

“HOPE” SHIRTS AND “MAGA” HATS:

WHEN AND WHY CONSUMERS CHOOSE CONSPICUOUS CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS

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Abstract

Why do small donors contribute to political campaigns? And why do they choose to purchase merchandise (vs. direct donation)? In this research we find that supporters of underdog (vs. favorite) candidates are more likely to express their support by purchasing campaign merchandise (vs. monetary donation). This occurs because underdog candidate supporters feel less powerful relative to favorite candidate supporters and compensate by selecting a more conspicuous method of contributing: the purchase of candidate merchandise. We investigate this decision examining real and hypothetical small campaign contributions in four different election cycles.

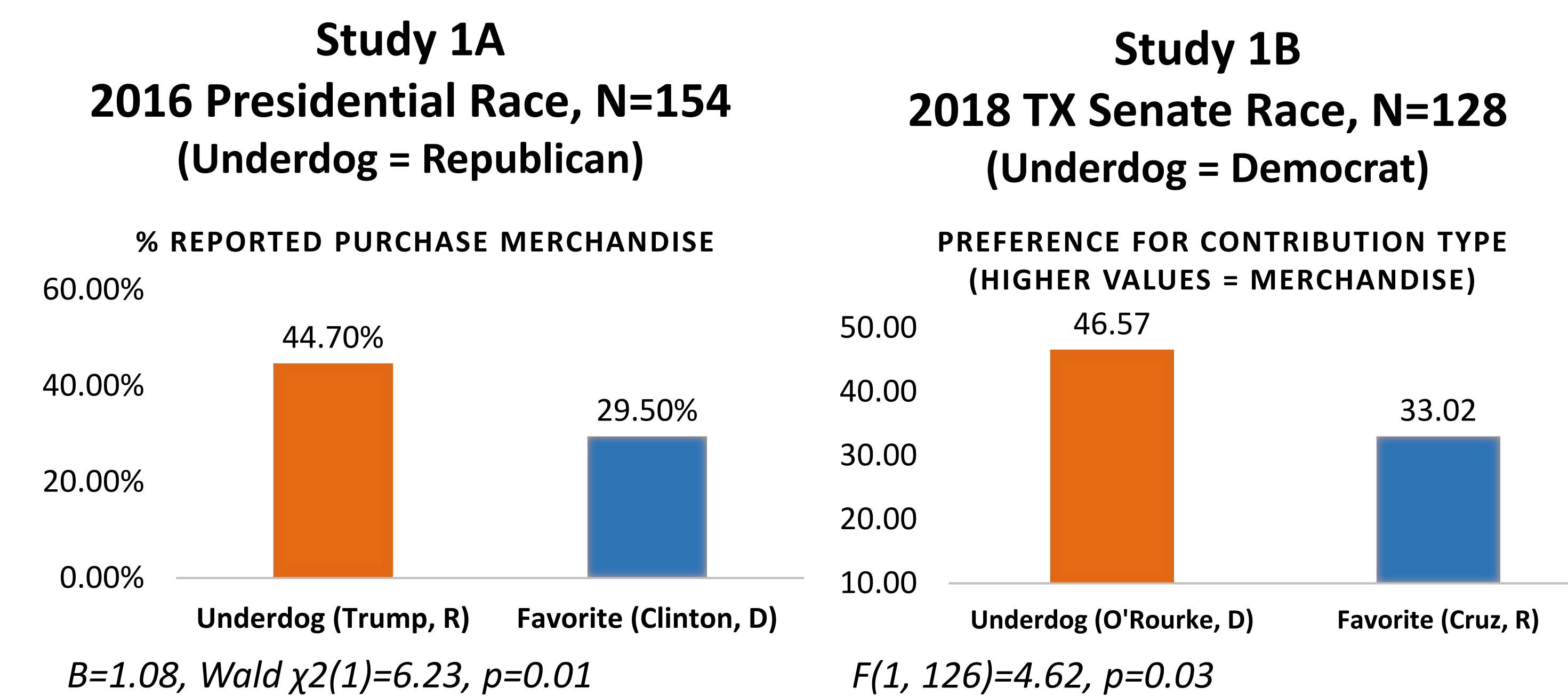
Hypotheses

Supporters of an underdog candidate are more likely to choose to contribute via a purchase, over an equivalent monetary contribution (Studies 1, 2, 3). This tendency is amplified when the low power status of underdog supporters is more salient (Studies 2, 5) and attenuated by temporary boost in power for underdog supporters (Study 4).

