria's parliament (or as officially named: People's Council) to represent 14 governates (see Appendix A). Some opposition parties had boycotted the elections and depicted the whole process as lacking integrity and transparency (BBC, 2016). In theory, the elections were announced as free and multi-party, however, in practice, it was a replication of the preceding legislative sessions. Many politicians and newspapers antagonistic towards the regime disparaged any elections that would take place in an ‘Assad-seized-controlled Syria’ as a ‘farce’ given the extensive vote-rigging, brinkmanship, and forced disenfranchisement that it portrayed (e.g., MacFarquhar, 2012; Bentley, 2016). Similar to the preceding sessions, many experts had confidently anticipated what the 2016 parliamentary elections results would be. As expected, the Baath party and its allies (known as National Progressive Front) had won the vast majority of seats in the People’s Council accounting for 200 (see Appendix B) of the 250 total number of seats (SANA, 2016a). The officially announced election turnout rate was 57%. Those results echoed what had been loudly whispered by many Syrian people; describing the elections as ‘predetermined assignments.’ Thus, we believe that the civil war did not actually impact the outcomes of the elections as the Baath party and its allies had claimed, and in a business-as-usual fashion, the ‘lion’s share of parliament and the ‘democratic wedding’ was fixed via ballot-rigging. The 2016 elections were the second parliamentary ballot (after the one held in 2012) since the flare-up of the civil war in 2011. However, the UN said it would not recognise those elections (France24, 2016).

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3 From a political marketing perspective, the campaign's dominating 'democratic  
4 wedding' theme that united the advertisements during the elections was 'Together, we build a  
5 better Syria' (Alwatan, 2016). Notably absent from the campaign were slogans calling for  
6 improving the status of the Syrians' living (Alwatan, 2016) or surviving the mire of the civil.  
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13 Amid claims of not receiving funds from the government, the vast majority of the  
14 candidates, based on our observations, had run their advertisements on four types of media.  
15 The first type was broadcast (i.e., local FM radio stations and TV channels). The second was  
16 print media, including newspapers and magazines. The third type was outdoor media channels  
17 such as posters and signs. The fourth category of advertisements had been run online,  
18 particularly, via banners placed onto online newspapers. Additionally, using social media (e.g.,  
19 Facebook and Instagram) as promotional tools was very common amongst the candidates.  
20 However, we do not recognise it as an advertising medium, since such promotional  
21 communications were not paid (e.g., unsponsored posts or ads). Thus, we categorise them as  
22 forms of publicity and public relations campaigns run via unpaid shared venues. Overall, all  
23 advertisements via all of the aforementioned channels (including publicity posts) had photos  
24 or videos of the candidates alongside slogans and persuasive requests for the potential voters  
25 to give their voices to those candidates (official statistics were not available).  
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#### 43 *Beliefs about and attitudes toward political advertising*

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46 Politicians and political parties spend considerable sums of money on advertising to  
47 influence voters (Franz and Ridout, 2007; Jin et al., 2009). Such was the practice in the 2016  
48 Syrian elections. Yet the impact is not predictable, as some voters are highly critical of  
49 advertising whereas others respond to it very favourably (Kaid, 2004). What makes political  
50 advertising effective then? The answer to this question may reside with an understanding of  
51 the prior attitudes and beliefs of voters (Gamson, 1992). There are several antecedents to the  
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3 understanding of voters' attitudes and beliefs including the credibility of the advertising source  
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5 (Anderson, 1981), the choice of media (Stroud, 2008), and the degree to which voters have  
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7 already established an initial belief regarding politicians or their party (Taber and Lodge, 2006).  
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11 An understanding of voters' beliefs and attitudes regarding political advertising is  
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13 frequently attributed to a range of differences in voters' perceptions (Franz and Ridout, 2007;  
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15 Jin et al., 2009). As such, scholars have addressed political advertising from multiple  
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17 perspectives. For instance, political advertising has been examined from several different  
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19 angles: *choice of candidate* (Johnston et al., 2004; Valentino et al., 2004), *voter turnout*  
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21 (Vavrek, 2007), *voter emotion* (Brader, 2005), *political advertising's ability to motivate voters*  
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23 (Brader 2005), *targeting youth in political advertising* (Waller and Polonsky, 1999) and  
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25 *cultural differences in political advertising* (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 1995).  
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31 A review of the literature on effectiveness of political advertising identifies two  
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33 categories of political advertising. Political advertisements that convey a *negative* message, by  
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35 attempting to *dissuade* voters from voting for a particular cause or candidate, and *positive*  
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37 political advertising in which effectiveness is measured by encouraging voters to vote *for* a  
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39 candidate or cause. In addition, comparative political advertising highlights both the supported  
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41 candidate's strengths and the opponent's weaknesses (Shah et al., 2007). The mix of negative  
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43 and positive advertising generates an overall 'tone' of political advertising which has a bearing  
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45 on its effectiveness and therefore on its appeal (to the voter).  
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50 There is considerable academic debate regarding the effectiveness of each of the two  
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52 'tones' of political advertising. While some scholars argue the benefits of *negative* political  
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54 advertisements (Goldstein and Freedman, 2002; Marcus et al., 2000), others suggest that  
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56 negative political advertising runs counterproductive to the advertisement's desired impact  
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58 (Dardis et al., 2008).  
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3 Although it has been shown that negative advertising carries more impact than positive  
4 advertising (Kaid and Tedesco, 1999) as well as tends to be more memorable (Kellermann,  
5 1984), positive focused political advertisements were found to be highly persuasive (Sears and  
6 Whitney, 1973). In addition, a study by Zullo and Seligman (1990) found that political  
7 candidates who spoke negatively during election campaigns lost in 82% of elections. Yet, the  
8 evidence varies when considering whether or not the candidate is an incumbent. Studies reveal  
9 that a negative political advertising campaign is more effective at influencing voters' attitudes  
10 and beliefs for the challenging candidate, while positive campaigning works more effectively  
11 for the incumbent candidate (Fridkin and Kenny, 2004; Lau and Pomper, 2002).

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25 Jin et al.'s (2009) empirical study was the first to identify a voter's belief structure  
26 regarding political advertising. They labeled five dimensions of beliefs that are the *raison d'être*  
27 of voters' favourable or unfavourable attitudes toward political advertising. Below is a brief  
28 description of each dimension.

