

Political Advertising

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Abstract

Political advertising provides a key link between the politician and the public. The concern over massive manipulation through political propaganda that drove early empirical research on the subject has subsided; however, newer research concludes that advertising can have nontrivial but short-lived influence on voter preferences. Furthermore, increasing levels of negativity and concerns over the consequences of such negativity spawned a heated debate in the literature over whether negative ads stimulate or depress turnout at the polls with the most recent evidence suggesting that it is the timing of negativity that determines its effect. Although advertising is intended to persuade, research suggests the medium yields important informational benefits, especially for citizens who do not pay a lot of attention to politics, and there is little to suggest that negativity has large negative effects on the health of democracy. Although the 2012 election was a record-shattering year for political advertising, campaigns are shifting to multi-platform communication strategies, which will bring new challenges for researchers.

INTRODUCTION

Despite a myriad of changes over the last half century in the way in which modern political campaigns are run, there remains one big constant: the important role of political advertising as a central feature of the way in which candidates communicate with citizens. Although campaigns are increasingly utilizing the Internet as a central component of campaign strategy, the use of television advertising has not declined (Ridout & Franz, 2011). Quite to the contrary, 2012 was—in fact—a record pulverizing year for TV ad volume and spending (Fowler & Ridout, 2012). Whether the 2012 election represents the high water mark or not, there can be no doubt that campaign advertising provides a key link between candidates for office and the public they seek to represent, one that comprises the largest single expenditure of modern campaigns (West, 2010).

Given the centrality of political advertising to campaigns and elections, it should come as no surprise that the subject has garnered lavish attention from political scientists examining advertising's influence on citizen voting

preferences, turnout at the polls, knowledge and views of the political system more broadly. The field has amassed a very large body of knowledge about advertising effects, and yet in some ways, there are some important questions that largely remain unanswered. This essay will attempt to outline the field of research on advertising and discuss the current trajectory of cutting-edge developments in the field before turning to critical issues for future research.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Studies of political advertising have focused on a number of questions regarding its influence. In order to fully understand the effect of campaign ads, it is important to acknowledge its multifaceted role, not just as a tool of political persuasion, but also as a vehicle for potential mobilization or suppression and provision of candidate information. As negativity is a prominent and increasing feature of campaign advertising (Fowler & Ridout, 2011, 2012; Geer, 2006), many questions revolve specifically around the role negative attacks play in advertising influence. Therefore, where appropriate, the evidence regarding negativity will be discussed in conjunction with advertising's effect on persuasion, mobilization, citizen information, and attitudes about government and democracy.

DO ADS PERSUADE?

The first and seemingly most straightforward question given the intended goal of the medium is the extent to which political advertising actually changes minds. Early empirical work on the influence of media largely dismissed concerns over massive influence, concluding that advertising had little to no effect as a tool of persuasion (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). This initial work ushered in an era of the so-called minimal effects, in which scholars largely confirmed that media messages had minimal ability to persuade. More recent work, however, recognized at least two problems in the foundational conclusions. First, when messages compete, as is the case in many electoral races, especially those for president, the two-sided (competing) flows of information will likely cancel out any potential persuasive influence, which does not mean that the messages have no effect but rather that we need to know when and where to look for effects (McGuire, 1986; Zaller, 1996). Second, we should not necessarily expect advertising to influence all citizens or all candidates equally; strength of existing opinions (or predispositions) matters (Bartels, 1993; Zaller, 1992).

To the extent that advertising has an influence, the influence is most likely to be a marginal one, which is not to say that they do not matter. More than

a few competitive elections are fought at the margin, where advertising may matter a great deal. Indeed, newer scholarship has found that advertising advantages—when one candidate has more ads on the air compared to his or her opponent—do correspond with a decline in favorability for the targeted candidate (Kahn & Kenney, 2004) with larger benefits to challengers than incumbents (Lau & Pomper, 2004; Ridout & Franz, 2011), in part due to the asymmetrical amount of information citizens have about the candidates.