Theoretical Background

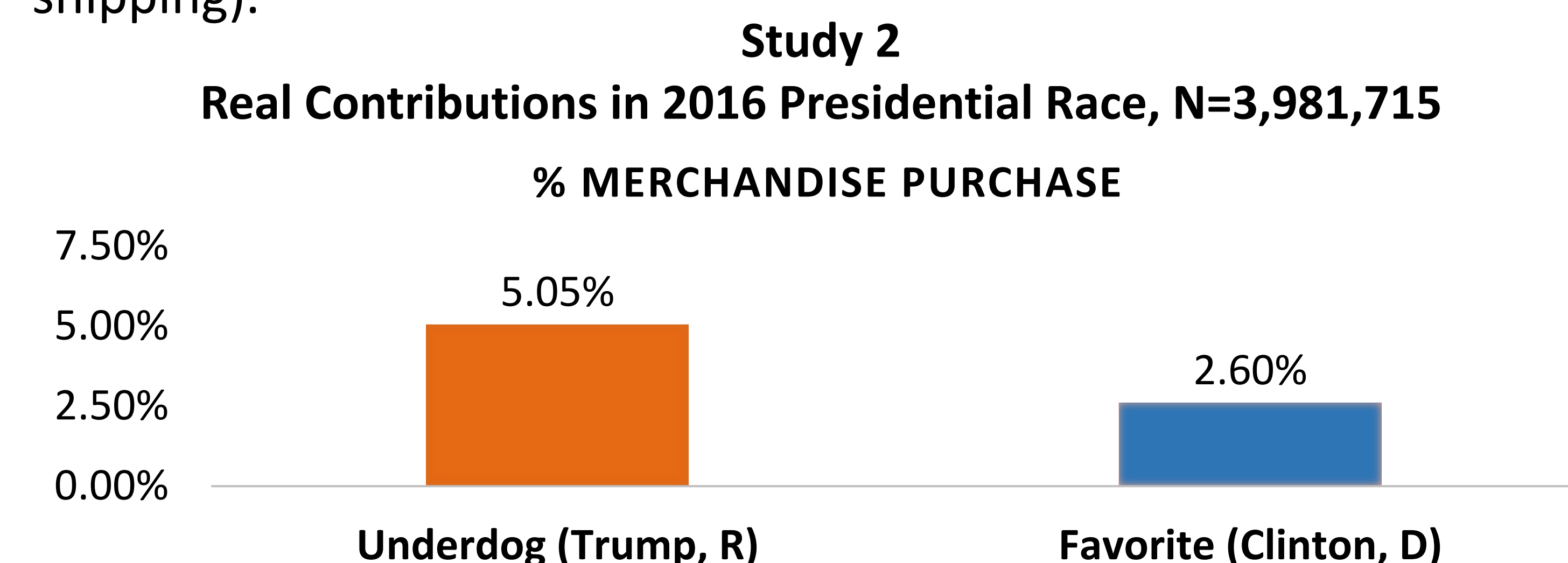
- Underdog supporters feel powerless.** Supporters of an underdog candidate experience a lower power state relative to supporters of the favorite because of the disadvantaged underdog positioning (Paharia et al., 2014). This is because individuals make inferences about their ingroup (i.e., underdog supporter = lower power) power relative to the power of outgroups (i.e., favorite supporter = higher power; Brauer & Bourhis, 2006).
- Underdog supporters choose conspicuous contribution format to compensate for their low power.** Underdog supporters are motivated to compensate for their low power (Mandel et al., 2017). Purchase contributions allow for underdog supporters to compensate for their feelings of low power more effectively than cash donations because of their conspicuous nature (Rucker & Galinsky, 2009).

Reported and Hypothetical Contributions



Real Small Donor Campaign Contributions

Real individual-level contribution filings from FEC: number of daily cash donations and merchandise purchase. We identified merchandise sales using zone-specific partial dollar amounts (i.e., shipping).