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34 • *Information*: the political advertising provides information about candidates to help the  
35 voters make informed decisions and gain political knowledge.
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39 • *Veracity*: political advertising can be criticized for delivering false, dishonest, exaggerated,  
40 deceptive or misleading information or claims which may affect the voter's decision.  
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43 Moreover, political advertising can ruin the reputation of the advertising industry and the  
44 credibility of advertising as a reliable source of information in general (Iyengar and Prior,  
45 2002). There have been many voices calling state authorities to regulate political  
46 advertising and to hold politicians accountable for their claims during the elections  
47 (Gleason, 1996). However, in practice, monitoring political advertising is very challenging  
48 if not impossible (Parker, 2016).
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55 • *Cynicism*: A harsh feeling about political advertising can be stimulated by negativity of the  
56 advertising's content. Nonetheless, negative political advertising has been praised by some



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3 advocates for its effectiveness, that is, numerous politicians in many elections around the  
4 globe have adopted advertisements that aggressively attack the opponents in in order to  
5 bring them down (Westen, 2012).  
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- 10 • *Money Politics*: Large amounts of money are usually invested into political advertising  
11 campaigns. It is unclear if this use of money feeds corruption or spreading dominating  
12 ideologies. Jin et al. (2009: 563) describe political advertising as “the power of money in  
13 politics.”  
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- 19 • *Entertainment*: Consumers tend to like attractive advertisements. Studies conducted in the  
20 Middle East have reported a significant positive relationship between the advertising’s  
21 entertainment value and voters’ overall attitudes toward advertising (Mahmoud, 2013;  
22 Mahmoud and Reisel, 2015). Many politicians tend to exhibit sarcastic attitudes and make  
23 fun of their rivals through political advertisements. In Syria, political advertisements were  
24 satirized by the media during the 2016 parliamentary election, and many Syrian people  
25 described the way the campaigns were run as a farce. In this study we use the term of  
26 sarcasm (instead of entertainment) as an alternative to the hedonic component of beliefs  
27 about political advertising.  
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#### 40 *Political advertising behavioural outcomes*

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43 Recent studies on attitudes toward advertising have concluded that robust links exist  
44 between attitudes and behavioural responses toward advertising (Mahmoud and Reisel, 2015).  
45 Many of these links are deeply rooted in national culture and thus determine how individuals  
46 make consumption decisions within their national culture (Rawwas, Patzer, and Vitell, 1998).  
47 Indeed, as Rawwas et al. (1998) assert, often such consumption decisions are made in cultures  
48 directly affected by war.  
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57 Research on behavioural responses to advertising is a function of consumers’ *beliefs*,  
58 that is, that an event or state of affairs has or will occur (Eagly and Chaiken, 1998), or their  
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3 attitudes, namely, the positive or negative cognitive dispositions that one person holds towards  
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5 a referent (Mahmoud, 2013).  
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8 In the present study, we explore three intentional or behavioural responses regarding  
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10 Syria's 2016 parliamentary advertising campaigns. Specifically, we examine the extent to  
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12 which the participants are watching or paying attention to political advertising, if they are  
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14 supporting a candidate(s), and if they are intending to vote (that is, turnout intention).  
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### 17 *Conceptual Model*

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20 During the elections in Syria, many online newspapers ran anecdotal polls to explore  
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22 voter opinions about political advertising campaigns. Most of those surveys show that voters  
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24 hold unfavourable attitudes toward political advertising. In light of this, we posit our first  
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26 hypothesis:  
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30 *H1: Voters hold negative beliefs, attitudes, and intentional responses regarding political*  
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32 *advertising.*  
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36 The civil war in Syria has cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and has  
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38 displaced nearly half of the population since 2011. The war has affected Syrians in nearly all  
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40 aspects of everyday life. For the majority, purchasing power and incomes have decreased. Yet,  
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42 some have profited by acting as so called "war traders" who have been exploiting their links  
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44 with the government or opposition factions to control the basic commodities traded in the  
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46 country. War traders have made fortunes at the expense of the many Syrians seeking to simply  
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48 ensure access to very basic needs (food, water, fuel). In this respect, perceptual variables may  
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50 be affected by wartime as evidenced previously (e. g., Mahmoud and Reisel, 2015 found that  
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52 war increases perceptions of job insecurity). Thus, the effectiveness of marketing  
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54 communications, including political advertising, can be affected during a wartime.  
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3 Furthermore, our study examined political advertising by candidates competing from different  
4 political parties. This leads us to our second hypothesis:  
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8 *H2: Wartime perceptions are related to beliefs about political advertising. More specifically,*  
9 *wartime perceptions are negatively related to information and veracity, while positively related*  
10 *to sarcasm and cynicism.*  
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16 Overall, attitude toward advertising received its first systematic investigation by Bauer and  
17 Greyser (1968) by conceptualizing consumers' beliefs about advertising as two distinct  
18 constructs – one economic, and a second, social. The authors indicate that the consumer's mind  
19 processes promotional messages in a sequence beginning with perception and followed by  
20 affect and a tendency towards behaviour (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961). Palda (1966) called this  
21 process the "hierarchy of effects." In the last three decades, the path from beliefs to behaviour  
22 via attitude toward advertising has been extensively researched. For instance, Alwitt and  
23 Prabhaker (1992) found unfavourable feelings toward advertising were predicted by  
24 consumers' beliefs about advertising as source of irritation. These conclusions are consistent  
25 with Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) findings that beliefs are antecedents of attitude as well as the  
26 "hierarchy of effects" suggestions in regard to how advertising is processed by consumers'  
27 minds (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961; Palda, 1966; Smith and Swinyard, 1988). Subsequent  
28 investigations have validated the path from beliefs to attitude to behavioural intentions in  
29 diverse contexts including those in the Middle East (Mahmoud, 2015; Mahmoud et al., 2019).  
30 For instance, effective advertising could enhance the chances for purchase intentions toward  
31 advertised products (Sathish et al., 2011). In political advertising, products are the candidates  
32 themselves who aim, through their advertising, to persuade and encourage voters to engage in  
33 political life, which translates into three possible behavioural responses/outcomes: watching  
34 the advertising, supporting a candidate, and voting in favour of those candidates. The  
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directional hypothesized relationships among all the variables in our conceptual model are illustrated in Figure 1.

PLACE FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

We therefore forward our remaining hypotheses:

*H3: Beliefs about political advertising are related to attitudes toward political advertising.*

*More specifically, information and veracity are positively related to attitude, while sarcasm and cynicism are negatively related to attitude.*

*H4: Attitudes toward political advertising are positively related to intentional responses/outcomes concerning watching advertisements.*

*H5: Attitudes toward political advertising are positively related to intentional responses/outcomes concerning supporting candidate(s).*

*H6: Attitudes toward political advertising are positively related to intentional responses/outcomes concerning voting.*

*H7: Watching political advertisements is positively related to favourable intentional responses/outcomes toward voting.*

*H8: Supporting candidates is positively related to favourable intentional responses/outcomes toward voting.*

## **Methods**

The study was conducted in a wartime context in Syria during the parliamentary elections of 2016. Our sample includes Syrian citizens of voting age. Based on the Syrian state's announcements on the number of qualified voters, our research population was nearly

