

## 1 The Role of Campaign Advertising

**D**URING EVERY election campaign, American politicians invade our television sets. They enter our lives uninvited and in thirty-second increments. We see them during commercial breaks while watching our favorite talk or game shows. We see them between the sports and weather updates during the local news. We might even see them before a television judge renders a verdict on a case, or during a rerun of a law or medical drama on cable television.

These political messages come in many shades and tones. Some of them are positive and uplifting, where candidates recount the struggles and triumphs of their lives. Many evoke feelings of enthusiasm, hope, or joy, cued with a crescendo of uplifting music. Some show the American flag waving. Others depict the candidate eagerly talking with everyday Americans about economic or moral issues.

Some ads, by contrast, are negative and nasty, attacking an opponent's policy ideas or personal character. Many of these messages try to scare or anger us, using ominous music or unflattering black-and-white photos of a political opponent. The point of these ads is crystal clear: your future depends on my election to office.

Not all ads are sponsored by candidates, of course. The Democratic and Republican parties are major players in the advertising game.

Some of their ads are coordinated with candidates' campaigns, and some are produced and aired independently. Outside interest groups are also part of the mix. Labor unions are perennially present, for example, but increasingly so are groups with strange-sounding names: Americans for Job Security, Freedom's Watch, Majority Action, Vets for Freedom, and American Rights at Work.

In short, televised political advertising is everywhere, and its ubiquity raises fundamental questions. Does any of it really matter? Do political ads break through the clutter and enter the consciousness of the American voter? In other words, do they influence citizens' views of the candidates and affect how they vote on Election Day? On the one hand, of course, the answer seems obvious. They must matter. Why, otherwise, would candidates and their allies spend so much money on them?

This is certainly the impression that one gains from journalistic coverage of campaigns. For example, Tom Wicker wrote in the *New York Times* in 1988 that many blamed the Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis's loss on "Willie Horton . . . rather than [the success of] ideological conservatism" (Wicker 1988). The Willie Horton ads were some of the most famous political ads of the previous thirty years, and they attempted to depict Dukakis as soft on crime (Geer 2006, 121–123; Mendelberg 2001).

Many believe it was a few ads by the organization Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, featuring men who had served with John Kerry in Vietnam, that led to Kerry's loss in 2004. As the veteran journalist Robert Novak put it on an appearance on *Meet the Press* in July 2007, "For Republicans [in 2004] a swift boat was a very good thing. [It] kept John Kerry from being president."<sup>1</sup>

And it was Hillary Clinton's "3 A.M." ad, asking which Democratic candidate voters would want answering the phone at the time of a national crisis, that propelled her to victory in Pennsylvania during the 2008 nominating contest—at least according to some. Mark Penn, Clinton's chief strategist, had this to say about the ad in August 2008: "Clever negative advertising works. That is reality. The tactic meets

<sup>1</sup> Transcript, MSNBC.com, July 15, 2007, available online at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19694666/print/1/displaymode/1098> (accessed January 29, 2010).

with media and pundit disapproval and spawns accusations of negativity, but the reality is that a clever negative ad can be devastatingly effective.”<sup>2</sup>

Although there is some scholarly evidence that political commercials move votes, there is still no consensus about the extent of advertising’s impact—that is, how many votes, if any, are changed. Many scholars have chosen to investigate important *byproduct* effects of advertising, such as the relationship between advertising tone and citizens’ involvement or participation in the political system. But as Huber and Arceneaux (2007, 957) write, “Few studies that analyze actual campaigns have been able to demonstrate that advertisements persuade individuals to change their minds.”

Much political-science research more generally would suggest that ads should have little impact on changing people’s candidate preferences. Many people enter election campaigns as partisans, for example, which makes it difficult to sway these voters. Moreover, scholars have shown that election outcomes can be predicted quite well on the basis of a few pieces of data known months before an election—indeed, months before the bulk of advertising has been aired (Holbrook 1996).<sup>3</sup> Other scholars submit that while advertising might have the potential to sway voters when one side dominates the airwaves, most presidential campaigns are balanced ones in which competing messages cancel each other out (Zaller 1996).

