

## **The Effect of Advertisement on Congressional Campaigns**

Advertisements are hard to escape in the world today. They are on social media, billboards, televisions, online, and everywhere. Whether people consciously recognize it or not, advertisements affect the way they see the world. This is especially true for political candidates. Political advertisements have the potential to shape a voter's mind to believing that a candidate is right for a position. This paper explores the effect that political advertisements have on a candidate's campaign by examining the contents of the advertisements, the type of advertisements, the medium of the advertisement, as well as the events surrounding it.

Darrel West examined different candidates in the 1992 race for Congress and observed different candidates' advertisement tendencies, as well the effect other political advertisements had on candidates<sup>1</sup>. The main candidates West focused on were John Seymour, Gray Davis, Dianne Feinstein, Bruce Herschensohn, Mel Levine, Leo McCarthy and Barbara Boxer. He explored the amount of coverage they received, as well as the type of coverage. He asked a focus group to answer questions about candidates. Questions included things like if they had seen certain candidates lately in the news, who they voted for in the primaries and general election, as well as what party they were affiliated with. West said that it is not wise to simply ask voters if they had viewed a political advertisement for a certain candidate influenced their vote. People like to believe they are independent from the media and can make their own rational and political decisions. When conducting this study, West attempted to make the focus group as varied as

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<sup>1</sup> Darrel West, *Political Advertising and News Coverage in 1992 California U.S. Senate Campaigns*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1058.

possible. He had a relatively equal number of men and women (54% women), as well as 54% Democrats, 20% Republicans, and 26% Independents.<sup>2</sup>

West found that commercials tended to focus on domestic policy and domestic affairs more than the candidate's traits. This is because studies have shown that advertisements that focus on likeability of a candidate are often not successful. Similarly, candidates can generate media attention through the news. General Election news stories focus first on the campaign, then domestic policy, and finally the candidate. The amount candidates were covered in the news made a difference on the success of the candidate, especially during the primaries. Levine and Boxer had been mentioned twice as much as McCarthy, which hurt his name recognition, making him less of a competition.<sup>3</sup>

The more a candidate produces advertisements, the more successful they tend to be. The success of an advertisement also depends on the type of advertisement. Advertisements that have an emotional appeal effects viewer differently than fact-based ads. Emotions often signal when something is wrong, which can make emotional appeals in ads very successful. Political ads tend to focus on two types of emotions: enthusiasm and fears. Enthusiasm signals positive emotions in viewers, and creates a desire for citizens to participate in "good times". Fear elicits negativity, and encourages people to reconsider information that had previously been given.<sup>4</sup>

Enthusiasm is supposed to encourage citizens to be attentive, and persuade them to want to participate in politics. Brader found that although that is the goal, enthusiasm tends to make

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1057.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1060.

<sup>4</sup> Ted Brader, *Striking a Responsive Chord: How Political Ads Motivate and Persuade Voters by Appealing to Emotions*, (Indiana, American Journal of Political Science, 2005), 390-391.

citizen look away from the current issue and turn their attention elsewhere. Enthusiasm works best when a person already believes in the positive agenda being pushed. This is because they do not have to be as heavily persuaded, and are more susceptible to sounds and effects around them. Enthusiasm messages are effective at time though, and they are most effective, “By wrapping positive messages in enthusiasm-eliciting music and images, campaign ads can remarkably change their impact on voters”.<sup>5</sup> Enthusiasm ads have the potential to influence people, especially when they have prior beliefs and feature happy images.

Fear is typically used to increase information seeking, but as Brader found, this is not always true. Studies show that fear provokes information seeking, but often it just a subconscious desire to want to know more. A study in 2000 shows that fear does not cause people to engage in the election, but causes them to engage in political action outside of voting. The effect of fear in advertisements is positive, meaning that it does produce the desired outcome, but the significance of the results is minimal.<sup>6</sup> Whether an ad contains fear or enthusiasm changes the effectiveness of the ad to the voters, showing that political advertisements success depends on the content.