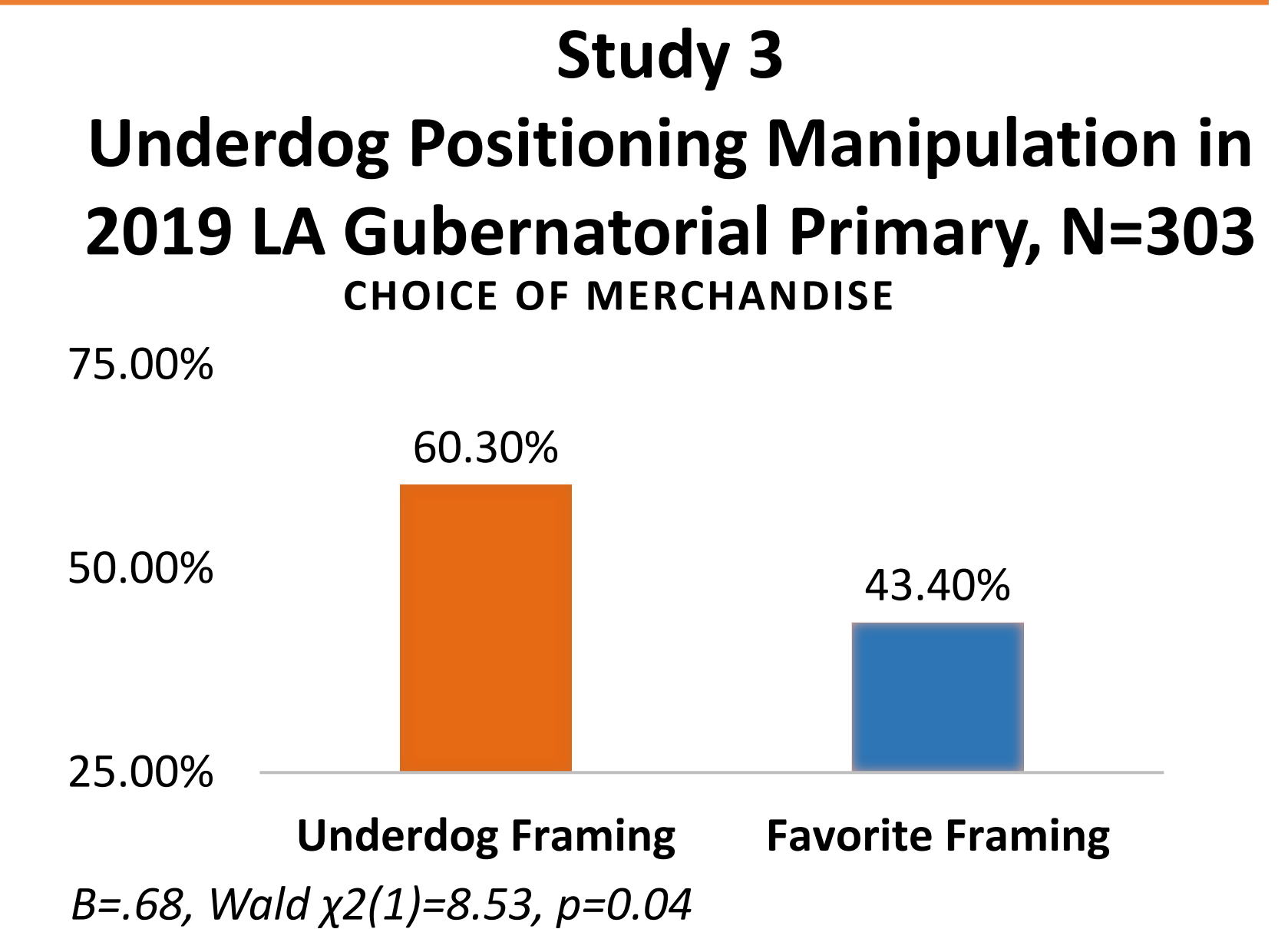


We matched the FEC contribution data with polls from FiveThirtyEight database. We find a positive effect of increases in the polling margin between the two candidates on purchase contribution for underdog ($b=.104, z=4.89, p<.001$): **highlighting underdog supporters' low power position in the race increase their preference for merchandise purchase.**



