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LIGHTS, CAMERA, CAMPAIGN!

MEDIA, POLITICS, AND POLITICAL ADVERTISING



Introduction

Selling Candidates and Soap

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Political advertising is a ubiquitous feature of contemporary American campaigns and elections. While it is hard for many to remember a time when political ads on television did not dominate campaigns and elections, it was not always the case that campaigns and candidates were made for television events. Using political ads as a primary vehicle or tool in elections is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Campaigning has always been a part of elections and also the primary way candidates run for office. When many think of what they would most like to see in campaigns, perhaps images of the Lincoln-Douglas debates come to mind. Such a vision depicts candidates locked in face-to-face debate with one another, articulating their position on the issues. This image of campaigning also depicts candidates as engaging the public, shaking their hands, going door to door, or meeting the voters in various town forums. While such campaigning may still exist today at the local level in some communities—or perhaps even in places like the Iowa caucuses or the New Hampshire primaries for the presidential race—for the most part the days when the public gets face time with candidates belong to a halcyon past. Contrary to the Simon and Garfunkel line in their song “Mrs. Robinson,” we no longer go to the candidate debate on a Sunday afternoon.

Candidates come to voters today predominately through political ads on television. Political advertising can make or break a candidate. Ads that define candidates, attack opponents, and relay messages that set tones or that otherwise define critical issues are central to campaigns and elections at the national and state level. They are also increasingly becoming even more important at the local level in many communities.

The use of paid advertising to communicate with the public is a relatively recent phenomenon. Perhaps it started in 1952 when Rossier Reeves teamed up with Dwight Eisenhower to do a series of political ads depicting average voters asking the candidate questions as part of a larger campaign called “Eisenhower Answers America.” Yet from these humble origins what has changed the nature of running for office is television.

Television and running for office are particularly suited for one another. Television’s need to tell a story, to personalize lives, to define good versus evil—or David versus Goliath—is great drama that sells advertising and generates revenue. Television is all about name recognition: It is about using niche marketing, demographics, and survey data to create images that are appealing and will capture market shares and sell products (Hamilton 2004). And television has been hugely successful in what it has done. Today many more people recognize Mr. Clean, Ronald McDonald, the Tidy Bowl Man, Mr. Whipple, Betty Crocker, Tony the Tiger, and the Pillsbury Doughboy than recognize their neighbors or public officials. Lines from commercials such as “I can’t believe I ate the whole thing,” “You deserve a break today,” “Where’s the beef?” and “I’d like to teach the world to sing” are staples of American pop culture, recognizable and familiar across generations. Television is the great democratic force, reaching into every living room in America.

Similarly, campaigns are perfectly suited for television. Campaigns have traditionally been about telling stories, defining good versus bad, us versus them, and the underdog versus the favorite. Candidates seek name recognition, access to voters and also want to tailor their message to the variegated constituencies that make up their electorate. Campaigns seek catchy phrases and images to identify candidates, hoping that buzz words or themes such as “Morning in America” or other similar slogans will resonate with voters. For the most part, the similarity in themes or scripts with both running a successful campaign and producing good television are remarkable, making television a natural home for candidates to sell themselves to the American public.

But the sheer size of the United States, both in population and geography, or within many states for that matter, renders personal campaigns impractical. It would be impossible to meet all the voters, speak with them personally, or attend enough town forums to reach everyone. But even if candidates could, the reality is that most Americans do not go to debates, attend town forums, or show up at political stump speeches. Instead, the average voter can best be reached in her living room, through her television, in much the same way that McDonald's, Coke, and other advertisers reach their customers. Politics is thus in competition with the rest of popular culture for the attention of the American voter. It is a noisy, crowded competition, necessitating that candidates often ape themes from pop culture in order to cut through the crowd.

Politics today occurs through television and political advertising more often than it does in any other fashion. It is from television that voters often learn much about candidates. While the public may deny the impact or efficacy of political ads, there is no question that hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on these ads and that voters literally see hundreds if not thousands of these ads during an election season. The irony is that many voters are receiving important information and images about candidates, issues, and political parties from the very ads that are often disparaged.

Indications of the scope of political advertising come in many ways. The Alliance for Better Campaigns, a Washington-based non-partisan organization that monitors the broadcast industry and television coverage of politics, reported that in 1982, sale of political ads brought in a little over \$200 million in ad revenue (Alliance 2000). By 2000, local television stations took in over \$1 billion from the sale of political ads. Even after adjusting for inflation, this is still a fourfold increase in ad revenue. In the first seven months of 2000, the top 75 media markets took in over \$211 million from political ads. Put into perspective, of the estimated \$4 billion spent in total on national, state and local campaigns in 2000, 25% of that money was spent on political ads.