Popular wisdom suggests that negativity “works,” but academic evidence that negative ads are more persuasive than positive ones is more tenuous. Some argue that emotional appeals to anger or fear may matter more than negativity (Brader, 2006), although a recent observational analysis had trouble finding consistent effects of emotional appeals (Ridout & Franz, 2011). Research suggests that sponsors of negativity do experience some backlash, or decline in support, due to negative attacks (Kahn & Geer, 1994; Lemert, Wanta, & Lee, 2006); however, a recent meta-analysis of the field argued that research examining the “net” persuasive effect of attacks (the decline in support for the targeted candidate minus the decline or backlash in support for the favored candidate) is few and far between and that additional evidence is needed to confirm overall effect (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007).

The rise of interest group advertising in response to recent changes in the campaign finance landscape (Franz, 2012) has raised interesting questions and concerns over influence. These concerns are tied to negativity as interest groups are more likely to air negative attacks than candidate-sponsored airings (Fowler & Ridout, 2012; Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, & Ridout, 2008a). Candidates themselves do not shy away from negativity, but some research suggests that interest group attacks may be more persuasive than candidate-sponsored ones (Groenendyk & Valentino, 2002). Others argue that the difference is not in persuasive power but rather that candidates are less likely to suffer backlash from attacks aired by interest groups on their behalf than if they air those same attacks themselves (Brooks & Murov, 2012). Additional work argues that the influence of interest group ads may be moderated by the amount of information citizens have about the group (Weber, Dunaway, & Johnson, 2012) or the disclosure of its financial donors (Dowling & Wichowsky, 2013).

DO ADS AFFECT TURNOUT AT THE POLLS?

A heated scholarly debate regarding the influence of advertising on voter turnout started with experimental analyses and some real-world replications arguing that negativity had a large demobilizing effect on the American electorate (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, & Simon, 1999). Numerous researchers challenged the initial findings, arguing that

rather than demobilizing, negativity could actually mobilize citizens by conveying the importance of what was at stake (Brader, 2006; Djupe & Peterson, 2002; Freedman, Franz, & Goldstein, 2004; Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Hillygus, 2005; Martin, 2004). Still others found no influence of advertising on turnout (Clinton & Lapinski, 2004; Finkel & Geer, 1998; Krasno & Green, 2008). Assessing the large literature on the subject, Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, and Ridout argue, “there is very little evidence that advertising, whatever its other effects, has any negative effect on voter participation in America” (2008b, p. 267). Lau *et al.* in summarizing their meta-analytic assessment of the state of the field agree, stating that, “if anything negative campaigning more frequently appears to have a slight mobilization effect” (2007, p. 1184).

ADVERTISING’S RELATIONSHIP TO KNOWLEDGE AND INTEREST

Scholarship is more consistent regarding the influence of advertising and negativity on citizen knowledge, recall and interest in the campaign. Although advertising is intended to persuade, it often increases information in the process. Studies of campaign spending argue that money spent on the campaign correlates with increased citizen knowledge (Coleman & Manna, 2000), which improves the quality of democracy. Moreover, evidence suggests not only that advertising may increase voter information but also that knowledge increases are especially noticeable among political novices (Freedman *et al.*, 2004; Ridout, Shah, Goldstein, & Franz, 2004). Negativity may play an important role in increasing knowledge, given negative ads have been shown to be more memorable than positive ones (Brians & Wattenberg, 1996; Martin, 2004), contain more substantive information compared to positive spots (Franz *et al.*, 2008a; Geer, 2006) and stimulate more interest in campaigns (Bartels, 2000; Brader, 2006; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000).

ADVERTISING AND DEMOCRATIC HEALTH

We know that negativity corresponds with increased levels of information and perhaps even a slight mobilization effect at the polls, but what about the longer term influences of advertising and negativity on attitudes toward the political system and citizens’ role in it? Though negative perceptions tend to correspond with lower efficacy (Thorson, Ognianova, Coyle, & Denton, 2000) and lower levels of trust in government (Leshner & Thorson, 2000), research that examines the influence of advertising itself finds little evidence that negativity has harmful effects on trust or political efficacy (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Geer, 2006; Jackson, Mondak, & Huckfeldt, 2009). In sum, the literature tends to find advertising has positive (or at the very least non-negative) democratic benefits.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