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3 eight million people, including the military and police forces, given the amendments to the  
4 Syrian electoral law in 2014 (Public Election Law, 2016). We constructed a self-administered  
5 cross-sectional survey that was distributed upon the commencement of the electoral marketing  
6 campaigns. Participants had the options to complete the survey either online or via paper-and-  
7 pencil self-administered questionnaires. We informed the participants that taking part in our  
8 survey is an indication of their consent of participation and that their participation was  
9 voluntary. Additionally, the respondents were informed that they were free to withdraw at any  
10 time without giving any reason and that they were free to not answer any particular question  
11 or questions, should they not wished to do so. Nearly 1,000 individuals were approached during  
12 the data collection process. Most participants were reluctant to take part in a survey containing  
13 *sensitive* questions about politics due to potential fears of recrimination that would be held by  
14 anyone living in a war-torn nation (for example, the respondents might not be assured that the  
15 researchers were not in fact governmental intelligence agents, even if confidentiality were  
16 stated). To address this concern and to conquer the low response rate we offered assurances of  
17 anonymity and employed a reaction strategy by collecting data in the privacy of the  
18 respondents' homes. Furthermore, given the extreme context of this study, we used a  
19 snowballing sampling approach. Despite the known limitations of snowball sampling (Waters,  
20 2015), the technique enabled us to rely on the participants to find additional respondents (Horst,  
21 2016). Altogether, 215 complete and fully usable responses were received and those were used  
22 in the analyses. The survey instrument was designed to measure the public's wartime  
23 perceptions, beliefs and attitudes about political advertising, political involvement, watching  
24 political advertisements, supporting candidates, intention to vote, and demographics.

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We measured wartime perceptions using a single item designed for the current study  
based on Mahmoud and Reisel, 2015's work. The item was "I'm negatively affected by the  
country's war" to capture the overall perceived negative impact of the civil war on respondents'

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3 lives. The set of beliefs about political advertising was measured using an adapted version of  
4 the multi-dimensional scale developed by Jin et al. (2009). Sample items for each of the five  
5 dimensions (see Appendix C for more details) were:  
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10 - “Political advertising is a valuable source of information about candidates” for  
11 information;
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13 - “It feels like I’ve got to laugh whenever I look at political advertising” for  
14 entertainment/sarcasm;
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16 - “Political advertising is a good use of campaign funds” for money politics;
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18 - “In general, political advertising is truthful” for veracity;
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20 - “Political advertising makes members of the public more interested in politics” for  
21 cynicism.  
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30 Attitude toward political advertising was measured using Jin et al. (2009)  
31 unidimensional scale. A sample item is: “In general, I like political advertising.” The remaining  
32 variables including political involvement, watching political advertising, supporting a  
33 candidate, and intention to vote were all measured on a single-item basis. Representative items  
34 were, respectively, “I’m interested in politics,” and “During 2016 elections, I watch or pay  
35 attention to candidates’ advertising,” and “Do you support or trust any of the candidates in the  
36 2016 elections?” and “Will you vote in 2016 elections?” Finally, the aforementioned measures  
37 were assessed using 5-point Likert scale.  
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49 Quantitative analyses were used to analyse the data. These included a one-sample t-  
50 tests to evaluate the different levels of beliefs and attitudes, and structural equation modelling  
51 to test the proposed structural model and its invariance related to political involvement.  
52 Moreover, we used another procedure of structural equation modelling to run a confirmatory  
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3 factor analysis and assess the dimensionality of the different beliefs. We also used  
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5 bootstrapping in the analysis of mediated effects.  
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9 Based on Jin et al.'s (2009) results, we tested the assumption that beliefs about political  
10 advertising were a five-dimensional structure. Our statistics, RMESA = .050 < 0.08, SRMR =  
11 .0515 < .08,  $\chi^2/df = 1.532 < 3$ , NFI = .904 > .9, and CFI = .964 > .9 (Bentler, 1990; Hu and  
12 Bentler, 1995; MacCallum et al., 1996; Byrne, 2010; Jöreskog and Sörbom, 2015) had an  
13 initial support for Jin et al. (2009) theory that beliefs about political advertising are a five-factor  
14 construct (see Figure 2a), however, money politics was unsuccessful in meeting the minimum  
15 of Cronbach's alpha (.7) recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) and Peterson (1994)  
16 for 3- (or above) item constructs. Money politics scored .668 on the reliability test without any  
17 possible if-item-deleted improvements for the scale. Thus, money politics was removed from  
18 the structural model and we re-ran the confirmatory factor analysis again.  
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38 Consequently, all our statistics improved after dropping money politics (RMESA =  
39 .044 < 0.08, SRMR = .048 < .08,  $\chi^2/df = 1.418 < 3$ , NFI = .93 > .9, and CFI = .98 > .9) and  
40 showed that beliefs about political advertising in Syria is rather a 4-factor structure, comprising  
41 of information ( $\alpha = .824$ ), sarcasm ( $\alpha = .731$ ), veracity ( $\alpha = .722$ ), and cynicism ( $\alpha = .735$ ) (See  
42 Figure 2b). Interestingly, the original five-dimensional structure was found to be invariant  
43 among our sample participants, whether they were involved in politics or not involved in  
44 politics ( $\Delta CFI$  never exceeded .001). Attitude as a unidimensional factor was also found to be  
45 internally consistent ( $\alpha = .812$ ). Table 1 presents the main variables in the study in inter-  
46 correlation matrix along with the values of mean and standard deviation for each variable.  
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PLACE TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

PLACE FIGURE 2b ABOUT HERE

## Results

### *Data description*

215 respondents participated in the study, 66% of which were male and 34% were female. The vast majority of the participants were highly educated holding a college bachelor's degree or higher (96.7%). A majority of the participants worked in the private sector (58%), with 12% working in the public sector; 25% of the respondents were retired or unemployed and 5% were self-employed. The majority (70%) of the respondents answered that they would not vote in the 2016 election or that they did not trust any candidates (76%). Such low confidence in government is not uncommon (Nye, Zelikow, and King, 1997). Participants reported that they got their news from three major sources: internet and social media (94%), television news (57%) and newspapers (39%). *Assessing public's beliefs and attitudes regarding political advertising*

Hypothesis H1 was tested using one-sample t-test to assess the public's beliefs and attitudes regarding political advertising, against the neutral value (i.e., 3). Table 2 shows that, as hypothesized, all beliefs and attitudes are negative toward political advertising. Therefore, H1 was fully supported

PLACE TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE



### *Path analysis and model invariance*

Although most of the goodness-of-fit measures indicate that the conceptual model fits our data, (see Table 3), (GFI) is .893 which is lower than .9 as recommended by Tanaka and Huber (1985)). Further, some paths are seen to be non-significant. Therefore, we eliminated all non-significant paths and performed another path analysis which produced an alternate model depicted in Figure 3 with the findings summarized in Table 4. All fit indices, Chi-square to the number of degrees of freedom (Bollen, 1989), comparative fit index (Bentler, 1990), the goodness-of-fit (Meyers et al., 2017), standardized root mean square residual (Hu and Bentler, 1995), and root mean square error of approximation (Browne and Cudeck, 1992), suggested that the alternate path model confirmed a good fit for the observed data. Moreover, all mediations were further tested using a bootstrapping approach and all these were found to be significant (see Table 5).