And consider this: if you ask typical Americans what they think of negative campaign ads they see on television, many will tell you that they detract from American politics—that they weaken democratic discourse (see Geer 2006, 2). For example, in a 2006 Gallup poll, 69 percent of Americans reported that they believe little or nothing of what is said in political advertising. Further, opinion poll after opinion poll finds that Americans think politics and campaigns are too negative. In 2006, for example, 63 percent of respondents in a different national poll reported that Republican candidates’ ads were

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Politico.com, August 11, 2008, available online at <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0808/12455.html> (accessed January 29, 2010).

<sup>3</sup>Indeed, scholars in political science have debated for years the existence and magnitude of campaign and media effects: see Holbrook 1996, chap. 1; Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004.

“too negative”; 61 percent reported that ads from Democratic candidates were “too negative.” Nearly 70 percent reported that neither Democratic nor Republican ads “provided useful information.”<sup>4</sup> If Americans do not trust political ads, then how can they persuade?

What emerges is a compelling puzzle. Even as campaigns spend lots of money on television ads, believing that they are crucial for victory, some scholars believe their effects are small, and many citizens express displeasure at their abundance. Our goal in this book is to offer the most comprehensive examination to date of the persuasive power of televised campaign ads. In other words, we hope to offer a more definitive answer to the enduring questions of how, when, and whether ads matter. We should be clear at the outset. The intended audience for this book is broad—students of American politics, journalists, political consultants, and interested citizens. As we make clear later, our primary contribution is not theoretical. In fact, we use the rich existing scholarship on campaign effects to lay out a number of commonly understood expectations about the effectiveness of political advertising. To these expectations we bring to bear the best data available and a sophisticated methodological approach. This methodological advance is our primary contribution.

More specifically, the book examines advertising in American election campaigns in 2000 and 2004, focusing in both years on the presidential elections and sixty Senate races. We also add in a later chapter a discussion of Senate advertising in 2006, and we include a preliminary analysis of persuasion effects at the county level in the presidential and Senate races of 2008. We do all of this by focusing on citizens’ exposure to the *complete* ad environment in a campaign. Because of that, we say very little about the impact of specific ads. Indeed, as avid consumers of American politics, and as scholars in the field, we are often asked to reflect on the effectiveness of certain ads. Did Mike Huckabee’s “Chuck Norris” ad help him win the Iowa caucuses in January 2008? Did John McCain’s ad in the summer of 2008, which featured images of Paris Hilton and Britney Spears, lead citizens to dismiss Barack Obama as little more than a celebrity? We wish,

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<sup>4</sup>The first poll was conducted in October 2006 by *USA Today* and the Gallup Organization; the second was sponsored by *Newsweek* the same month.

of course, that we could provide rock-solid evidence about the effectiveness of the latest and most discussed campaign ads—and make predictions about their effectiveness as soon as they appear. We could make millions as media consultants if such questions could be answered prospectively and definitively.

Ultimately, however, an in-depth focus on one or two ads in a campaign would only begin to answer the question of how the ad environment in total influences citizens' attitudes and choices. Indeed, most citizens in actual campaigns view multiple political ads and often in high numbers. Isolating the effect of one or a few viewings of one or a few ads would miss the total impact of advertising in any particular campaign.

Our contention in this book is relatively simple, actually. We argue that campaign ads *do* matter, but their impact is largely contingent. More specifically, we focus on the influence of television ads as moderated by three key factors: the characteristics of the ads (promotional versus attack ads, for example), the campaign context in which they air (such as open seats and competitive races with an incumbent running), and the receiver of the ad message (partisan viewers or independent viewers, to name two). These are not the only conditions under which an ad's effectiveness might be moderated, of course; the issues discussed in the ads may help or hinder a campaign's persuasive appeals; the presence or absence of a scandal may also matter, as might the overall production quality of the ads. The three major factors that we focus on here, however, are the ones scholars have studied the most and are arguably the most important factors that condition the influence of advertising.