Projections are that \$1.6 billion will be spent on political advertising in 2004, up from the \$1.2 billion spent in 2002 (McConnell 2004). As of the 2004 Iowa caucuses, \$3.8 million had been spent on political ads, with presidential candidates Howard Dean and John Kerry each spending in excess of \$2 million in Iowa alone. All told, political ads for the 2004 Iowa caucuses averaged to more than \$90 per caucus voter (Wisconsin Advertising Project 2004).

If dollar amounts alone were not enough of an indication of how omnipresent political advertising on television has become, counting the actual number of ads should paint a clearer picture. In the top 75 media markets in 2000, nearly 287,000 political ads were run—the equivalent of 99 solid days of political advertising (Alliance 2000). Through December 31, 2003, almost 11,000 ads had been run in the Des Moines, Iowa, market, and by some estimates, as the January 19, 2004 Iowa caucuses got close, one could see up to 150 political ads per day on television (McConnell).

Finally, proof that political ads are a ubiquitous presence in campaigns lies in the fact that ads stand out and are remembered by viewers—as citizens—as surely as are ads by car companies, hamburger joints, and beer companies. Among the classics there is the famous “Daisy” ad from the 1964 presidential race where President Johnson had a little girl counting flower petals, only to have the commercial fade to a nuclear bomb detonation. This ad successfully used the fear of war to dissuade voters from voting for Barry Goldwater. In 1984, President Reagan’s “Bear in the Woods” ad exploited fear of the Soviet Union, while his “Morning in America” depicted an optimistic American looking towards the future. In 1988, the “Willie Horton” ad exploited fear of crime and racism to depict Democrat Michael Dukakis as weak on crime, and more recently, ads in the 2000 New Hampshire presidential primary by a friend of George Bush derailed John McCain’s campaign. These are just some of the ads that have been considered as memorable uses of television to craft images and affect voter perceptions.

The sheer number of ads, how much campaigns spend on advertising, and how much money television stations rake in from candidates all point to the new reality of campaigns and elections—they are in fact made-for-television events. No matter what the public or its critics may think, two facts stand out: (1) lots of time and money is spent on political ads, and (2) political strategists and candidates assume the money and time spent on these ads are worth it.

Every election cycle brings with it a new crop of political ads. Some stand out; some become classics, and some are dogs. This book seeks to ask and answer a simple question: What impact do political ads have on campaigns and elections? It explores the many facets of political advertising and television, seeking to assess the trends, issues, and forces that shape political ads and, in turn, what impact these ads have on voters, campaigns, and candidates. Through case studies, interviews, and analysis of specific campaigns and ads—predominately in the United States and to a lesser extent in Canada—the book seeks to develop a better understanding of how ads

are constructed, why some work, why some fail, and what it is about political ads that allows them to make or break a campaign.

Of course, this is not the first book written on political communication or political advertising. Among recent books that have explored various aspects of political advertising and television are Diamond and Bates' *The Spot: The Rise of Political Advertising on Television* (1988), Jamieson and Waldman's *The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories That Shape the Political World* (2003), and Thurber, Nelson, and Dilio's *Crowded Airwaves: Campaign Advertising in Elections* (2000). Similarly, Vanderbilt University's Television News Archive (<http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu>), the Julian P. Kanter Political Commercial Archive at the University of Oklahoma (<http://www.presidentsusa.net/ads.html>), and the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project (<http://polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising/>) have committed considerable resources to understanding television news and political advertising. The Pew Center for the People & the Press (<http://peoplepress.org/>) and the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Southern California (<http://ascweb.usc.edu/home.php>) are major forces in the examination of the relationship among television, the media, and politics.

This book goes beyond traditional notions of exploring political advertising. It places political ads in the broader context of the media, politics, and popular culture. It not only looks at how political ads, along with traditional news, are used to affect voters, but it also broadens the discussion even further, looking at new trends in campaigns on television. For example, it looks at the rise of Spanish-language advertising as well as the rise of late-night television and talk shows as new phenomena in advertising. In many ways, the book looks at political ads as competing with traditional commercial ads and entertainment venues for audience attention and then asks what the implications are of this rivalry.

In Chapter 1, Arthur Sanders draws an analogy between political ads and the production of commercial ads. Opening with the now-omnipresent Verizon Wireless "Can you hear me now?" line, Sanders details what makes for a successful political ad, finding parallels between selling candidates and cell phones. A good political ad does four things: it provides drama, plays on familiar themes, focuses on people and not policy, and makes a simple appeal to the viewer. In addition, good ads must fit within the context of a campaign and must also contrast candidates as a choice between good and evil. Often times political ads can piggyback on successful commercial ads or themes (think of, for example, Walter Mondale stealing the