PLACE TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

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We conducted an invariance test to analyse the moderating role of political involvement. We found that  $\Delta CFI$  was (.01) higher than .001 (Byrne, 2010), which demonstrates a significant variance (regarding levels of political involvement) in the alternate model between two groups of people that were classified as either involved or not involved in politics. Therefore, we conducted pairwise parameter comparisons using  $Z$  score to detect moderated paths. Our results demonstrated that political involvement moderates the path from

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3 wartime perceptions to sarcasm, from sarcasm to attitude, from veracity to attitude, and finally  
4 from cynicism to attitude. We concluded that wartime perceptions are positively related to  
5 sarcasm only for respondents who are politically indifferent ( $\beta_1 = .362$ ) (refer to Figure 3).  
6  
7 These effects are transmitted onto attitude via sarcasm ( $B = -0.077$ ,  $P < .01$ ) whereas, wartime  
8 perceptions carry little effect on politically involved voters in relation to their sarcasm  
9 perception toward political advertising ( $\beta_2 = .032$ ). Thus, the validity of hypothesis 2 is only  
10 partially supported. However, both groups, politically involved and non-involved participants,  
11 hold unfavourable attitudes toward political advertising because they believe that political  
12 advertising is sarcastic. Sarcasm's effects on attitudes were stronger for those who are non-  
13 politically involved ( $\beta_1 = -.388 > \beta_2 = -.207$ ). Additionally, people with low levels of political  
14 involvement were found to hate political advertising as indicated by the lack of veracity ( $\beta_1 =$   
15  $.858$ ), whereas those with high degree of political interests dislike political advertising  
16 immersed in cynicism ( $\beta_2 = .833$ ). Thus, hypothesis 3 is only partially supported.

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19 For all respondents, positive attitudes toward political advertising were linked to  
20 positive behavioural responses, therefore respondents are more likely to pay attention and  
21 watch political advertising ( $\beta = .288$ ) (supporting hypothesis H4), favour a candidate ( $\beta = .367$ )  
22 (supporting hypothesis H5), and/or be willing to vote ( $\beta = .261$ ) (supporting hypothesis H6).  
23 Our results also show that having a candidate to support is positively related to intention to  
24 vote ( $\beta = .462$ ), supporting hypothesis H8. The results also indicate that watching and/or paying  
25 attention to political advertising does not relate to voters' intention to vote, providing support  
26 for rejecting hypothesis H7.

## 27 Discussion

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29 The aim of the current study was to assess the effectiveness of political advertising in a wartime  
30 context. We conducted an empirical investigation to validate and test a structural path model

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3 linking voters' wartime perceptions to their behavioural responses toward political advertising  
4 via beliefs and attitudes. Furthermore, we were able to assess our model's invariance regarding  
5 voters' level of political involvement. Our study attempted to shed light on the effectiveness of  
6 political advertising in Syria - a war-torn totalitarian regime. This study offers the first research  
7 of its kind to investigate wartime perceptions as a predictor of political advertising's  
8 effectiveness, which is measured by beliefs, attitudes, and behavioural intentions toward such  
9 advertising.  
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20 While it can be argued that political advertising may seem irrelevant in a dictatorship  
21 where media outlets are not independent of government control, and political advertising in a  
22 dictatorship may be simply a form of government propaganda, recent empirical research  
23 suggests that political advertising is still relevant in dictatorship-based countries (Knutsen et  
24 al., 2017). Elections may allow dictators to co-opt rivals, project legitimacy, deter opposition,  
25 and learn about regime/opposition strength and standing in the broader population (Ghandi,  
26 2008; Little, 2012). To further reinforce this legitimacy, autocratic governments hold elections  
27 to neutralize groups that would otherwise pose a threat to the ruling regime (Ghandi, 2008).  
28 Finally, as Levitsky and Way (2010) suggest, elections provide authoritarian regimes with a  
29 semblance of popular acceptance and recognition of their authority.  
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43 Although our study utilized the belief structure first introduced by Jin et al, (2009), their  
44 set of beliefs about political advertising was derived from American political campaign data.  
45 Our validity tests indicate some variance from the original 5-factor model the authors'  
46 suggested. With the help of confirmatory factor analysis, we established that beliefs held by  
47 voters about political advertising in Syria fall within four categories (rather than five):  
48 information, sarcasm, veracity, and cynicism. Money politics was dropped from analyses due  
49 to its insufficient validity and reliability. Thus, we mark this factor as a culturally-sensitive  
50 dimension of beliefs about political advertising that recalls for further research to run re-  
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3 validation for the belief-measuring structure through cross-cultural studies which are  
4 commonly used in behavioural sciences (e.g., Smith et al., 2013).  
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8 We find that voters' beliefs and attitudes regarding political advertising are negative.  
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10 First, political advertising is perceived as an unreliable source of information about the  
11 candidates. For example, our participants disagree about political advertising being a good  
12 source of information about candidates' personalities (82%), and public service record (77%),  
13 and the policies they support (81%). Second, our respondents feel sarcastic about political  
14 advertising. The vast majority of our respondents (72%) agree that watching political  
15 advertising makes them want to laugh off disparaging remarks. This sense of humour stems  
16 from a lack of trust in the government's election promises. Third, veracity levels score low on  
17 voters' perceptions of political advertising. 86% of our sample believes that political  
18 advertising is dishonest and convoluted. Fourth, Syrian voters feel deeply cynical about  
19 political advertising. With the majority of our participants disagreed with the ability of political  
20 advertising to get the public more interested in politics (65%), to increase voter's registration  
21 (64%), and turnout rate (69%). Syrian voters take a rather cynical view of political advertising.  
22 Finally, voters' overall attitude toward political advertising is unfavourable in general, as  
23 almost half of our sample dislike political advertising (49%) and see it as worthless  
24 communication (70%). It appears then that the conduct of elections in quasi-dictatorial  
25 government regimes conveys a certain degree of legitimacy to the outside world (Blaydes,  
26 2008).  
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50 While our results provide few surprises, since elections tend to reinforce rather than  
51 undermine authoritarian regimes, the effect of such elections on consumer affairs is a little less  
52 understood. One argument for the relevance of elections conducted by quasi-dictatorships is  
53 acquisition and distribution of resources. The distribution of resources to the voting public  
54 often becomes the basis of election promises. An example of such behaviour in Middle East is  
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3 provided by Albrecht and Schlumberger (2004) who argue that governments in the Middle East  
4 have been subsidising basic foodstuff and consumer goods as election promises since the  
5 1970s. In Egypt, for example, the nation's army employees and their families are provided with  
6 ready access to consumer goods and housing that is not easily obtained by other consumers  
7 (Beattie, 1991; Blaydes, 2008). Further, our findings point to the necessity of political  
8 advertising in nations with autocratic regimes. Such campaigns are often necessary to reinforce  
9 the strength of the regime and promote political strength to the voters.  
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20 The path model in our study was tested using a structural equation modelling approach.  
21 Our findings show that wartime perceptions lead to more unfavourable attitudes toward  
22 political advertising through increasing the levels of sarcasm especially for voters who are less  
23 involved in politics. Further, veracity decreases unfavourable tendencies toward political  
24 advertising for less politically involved voters, while cynicism exerts a negative influence over  
25 the attitudes of those who are highly involved in politics. Unlike findings in previous research,  
26 information is unrelated to attitude which is not surprising. For example, Jin et al. (2009) also  
27 found that not all beliefs predicted affect. Our path analysis results show attitude toward  
28 political advertising as a key precursor for our three tested voters' intentional behavioural  
29 responses. In summary, voters' positive attitude toward political advertising will increase  
30 chances of watching and engaging with political advertising, as well as being more willing to  
31 vote. The positive influence of attitude on intent to vote can be either direct or indirect, that is,  
32 by having a candidate to support which boosts the probability of turnout. These results concur  
33 with the observation that the majority of our respondents stated they avoid watching political  
34 advertising (62%), do not have a candidate to support (76%), and are unwilling to vote (69%).  
35 Overall, the order of the key variable of our path model (i.e., beliefs → attitudes → behavioural  
36 intentions) finds support from literature in different contexts (e.g., Mahmoud and Reisel, 2015;  
37 Mahmoud, 2013; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). However, the wartime perceptions effects on the  
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3 effectiveness of political advertising via increasing sarcasm towards it is quite new and  
4 warrants replication studies in similar contexts.  
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8 Our path model may be used as the basis for future works in political advertising. For  
9 instance, our path model may be used as the basis for future studies to explain voters' opinions  
10 on the legitimacy of political advertising in nations with autocratic regimes. Further, our path  
11 model may also be used as the basis for how autocratic regimes use political advertising during  
12 election campaigns.  
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### 20 *Research limitations, practical implications and suggestions for future research*