Determining the actual persuasive influence of campaign advertising is more than an academic exercise, however. Such an investigation matters for any evaluation of contemporary American politics. Indeed, elections are the primary means by which voters and their elected representatives are connected, and political advertising in particular accounts for the overwhelming bulk of candidates' and parties' electioneering budgets. Voters are often bombarded by these short messages, and in many cases they represent the voter's only exposure to the candidate. This is particularly true for political novices who may avoid news media or Internet blog coverage of campaigns.

If ads aired during an election campaign do, in fact, alter voters' candidate preferences, determining the if and when is only part of the bigger story. We must also ask *how* ads are persuading. On the one hand, ads might be “manipulating,” convincing people to vote for a candidate who might act against their best interests. This would be quite troublesome, as it would suggest that the candidate who has the most money to buy ads will be the victor, not the candidate who is more representative of the particular electorate.

On the other hand, ads might be persuading by informing, by providing people with the information that they need to make enlightened decisions about which candidates best represent their interests. In this case, ads are not troublesome but represent one more way by which to bring information to voters, offering a connection between elector and elected.<sup>5</sup>

## The Relevance of Television Advertising

It is likely true that the Internet is the next wave of electioneering innovation, and it may someday supplant television as the primary method of reaching voters—we can hardly deny these developments. For example, in their seminal study of young voters in contemporary American politics, Winograd and Hais (2008, 154) argue that “[Internet politics] present the possibility of an end to the ever rising cost of thirty-second television campaign commercials, and the time-consuming and potentially corrupting need to raise the money to pay for them.” The development of sophisticated online outreach technology, they add, “will cause television to lose its role as the primary medium for campaigns to get their messages out to voters in the near future” (Winograd and Hais 2008, 163). Given such claims, is it even worth studying the effects of televised advertising? Are we exploring a “dying art”?

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<sup>5</sup>Indeed, there is a rich scholarship in political science on the ability of voters to make informed decisions on the basis of minimal information (Downs 1957; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). It seems reasonable to suggest that campaign advertising is one source of information voters can use to make short-term and quick judgments about candidates (Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, and Ridout 2007, 12–18). The usefulness of ads, however, is predicated on the likelihood that they will not draw voters away from candidates they would normally be predisposed to support.

Our answer is emphatic. We believe it *is* important to study political advertising on television, largely because the immediate impact of the Internet (now and in the foreseeable future) is a transformation in how candidates and their political allies fund advertising, not in how they attempt to persuade voters. Even the most recent studies of the effects of digital media in elections agree. For example, according to Kate Kaye (2009, 14, 19), “Many political consultants don’t think Internet ads can be used to sway voters. . . . Obama grabbed millions of dollars through online fundraising from countless donors giving relatively small amounts of cash. But, as in every election in recent history, the bulk of that money was spent on television ads.” Simply put, the Internet as superior campaign communicator is not yet here.

This leaves television—still—as the primary medium for reaching potential voters. This is true even at a time when campaigns are keenly aware of the fragmentation of the American media. That is, with the proliferation of cable news choices, Americans have ever more abundant options in news and entertainment. This transition from a “broadcast” media environment, where Americans have only a few channels and popular programs have huge audiences, to a “narrow-cast” media, where audience share is split up over hundreds of programs, leaves television advertisements potentially struggling to break through to potential voters. As Martin Wattenberg (2010, 57) has noted, viewership for major presidential speeches and press conferences is down significantly, by as much as 50 percent for the State of the Union between 1980 and 2005.

A recent U.S. Supreme Court decision may even make televised political advertising more prominent in the future. The court ruled in early 2010 that corporations and unions were free to spend unlimited amounts of money on advertising that directly advocated the election or defeat of a candidate, a practice that was previously illegal at the federal level and in many states. Some predict this will make political ads even more prevalent. The preliminary evidence from 2010 bears this out, in fact, as we noted in the Preface.