New and innovative work involving political advertising continues to improve knowledge about its role as the central linkage between politician and the public. Reporting on the results of the first large-scale experiment, Gerber, Gimpel, Green, and Shaw (2011) employed \$2 million of incumbent Governor Rick Perry's 2006 reelection funds on advertising in media markets randomly assigned to different launch dates and volume of activity. By pairing the experimental deployment of ads with daily tracking surveys and a follow-up after the campaign's end, the authors found that advertising had a strong influence on voter preferences but also that the effects decayed rapidly. More specifically, the results indicated that advertising was a relatively inexpensive method of boosting citizen support for a favored candidate but that the large, immediate increase in preference could no longer be detected 1 or 2 weeks after the ad campaign's end. In other words, advertising's power to persuade may be large but short-lived.

There is also new research that helps to explain the stalemate in the literature on the question of mobilization. Scholar Yanna Krupnikov (2011, 2012) argues that the *timing* of exposure to negativity greatly influences the extent to which its influence will be one of mobilization or demobilization. In particular, Krupnikov's argument and evidence suggest that negativity *before* citizens make a choice of candidate can aid candidate selection but encountering negativity about a chosen candidate *after* the individual has made the decision to vote for that candidate may result in uncertainty about the choice, leading to a demobilization effect. In other words, negativity has a conditional effect on turnout that has everything to do with the timing of exposure.

In addition to these key developments, new techniques from computer science such as textual (and eventually video visual) analysis—where computer-assisted clustering algorithms allow researchers to “efficiently search over millions of potential categorizations schemes to identify interesting or useful organizations of the text” (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013)—hold particular promise for the field of advertising and communication more broadly. Political scientist Nick Beauchamp (2011), for example, uses a “bottom-up” approach to ad effectiveness by predicting the influence of any given ad based on the words of its script alone.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In sum, we know a great deal about the influence of advertising. We know that advertising can move citizen preferences though its effect is short-lived; that to the extent that negativity influences turnout, the influence is more

likely to be a slight mobilization effect although the timing of exposure to negative messages matters a great deal; that advertising has positive benefits for citizen knowledge, especially among the low-information public, and that on balance advertising appears to contribute to democratic health. Key to the development of advertising analysis in the real world (as opposed to the laboratory) was the development and availability of comprehensive tracking services like Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG), which deploys “ad detectors” in each of the nation’s 210 media markets to track where and when political ads air along with recording the actual spot itself. Thanks to CMAG and the efforts of the Wisconsin Advertising Project (2000–2008) and its successor, the Wesleyan Media Project (2010–present), the scholarly community’s access to this frequency and content information has vastly improved the study of campaign strategy and advertising influence. And yet, in spite of the vast strides scholars have made on multiple fronts, big questions remain.

Although advertising is intended to persuade, common sense tells us that we should not expect all ads to be equally persuasive, and yet the vast majority of (especially observational) research ignores this complicating factor and simply counts up the number of spots on each side, presuming that the candidate with the largest number of ads in any given market has the advantage. Is it possible that one particularly powerful ad might trump or counteract many hundred airings of a not-so-powerful one? And how, specifically, do the content features of advertising correlate to persuasive influence? The literature has little systematic or comprehensive guidance on either subject.

As large as those questions are, there are even larger ones to come. Although standard practice of micro-targeting messages through direct mail has been around for a long time, there is evidence that campaigns are now tailoring their advertising to specific audiences (Ridout, Franz, Goldstein, & Feltus, 2012). Communication technology will allow campaigns to increasingly personalize the content of messages while also increasing the number of possible ways through which campaigns may reach citizens, and these developments will occur by orders of magnitude. As the tide shifts and campaigns move rapidly into a multi-platform advertising strategy where a greater proportion of ads are viewed, discussed and shared online, tracking that advertising placement let alone measuring its effect will become increasingly difficult. As campaigns evolve, the tools of scholars, including big data techniques enabling large quantitative mappings of message sentiment and networks, will be especially important in keeping up. Whether and how existing efforts to track campaign activities will be sufficient remain to be seen.

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