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23 We ran our investigation in a country with a political dictatorship during civil war.  
24 Thus, the generalisability of our findings would benefit from further research in contexts  
25 depicted as quasi-dictatorships or democracies at war. The dictatorial level can be  
26 conceptualised as a potential moderating variable for the path model.  
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33 Our research is an attempt to examine political advertising's effectiveness in an extreme  
34 context, namely, during wartime. The context of the data collection process imposed many  
35 constraints on employing a probability sampling procedure. Therefore, we utilized snowball  
36 sampling to gather as many responses as possible. Non-probability sampling lowers the  
37 external validity and consequently the generalizability of research outcomes. We recommend  
38 subsequent research employ a randomized sampling approach, albeit, many risks could  
39 accompany the data collection process in a wartime context. However, the extreme context  
40 does not necessarily have to mean a wartime, as it could represent a particular hardship a  
41 government and/or country experiences in which case data collection may not be threatened by  
42 the dangers of war implications.  
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56 We used a cross-sectional design with all data, unlike in longitudinal studies, collected  
57 at one point of time. Cross-sectional studies do not allow for causation (Langridge, 2004). In  
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3 this respect, we suggest future empirical investigations to follow a longitudinal design on  
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5 extending the validity of our model to establish causality on a rigorous basis. Nonetheless,  
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7 findings generated from a cross-sectional study can still be regarded as interpretable and valid  
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9 as long as they are conducted on a strong theoretical basis (Tharenou et al., 2007).  
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13 We built our instrument mainly on the work of Jin et al., (2009). Those measures were  
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15 developed in a Western nation with relatively stable political environment where the  
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17 communications are fair and open. Thus, even positive ads could be construed as cynical if  
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19 people did not believe in the system. For example, talking about expanding political freedoms  
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21 in the Arab world (positive ad), 67% of Arab youth believe that Arab leaders should do more  
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23 to improve freedom and human rights (Burson-Marsteller (ASDA'A), n.d.). Therefore, eliciting  
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25 a new structure of beliefs about political advertising within a wartime context or dictatorships  
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27 using Churchill's (1979) model of developing and validating multi-dimensional scales can  
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29 improve the external validity of our model in future research. Furthermore, we advise that  
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31 future research should also follow Churchill's approach in constructing a multi-dimensional  
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33 wartime perception scale that captures views of war for people experiencing and living with it.  
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39 We argue that beliefs, as presuppositions sourcing people's overall evaluations, i.e.,  
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41 attitudes towards political advertising, are an outcome of an enduring accumulation of many  
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43 exposures to political communications. This implies that both beliefs about and attitudes  
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45 towards political advertising are not only capturing an individual's current exposures to  
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47 political advertisements but also depicting those that happened in the past. Therefore,  
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49 encounters with political advertising accumulatively nourish the attitudinal components over  
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51 time. Furthermore, based on the *Facet Model of Effects* (e.g., Moriarty et al., 2015), being  
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53 exposed to advertisements (e.g., seeing, hearing) does not necessarily mean that the effects  
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55 associated with such exposures would elevate an impact that would shape the affect (i.e.,  
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57 attitude) and be transmitted into behavioral intentions.  
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3 Our study could have benefited from integrating a supplementary design like content  
4 analysis. Thus, such procedure is highly recommended for future research on the advertising  
5 that was actually done, instead of a hypothetical one, which would then allow for a better  
6 understanding of what respondents were assessing. Future research could also examine the  
7 possible effects of ethnicity, gender and religion on advertising effectiveness during wartime.  
8 Such examinations may reveal gender differences in ethnic or religion-based motives for  
9 determining the believability of political advertising campaigns.  
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For Peer Review



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**Appendix A: Parliamentary seats distribution amongst constituencies**

<b>Constituency</b>	<b>Seats</b>
Damascus Governorate	29
Rif Dimashq Governorate	19
Aleppo (city)	20
Aleppo Governorate	32
Homs Governorate	23
Hama Governorate	22
Latakia Governorate	17
Idlib Governorate	18
Tartus Governorate	13
Raqqa Governorate	8
Deir ez-Zor Governorate	14
Al-Hasakah Governorate	14
Daraa Governorate	10
As-Suwayda Governorate	6
Quneitra Governorate	5

Source: (Al-Masdarnews, 2016).

