

Messaging the Bases: Tailoring Political Ads to Audiences

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Abstract

Advertising is a crucial instrument in political campaigns. A correctly-placed and designed ad energizes a politician's base and depresses the opponent's. I theoretically and empirically examine how politicians strategically vary ad content and placement to reflect the political makeup of audiences to invoke desired electoral reactions. Politicians can select ads that increase the salience of policy positions or highlight valence (non-policy) attributes via positive ads about themselves or negative ads about opponents. In turn, ads affect voters' choices of candidates and whether to abstain due to alienation or indifference. I characterize theoretically how the optimal composition of ads varies with audience demographics and candidate characteristics. I then use the texts of different ads in states with competitive gubernatorial or presidential contests in 2008 and 2012 to identify the types of ads used on different tv shows. I combine these data with viewer demographic and polling data, uncovering empirical findings consistent with the theory (e.g., opposing candidates target different (and more polarized) audiences with policy ads, positive valence ads are mostly targeted to a candidate's alienated base).