

**Case Study Focus:****Ad Testing****Political Campaign****Background**

The highly publicized 2005 Virginia governor race matched Tim Kaine against Attorney General Jerry Kilgore and ended with Kaine prevailing by a 5.7% margin. As the race unfolded, advertising and counter-advertising played an increasingly important role in relaying to the public both the make-up of each candidate and their vision for Virginia. In October, Jerry Kilgore went on the attack, running a series of emotional, hard-hitting ads calling into question Tim Kaine's ability to uphold the death penalty due to his personal opposition to it. These ads used tearful testimonials and real-life stories to get under voters' skin. The Kaine campaign, while prepared for the eventuality of an attack on the death penalty issue, needed to quickly test the effectiveness of their pre-readied response ads in nearly real time. The day after Kilgore's attack ads aired, the Kaine campaign began to run its response ads. Based on previously conducted focus groups and polls, they believed that their response to the death penalty issue was the right one, but because Kilgore's ads were more vociferous and aggressive than anyone had expected, it was critical to evaluate how well the response could hold up to this full-bore attack.

**Why iModerate?**

The Kaine campaign was faced with a somewhat untenable situation. They needed to know not just what voters thought about Kilgore's ads, but why they felt that way, and they needed to know immediately. iModerate proved to be an invaluable resource in this situation. Standard internet polling was a good and effective solution to track how well the response ads were holding off Kilgore's attack, but a quantitative survey alone could not yield the nuanced and gut-level qualitative feedback that the campaign knew it needed to accurately gauge any damage done by Kilgore's attack. However, due to the time-sensitive nature of this research, focus groups were simply not an option. Additionally, because of the social dynamic of a focus group, the potential for "group think" around such a controversial and sensitive issue was very real. To gather the emotional, explanatory feedback it needed to truly understand the impact Kilgore's ads were having, as well as how—and why—Kaine's response ads were holding off the attack, the Kaine campaign used iModerate sessions.

**Methodology**

The survey of 268 registered Virginia voters took place on October 12-13, 2005. Participants were registered voters who said they were likely to vote in the November 2005 election for governor. The sample of voters had an accuracy of +/- 5.99. A subgroup of 60 participants took part in iModerate's live, one-on-one interview sessions. These respondents were randomly intercepted during the survey and were directed back to the study after completing the iModerate interviews.

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## Political Campaign

**iModerate Session Objectives**

- Find out how effective Kaine's response message was by probing around the questions of whether the response effectively addressed any concerns raised by the Kilgore ad and whether the ad made respondents believe that Kaine would uphold the death penalty.
- Ascertain how the ad would impact their likelihood to vote for Kaine, and what specifically about it influenced them.
- Gauge how the Kaine ad and Kilgore's ads measured up in terms of believability—and why one or the other was more believable.

**Results**

Because the iModerate interviewers were able to view respondents' answers to survey questions during the course of the one-on-one session, they were able to probe for more complete responses and explanations on several key questions, ensuring that the Kaine campaign would be able to understand not just what a voter thought about particular elements of the Kilgore and Kaine ads, but why they felt that way. In addition to basic demographic information such as the respondents' gender and party affiliation, moderators were able to see their pre- and post-exposure favorability ratings and voting intentions, as well as specific believability ratings of the ads they were shown. The moderators then used this information to guide the discussion to add depth to the quantitative information gathered in the poll. For example:

**Moderator:** I noticed that prior to seeing the Kaine commercial you were not sure about who you would vote for, but then after seeing the second ad by Kaine you said you would vote for Tim Kaine. Can you help me understand why that is?

**Guest:** I went online and quickly looked at each website so I could get a little bit better sense of who each was because I realized I would just have to answer I don't know to everything unless I got a better feel for where each would stand on issues that are important to me.

**Moderator:** I see. So was your switch in decision influenced by the ads you saw today?

**Guest:** Somewhat. I liked that he is willing to put his own personal opinions aside for what the voters decide.

The findings from these sessions revealed that Kilgore's death penalty attack ads were seen as unfair and below the belt, while Kaine's responses reinforced his integrity and honesty by focusing on what he would do, rather than on what his opponent would not.

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**Guest:** It was better. I was impressed he didn't hit Kilgore back but answered with a political philosophy that while HE was against the death penalty he had a constitutional mandate to uphold the law of the land as long as it was the law of the land.

**Moderator:** Any words or phrases specifically stood out for you? Which ones if any?

**Guest:** It wasn't the phrases but the message. He told me what he stood for, not what Kilgore didn't. I may not agree with him on the death penalty (which I do not) but I respect his stance because he was very clear about it.

The quantitative study asked the question "Given what you just saw, how favorable are you toward Tim Kaine?" Post-exposure response showed that both of the Kilgore attack ads dropped Kaine's favorability ratings by as much as 10 percentage points. However, after seeing Kaine's response ads, the ratings climbed again, landing nearly 8 points higher than they were prior to seeing either ad. In essence, the data showed that while Kilgore's death penalty ads did have an impact, the Kaine response was strong and effective. The iModerate sessions were able to strengthen these findings by providing insight into which buttons the ads pushed and what emotional impact they had.

The combined results from the quantitative and qualitative research conducted on the death penalty ads revealed that the campaign's position was strong. The quantitative findings allowed them to track the impact of the ads on voting intention, while the qualitative findings from the iModerate sessions gave insight into the deeper impact of the advertising, specifically, why voters were reacting they way they did. This information—gathered in just two days—gave the Kaine campaign confidence that the path they had chosen was the right one. Without these findings, uncertainty about what was really driving voter behavior could have caused confusion or doubt within the campaign. Instead, it was able to maintain a solid, consistent and focused approach that resonated with voters on Election Day.