**Appendix B: Won seats: NPF vs. non-NPF**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Won seats</b>
<b>National Progressive Front (NPF)</b>	Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party	172
	Syrian Social Nationalist Party	7
	Syrian Communist Party	4
	Socialist Unionists	2
	Socialist Union Party	2
	National Vow Movement	1
<b>Non-NPF</b>	Independents allied with NPF	12
	Independents not allied with NPF	50

Source: (SANA, 2016b)

For Peer Review

### Appendix C: The employed multi-item measures

Dimension	Item	Assessment
<b>Information</b>	Political advertising is a valuable source of information about candidates.	5-point Likert Scale: 5 represents 'strongly agree'; while 1 symbolises 'strongly disagree'
	Political advertising tells me which candidates support the policies I prefer.	
	Political advertising is a good source of information about the personalities of candidates.	
	Political advertising provides information about candidates' public service records.	
<b>Sarcasm/entertainment</b>	it feels like I've got to laugh whenever I look at political advertisement.	
	Sometimes political advertisements are even more enjoyable than news media content.	
	Entertaining	
<b>Money politics</b>	In general, political advertising helps the political system.	
	Political advertising is a good use of campaign funds.	
	In general, political advertising promotes competition, which benefits the public.	
<b>Veracity</b>	In general, political advertising is truthful.	
	The information in most political advertising is straightforward.	
<b>Cynicism</b>	Political advertising makes members of the public more interested in politics.	
	Political advertising helps to increase the voter turnout rate.	
	Political advertising helps to increase voter registration.	
<b>Attitude</b>	Positivity	
	Value	
	Praiseworthy	

Tables

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations

Dimension	Mean	SD	Information	Sarcasm	Veracity	Cynicism	Attitude	Wartime Perceptions	Watching PAds	Intent to Vote	Supporting a Candidate
Information	1.7512	0.82792									
Sarcasm	3.3039	1.12494	-.283**								
Veracity	1.5953	0.66906	.545**	-.200**							
Cynicism	3.9597	0.92301	-.564**	.254**	-.496**						
Attitude	2.0713	0.94889	.614**	-.448**	.572**	-.625**					
Wartime Perceptions	4.46	0.868	-0.08	0.124	-0.038	0.085	-0.087				
Watching PAds	2.25	1.269	.185**	-.156*	.190**	-.308**	.213**	-0.13			
Intent to Vote	0.31	0.464	.257**	-.328**	.167*	-.323**	.384**	-0.018	.160*		
Supporting a Candidate	0.24	0.429	.206**	-.246**	.191**	-.247**	.313**	-0.046	.231**	.558**	
Political Involvement	0.4977	0.50116	-0.128	0.131	-.145*	.198**	-.160*	0.035	0.089	-0.007	0.024

\*\* P < 0.01; \* P < 0.05

**Table 2:**

<b>One-Sample Test</b>						
Test Value (Neutral Value) = 3						
Dimension	T	Mean	Df	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Information	-22.117***	1.7512	214	-1.24884	-1.3601	-1.1375
Sarcasm	3.961***	3.3039	214	.30388	.1527	.4551
Veracity	-28.575***	1.5860	214	-1.41395	-1.5115	-1.3164
Cynicism	17.939***	4.0574	214	1.05736	1.1735	.9412
Attitude	-14.351***	2.0713	214	-.92868	-1.0562	-.8011

\*\*\*  $P < .0001$

**Table 3: Basic model path analysis**

	<b>Path</b>	<b>Estimate <math>\beta</math></b>
Information	<---	Wartime Perceptions -0.078
Sarcasm	<---	Wartime Perceptions 0.216**
Veracity	<---	Wartime Perceptions -0.054
Cynicism	<---	Wartime Perceptions -0.073
Attitude	<---	Information 0.095
Attitude	<---	Sarcasm -0.338***
Attitude	<---	Veracity 0.273*
Attitude	<---	Cynicism 0.409**
Watching Political Adverts	<---	Attitude 0.286***
Supporting Candidate(S)	<---	Attitude 0.361***
Intent to Vote	<---	Supporting Candidate(s) 0.466***
Intent to Vote	<---	Watching Political Adverts -0.025
Intent to Vote	<---	Attitude 0.269***

$$X^2/df = 1.653 < 3$$

$$CFI = .935 > .9$$

$$GFI^{\forall} = .893 < .9$$

$$SRMR = .053 < .08$$

$$RMSEA = .064 < .08$$

\*\*\* P < .0001; \*\* P < .01; \* P < .05

$\forall$  Indicates poor fit

**Table 4: The alternate model statistics**

	<b>Path</b>	<b>Estimate <math>\beta</math></b>
Sarcasm	<---	Wartime Perceptions ** .214
Attitude	<---	Sarcasm *** -.318
Attitude	<---	Veracity ** .328
Attitude	<---	Cynicism *** .453
Supporting Candidate(s)	<---	Attitude *** .367
Intent to Vote	<---	Supporting Candidate(s) *** .462
Intent to Vote	<---	Attitude *** .261
Watching Political Adverts	<---	Attitude *** .288
$\chi^2/df = 1.664 < 3$		
CFI = .942 > .9		
GFI = .920 $\in$ [.9, .95]		
SRMR = .054 < .08		
RMSEA = .056 < .08		