Moreover, people are not abandoning their television sets, despite other entertainment options. In November 2009, Nielsen reported that the average household was watching more television each day (more than eight hours) than in any previous period, up 11 percent

from 1999.<sup>6</sup> Even when Americans watch shows recorded on digital video recorders (DVRs), a substantial proportion (nearly half, according to some estimates) watch the recorded commercials instead of fast-forwarding through them (Carter 2009). David Carr of the *New York Times* had this to say in May 2009:

Why, as network television has been sliced in half in terms of audience in the last few decades, do marketers still buy in? First and foremost, because it works. At a time of ever-atomizing audiences, broadcast television's slice may be smaller, but it is still the biggest slice. Think network television is washed up, overwhelmed by targeted and measureable ads on the Web? How is it that Apple, a tech company, and by the way, probably the most talented marketing company on the planet, is all over network television right now? And remember the movie industry is having a big year with big movies, using, yes, network television to drive people into theaters. Network television advertising retains traction with both buyers and consumers because, in spite of the proliferation of screens, people are still watching more television than ever. (Carr 2009)

Campaigns clearly recognize this, since the volume of paid televised political advertising has remained relatively stable across recent election cycles, as data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project reveal.<sup>7</sup> Table 1.1 shows some summary statistics about the number of presidential ads (paid for by either candidates or outside groups) aired in each media market in each of three presidential nomination seasons:

<sup>6</sup>Report posted on Nielsen's blog, available online at <http://blog.nielsen.com> (accessed January 13, 2010). Since 2005, Nielsen's totals for daily household viewing have included shows recorded with a DVR and played back within seven days.

<sup>7</sup>The Wisconsin Advertising Project is housed at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and is directed by Kenneth Goldstein. As graduate students, we were involved with the collection and coding of the ad data for the 2000 election. More information about the ad data is provided in Chapter 3. Prior to the project's establishment in 1998, data on the frequency of ad airings is only anecdotal, although Shaw (1999) provides some numbers on ad Gross Ratings Points obtained from the presidential campaigns for 1988, 1992 and 1996. The University of Oklahoma maintains an archive of political advertisements back to the 1950s, but the archive has no information on the frequency with which the ads aired.



**TABLE 1.1** Number of Ads per Media Market by Year  
(Presidential Nomination Races)

Number of ads per media market	1999–2000	2003–2004	2007–2008
Mean	1,349	1,432	1,860
25th percentile	121	318	214
Median	787	989	997
75th percentile	1,569	1,434	2,348

Source: Wisconsin Advertising Project

Note: The period covered is from October 1 of the previous year until the nomination was secured. Ad totals are for the top seventy-five markets in 2000 and for all 210 markets in 2004 and 2008.

1999–2000, 2003–2004, and 2007–2008. A media market is simply a geographic area in which most people have access to similar television and radio broadcasts and newspapers. The number of markets for which we have access to ad-tracking data has increased over time (from the top 75 media markets in 1998 and 2000 to all 210 markets for presidential candidates in 2004 and 2008). To make these numbers comparable over time, we report summary statistics about the number of ads aired in each market, not the total number of ads aired across all markets.

In each successive nomination campaign, the mean and median number of ads increases. To put these figures into perspective, keep in mind that while both Republicans and Democrats were battling for their parties' nominations in 2000, only Democrats had a contested race in 2004. And in spite of that, there was a substantial increase in total advertising between those two years. Part of the increase in 2007–2008 could be due to the unusually long race on the Democratic side, but the market-level summaries that we report should not be very sensitive to the length of the nominating contest. With the exception of Iowa and New Hampshire, which saw campaigning and advertising for most of 2007, most markets in the primary phase of the presidential election received high advertising volumes right before their primary or caucus date and very little right after.