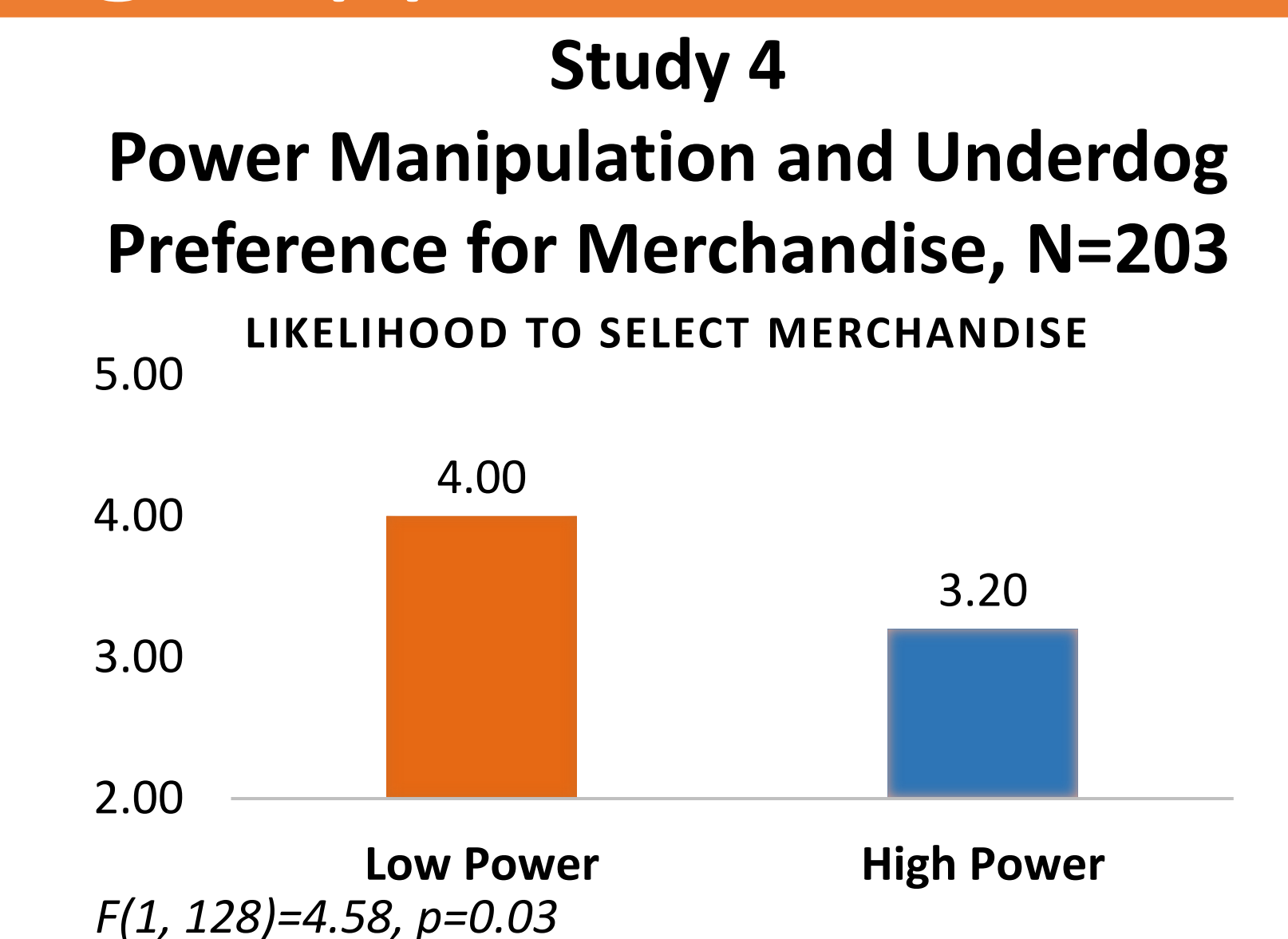
Underdog Positioning Manipulation

When the candidate was framed as an underdog, their supporters were more likely to choose merchandise regardless of candidate party affiliation.