\*\*\*  $P < .0001$ ; \*\*  $P < .01$

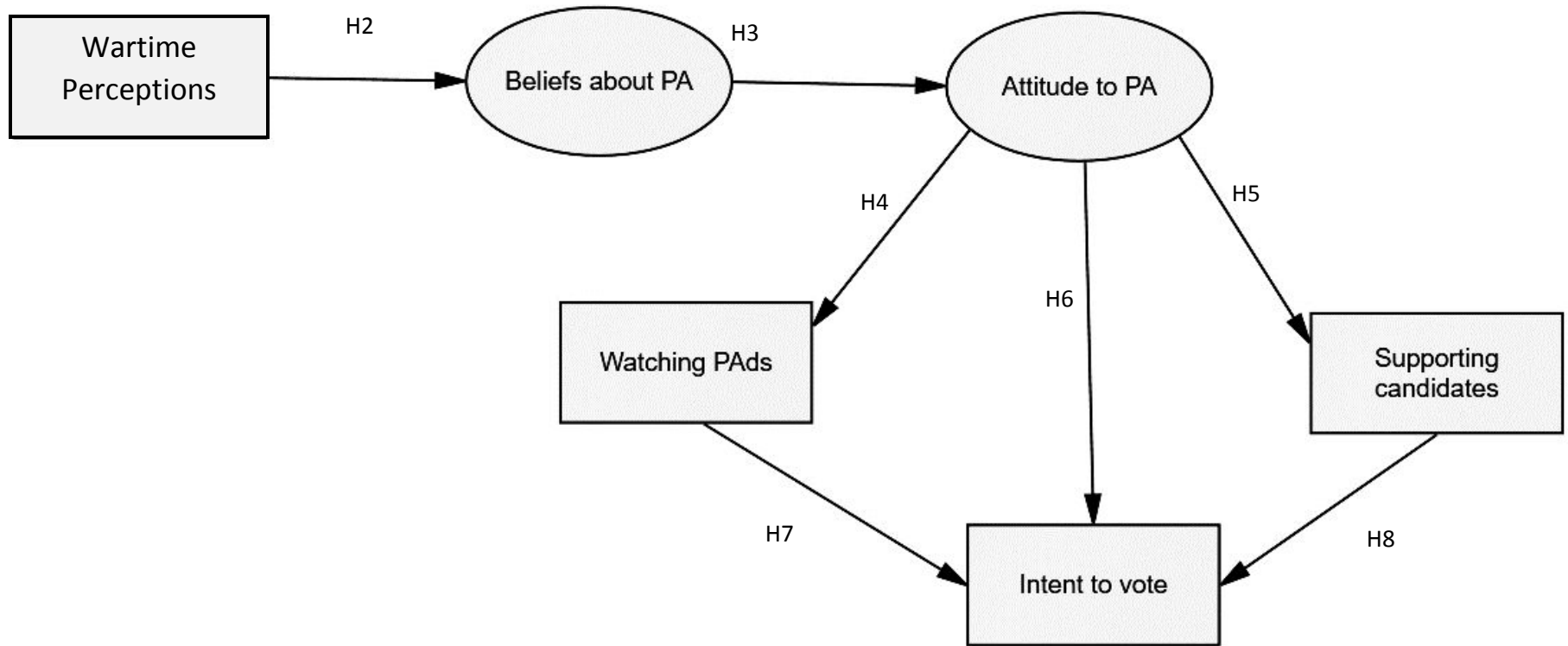
**Table 5: Mediation analysis**

#	Mediation path	Mediation Estimate B	Mediation Type
1	Wartime Perceptions --> Sarcasm --> Attitude	-.077**	Full
2	Veracity --> Attitude --> Watching PAds	.194*	Full
3	Veracity --> Attitude --> Supporting a Candidate	.084*	Full
4	Veracity --> Attitude --> Intent to Vote	.106*	Full
5	Sarcasm --> Attitude --> Watching PAds	-.139**	Full
6	Sarcasm --> Attitude --> Supporting a Candidate	-.06**	Full
7	Sarcasm --> Attitude --> Intent to Vote	-.076**	Full
8	Cynicism --> Attitude --> Watching PAds	.287*	Full
9	Cynicism --> Attitude --> Supporting a Candidate	.124*	Full
10	Cynicism --> Attitude --> Intent to Vote	.157*	Full
11	Attitude --> Supporting a Candidate --> Intent to Vote	.081**	Partial

\*\*  $P < .01$ ; \*  $P < .05$



Figure 1: Conceptual model



PA = Political Advertisement

Figure 2a: Confirmatory factor analysis (Basic Measurement Model)

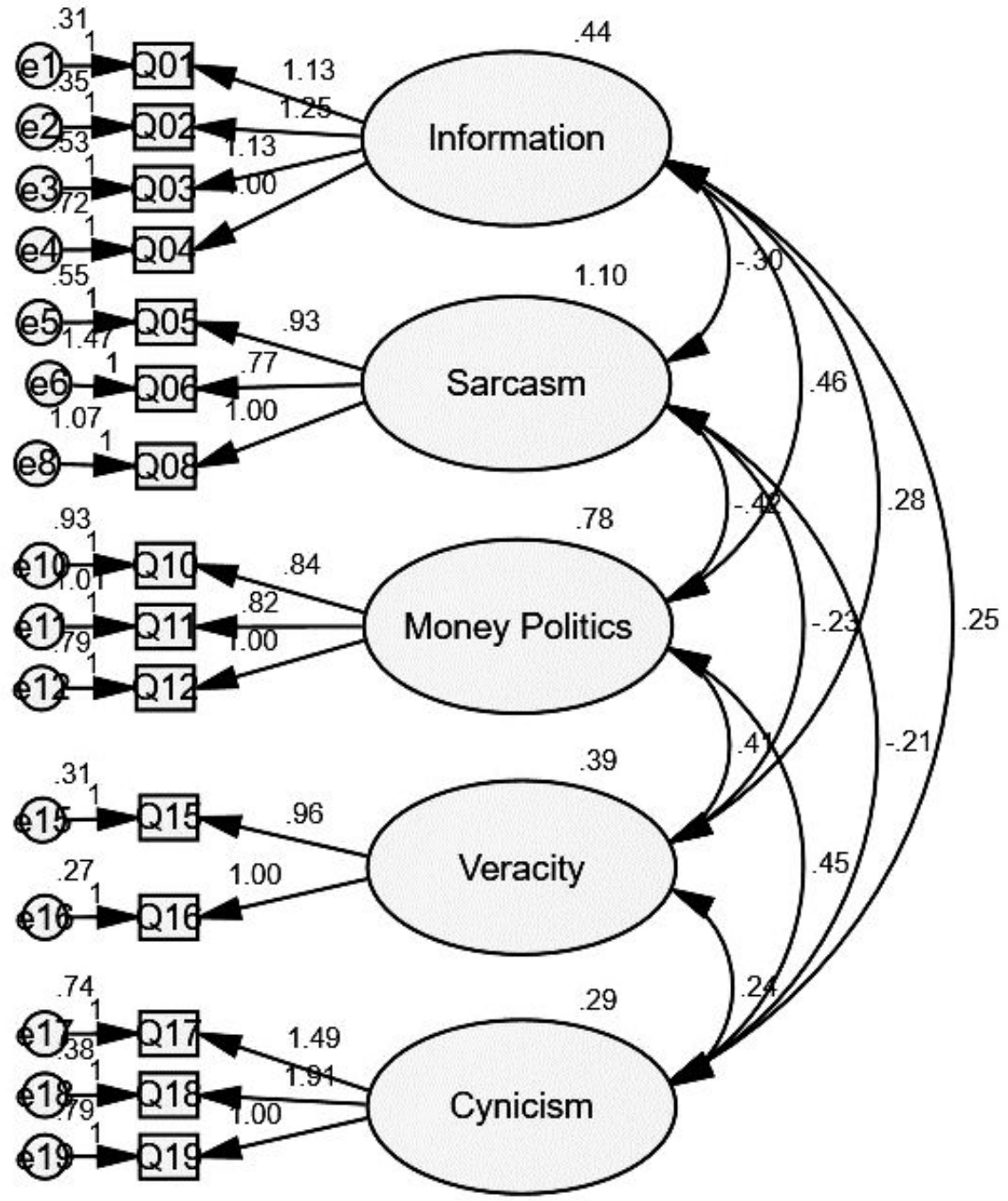


Figure 2b: Confirmatory factor analysis (Alternate Measurement Model).