In sum, it seems clear that the volume of advertising has increased in presidential nomination races in recent years. Why? The most likely explanation for this has to do with changes in campaign-finance law

and changes in the ways in which candidates have gone about soliciting donations. First, after the 2002 elections, the limit on an individual contribution to a candidate rose from \$1,000 to \$2,000, making it easier for candidates to raise funds from relatively wealthy donors.<sup>8</sup> But at the same time, a ban on large unregulated contributions to political parties, which began after the 2002 elections, compelled the parties and individual campaigns to reach out to heretofore untapped millions of small-money donors—done largely on the Internet.

This is perhaps best exemplified by Howard Dean's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004, which was able to raise \$52 million through Internet contributions (Hindman 2005). In 2008, Barack Obama raised, by some estimates, more than \$300 million for the primary campaign, with up to \$200 million coming from Internet contributions (<http://www.cfinst.org>). The ability to raise large sums of cash for the primary campaign has convinced many presidential primary candidates in recent years to forgo the public funding option, whereby the government matches private contributions to a candidate in exchange for the candidate's promise to limit spending in primary states. This has consequently raised the amounts of money spent on the nominating contest and resulted in greater use of televised political advertising.

Does this trend of rising ad airings hold for other races, however? To examine this, we calculated the number of congressional ads aired per market in 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2008, including all U.S. Senate and U.S. House races (Table 1.2). The evidence is compelling. There was a substantial increase in coverage between 1998 and 2000, and while the amount of advertising in 2002, 2004, and 2008 seemed to plateau (and even decline in a few categories), all three years saw substantially higher levels of advertisements over 1998.

The initial bump in the volume of advertising between 1998 and 2000 is perhaps best explained by the changing sponsorship of ads. Around 1998, outside groups and parties began paying for increased levels of television advertising, a trend that has continued in recent years. The reasoning for this was a much more partisan and polarized political environment in Washington after 1994 (making every com-

<sup>8</sup> The \$2,000 figure is also indexed to inflation. Thus, the individual upper limit was \$2,100 in 2006, \$2,300 in 2008, and \$2,400 in 2010.

**TABLE 1.2** Number of Ads per Media Market by Year (House and Senate)

Number of ads per media market	1998	2000	2002	2004	2008
Mean	4,096	6,496	5,967	5,568	5,852
25th percentile	1,164	2,374	1,842	1,639	1,135
Median	2,620	5,902	4,821	4,189	4,153
75th percentile	6,592	9,540	9,113	7,946	7,749

Source: Wisconsin Advertising Project

Note: Ad totals are for the top seventy-five markets in 1998 and 2000, the top one hundred markets in 2002 and 2004, and all 210 markets in 2008.

petitive House and Senate election crucial to liberal and conservative interests), coupled with far looser restrictions on how ads could be funded (Franz 2008). As a consequence, many more political players have chosen to air television ads in the past ten years with the intention of reaching persuadable voters.

For general election presidential advertising between 2000 and 2008, the story is similar (Table 1.3). While the average media market received 4,075 ads in 2000, the number was about 25 percent higher (5,069) in 2004. Note, however, the very small number of ads aired (just three spots) at the 25th percentile. This much wider distribution of ads buys in 2004 is an artifact of the available data. In 2000, we have only ads aired in the top seventy-five markets, but we have ads aired in all 210 markets in 2004. With this complete set of market-level

**TABLE 1.3** Number of Ads per Media Market by Year  
(Presidential General Election)

Number of ads per media market	2000	2004	2008
Mean	4,075	5,069	4,078
25th percentile	1,222	3	5
Median	3,438	717	1,000
75th percentile	6,783	9,509	7,690

Source: Wisconsin Advertising Project

Note: In 2000, we identify the general election as beginning on June 1. In 2004, because John Kerry had secured enough delegates after Super Tuesday, we count March 3 as the beginning of the general election. June 15 is the start point for 2008. Ad totals are for the top seventy-five markets in 2000 and for all 210 markets in 2004 and 2008.

data, we can see that presidential candidates often put a very small number of ads in minor markets.