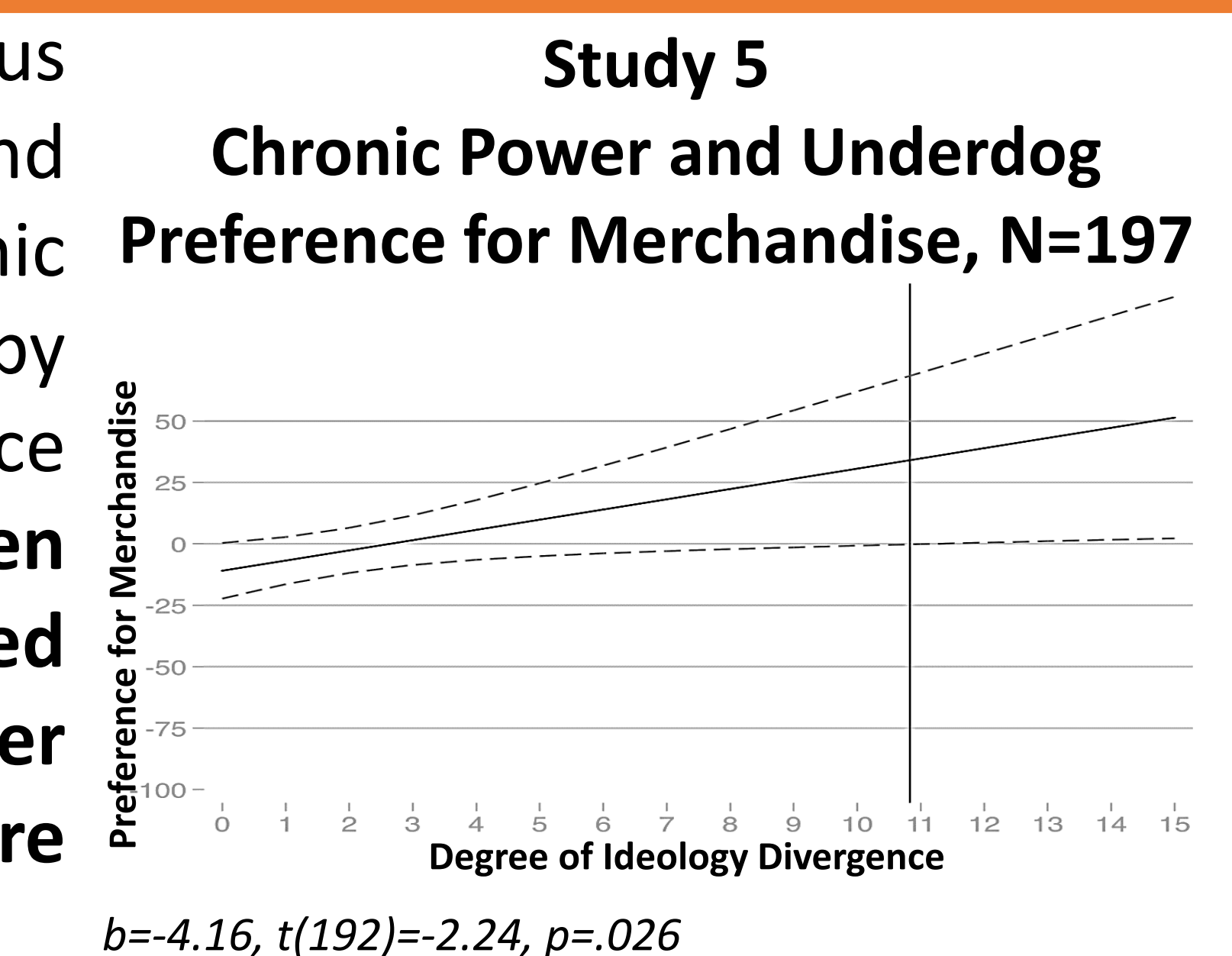
Restoring Underdog Supporters Power

Participants completed a low vs. high power manipulation. In an ostensibly unrelated study, they indicated how they would contribute to the campaign of Elizabeth Warren, described as an underdog in the 2020 Democratic primary.



Salience of Underdog Supporters Low Power

Manipulation of candidate status in hypothetical race and comparison of participant chronic low (vs. high) power state by measuring ideology divergence (similarity) from majority. **When underdog supporters diverged from state majority (i.e., lower power salient), they were more likely to select merchandise.**



Takeaways

Affiliation with an underdog candidate influences decision of how to contribute to a political campaign. Supporters of underdog candidate feel less powerful relative to favorite candidate supporters, and therefore prefer a conspicuous contribution format (merchandise purchase) to compensate for this less powerful state.