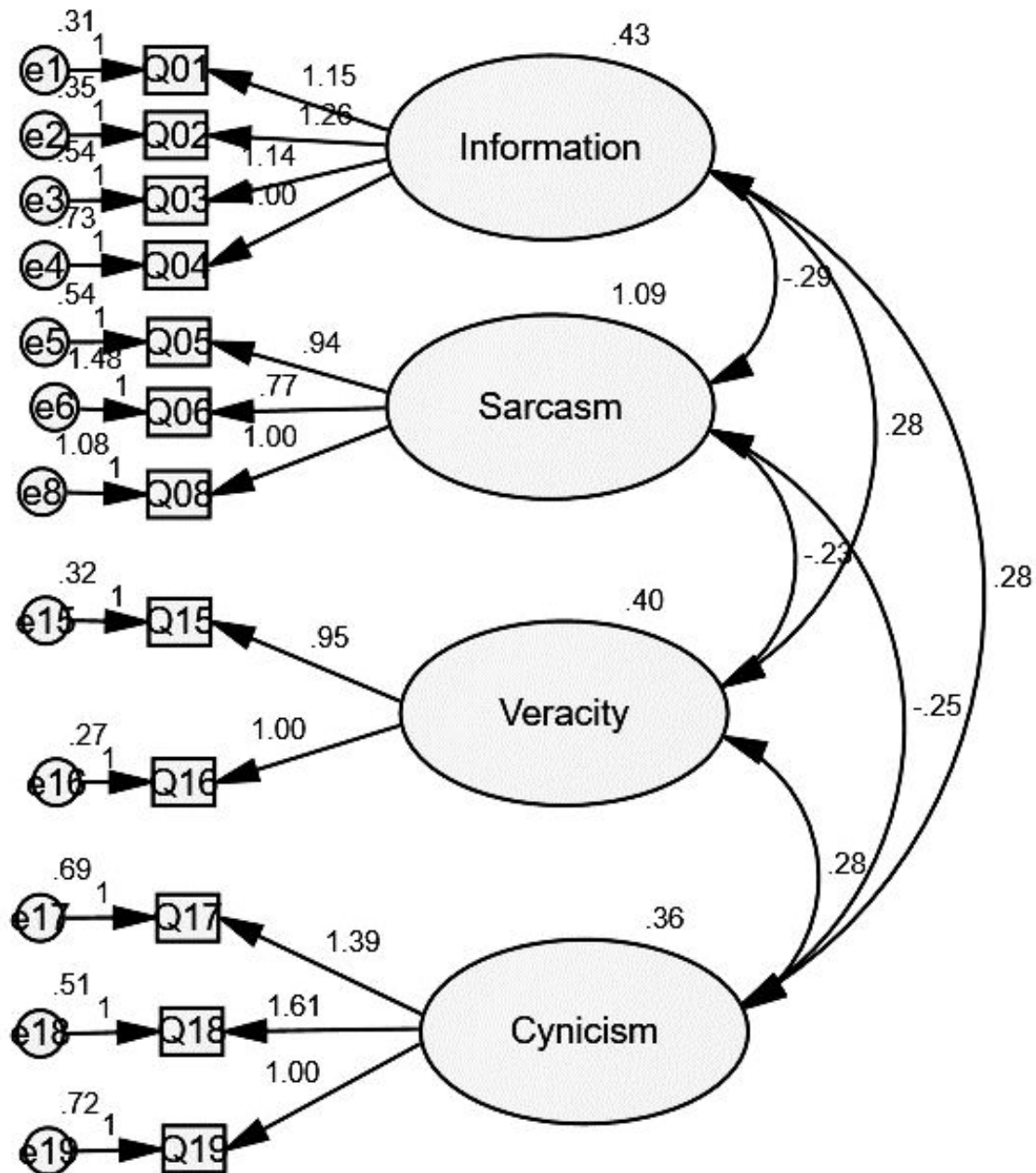
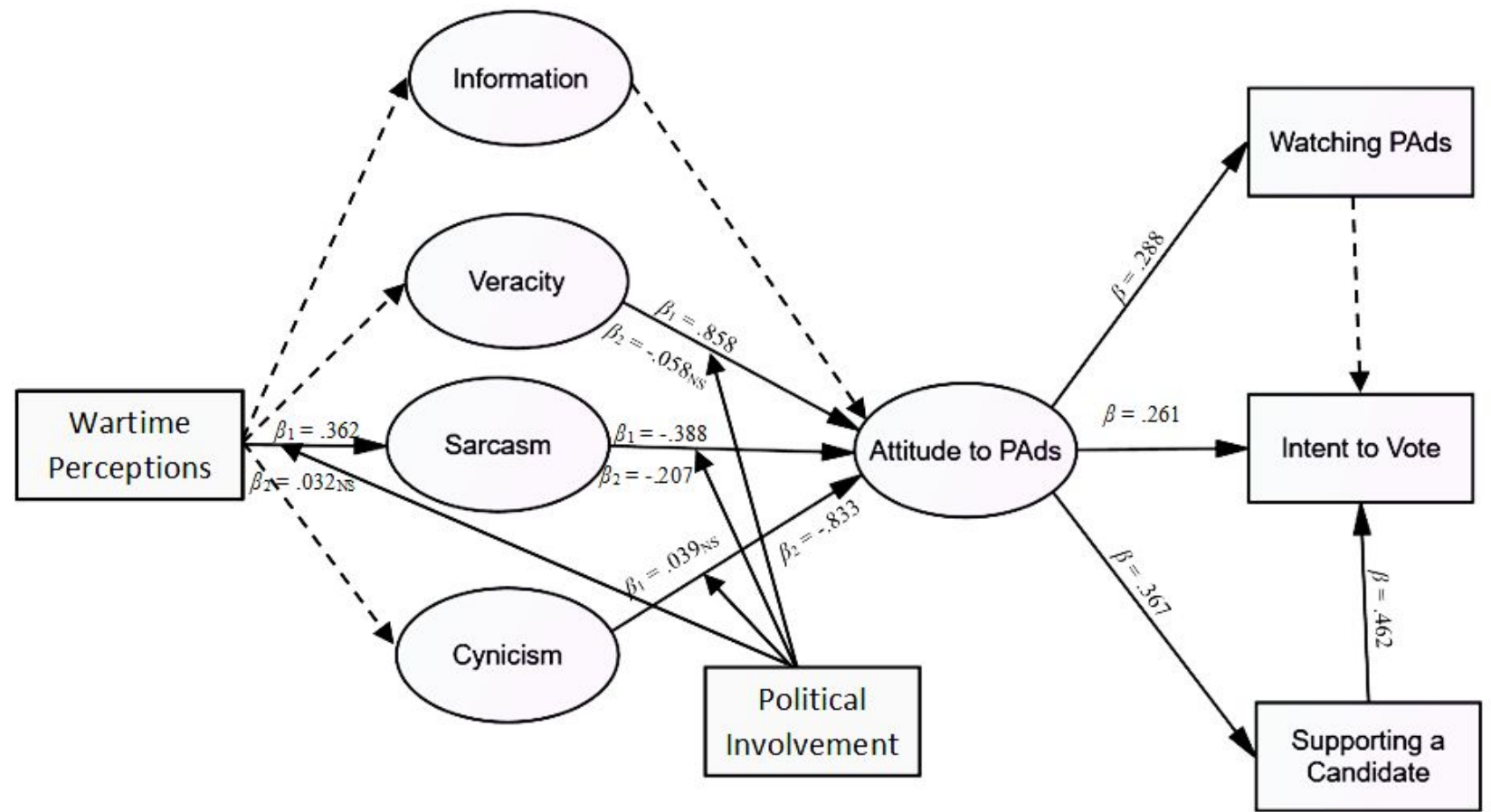


Figure 3: Alternate path model<sup>1 2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Dashed arrows or coefficients subscripted with 'NS' denote non-significant paths.

<sup>2</sup> Where applicable,  $\beta_1$  is the estimate value for participants who are not involved in politics, whereas,  $\beta_2$  represents coefficients for politically involved respondents.