While advertising surged in 2004, it did decline somewhat in 2008. The average number of ads aired in the top 210 markets during the general election presidential campaign was 4,078. Only the median number of ads was higher that year (1,000 ads in 2008, compared with 717 in 2004). This lower total advertising is the consequence of little interest group advertising in the general election in 2008 (Kimball 2009) and a much lower investment from the Democratic Party, which aired only 7,800 ads in the entire general election phase across all 210 markets. This latter decline was driven by the aggressive fundraising of Barack Obama, who was the first major party nominee to opt out of the general election public funding program.

Our core message here is simply put: the best available evidence suggests that the volume of advertising has increased over recent years or, at least, remained steady. Consider this bit of historical context. When McGinnis (1969) was writing about Richard Nixon's use of television in 1968, the medium had not yet been fully embraced by campaign managers. McGinnis specifically chronicled the divisions within the campaign between the "ad people" and the traditional campaign managers.<sup>9</sup> Forty years later, however, no major campaign consultant would counsel a presidential or Senate candidate to wage a serious campaign without a presence on television. In fact, John Kerry's 2004 bid was essentially run by Bob Shrum, a media and campaign advertising consultant.

The dominance of television in political campaigns is still true even at a time when campaigns are becoming more innovative in the tactics they use. For example, a new trend in elections involves the aggressive mining of consumer purchasing data (tracked by credit card companies) to identify relationships between retail preferences and political choices (Hillygus and Shields 2009); the information is subsequently used to instruct get-out-the-vote efforts and peer-to-peer contacts. Republicans employed this tactic aggressively begin-

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<sup>9</sup>Curiously, in her discussion of the emergence of digital media in the presidential election of 2008, Kaye (2009) chronicles the challenges some online media consultants, especially for the McCain and Clinton campaigns, faced in being taken seriously by more traditional consultants who specialized in offline campaigning.

ning in the 2004 elections (Gertner 2004; Sosnik, Dowd, and Fournier 2006). Put simply, campaign consultants want to know whether conservatives disproportionately purchase domestic beer and subscribe to hunting magazines; whether liberals prefer lattes at Starbucks and give often to charities; and whether moderates prefer American-made to foreign-made cars. They are able to get answers to these and similar questions through extensive polling that looks for trends and relationships between consumer habits and political attitudes. Voter files are subsequently linked to data on individuals that is purchased from credit card companies and, because polling has identified which consumer habits are associated with which political attitudes, these data can be used by campaigns to develop a highly tailored message and send it via phone calls or direct mail only to certain types of consumers/voters. Targeting along these lines can be so precise that a grandmother in apartment 4B might receive a health-care mailing that emphasizes the candidate's efforts to secure the long-term viability of Medicare, while the graduate student in apartment 6C receives the student-loan mailing that outlines the candidate's commitment to affordable education.<sup>10</sup>

Compare this with the relative inefficiency of traditional television advertising. Most ads are aired on local television news broadcasts or talk shows and games shows (Goldstein and Freedman 2002). A certain demographic watches these programs (Rivlin 2008), of course—usually older voters—but the targeting strategy is broader. Your ad will be seen by your base voters, undecided voters, voters of the other party, and lots of non-voters. What you say on television, then, often can be wasted on viewers who will never vote for you, or never vote at all.

In sum, television remains more of a shotgun tactic than a rifle shot, as the overwhelming majority of ads (especially, still, for lower ticket races) are not targeted to specific demographic audiences.

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<sup>10</sup> In truth, this tactic really is not new. Before television—before the modern campaign more generally—candidates could micro-target different audiences in different states with different speeches (Hillygus and Shields 2009, 154). Candidates might, for example, tell one audience something in one town but something completely different in a different town. This is the original form of micro-targeting that became impossible in the world of multimedia, where such inconsistencies in message are easily identified. The micro-targeting trend of today, then, is really a technological trend.