The effect of negative advertisements has been under close examination for years. The belief has typically been held that negative ads decrease citizen participation in elections, and / or create political apathy. Brooks and Geer tested this theory in 2007 and, “Found no evidence that negative, uncivil, or trait-based messages within ads attenuate respondents' levels of political

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 397

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 402

interest, political trust, external efficacy, or political learning”<sup>7</sup>. Jackson, Mondak, and Huckfeldt also did an experiment where they test this hypothesis, yielding similar results.

When doing their experiment, Jackson, Mondak, and Huckfeldt considered where their participants lived, when they were interviewed, and many television programs they view. Considering where the participants live is crucial because exposure to political ads depends on geographic locations. When the participants were interviewed determines if they watched the primary or general campaigns. Reactions between the two stages differ, as well as the ads themselves. They also weighed the amount of television programs watched by each participant, since more avid television watchers have a better chance of being exposed to multiple political ads than someone who watches very little. <sup>8</sup>

Jackson, Mondak, and Huckfeldt experiment did not show any support whatsoever that negative ads are detrimental to views on politics. There are four possibilities as to why they do not seem to effect politics. The first is that citizens are capable of disliking negative ads, but not turning a blind eye to politics because of it. This argues that citizens see candidates and ads for who they truly are, and therefore are not persuaded by them. Another possibility is that citizens do have negative views of politics that do not stem from negative ads. The third possibility is that negative ads do impact voters, but it is on a macroscale that this study is not able to prove,

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<sup>7</sup> . Robert A. Jackson, Jeffery J. Mondak and Robert Huckfeldt, *Examining the Possible Corrosive Impact of Negative Advertising on Citizens' Attitudes toward Politics*, (Utah, Sage Publications,2009), 58-59.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 61

because any single study is limited. The last possibility is that negative ads over time tear town political attitudes, therefore it cannot be detected by a survey.<sup>9</sup>

Goldstein and Freeman discussed the difficulty of trying to measure negative advertisements. Most studies are done in a laboratory where individuals all see the same clip. This does not measure how often an advertisement was played on television, or how many times a voter was exposed to the ad. It also does not take voters from other parts of the nation into account. This assumes that citizens in different parts of the nation view elements of an ad the same way, which is not true. When negative ads are not tested in a lab, they rely on self-reports from voters. This is problematic because recall memory is not only unreliable, but also correlate with the turnout.<sup>10</sup> This proves that advertisements are not always effective for every candidate, but depends on the situation, candidate, as well as the voters.

West's study does not prove that political advertisements effects political attitudes, but it displays three different cases involving negative advertisements: spots that benefit the candidate being attacked, ads where the attacker reaps the benefits, and ads where it does not affect either candidate. West classifies an ad as negative if it is, "Unflattering or pejorative comments were made about the individual or if statements were printed challenging comments made by that person"<sup>11</sup> Overall, West concludes that negative ads depends on multiple factors, such as the candidate and the campaign itself.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 66

<sup>10</sup> Ken Goldstein and Paul Freedman, *Campaign Advertising and Voter Turnout: New Evidence for a Stimulating Effect* (Virginia, The Journal of Politics, 2002), 724.

<sup>11</sup> West, *Political Advertising*, 1065.

Davis and Levine both ran negative advertisements against their competitors which did not benefit Davis or Levine. Davis' infamous ad that read: "Leona Hemsley and Dianne Feinstein? Hemsley blames her servant for the felony. Feinstein blames her staff for the lawsuit. Hemsley is in jail. Feinstein wants to be senator? Truth, for a change. Gray Davis, Democrat for the U.S. Senate"<sup>12</sup>, was very detrimental to his campaign. After his it aired, people saw Davis more negatively than they saw Feinstein. Almost 60% of all of Davis' new coverage following the release of this ad was negative, which helped Feinstein to beat him in the primaries.

Similarly, Levine ran negative of advertisements against Boxer. The more negative ads he ran though, the more people favored Boxer. Not only was this problematic for him in likeability, he had also spent most of his budgets on advertising, where Boxer only spent 28% of her budget on advertising. According the Federal Election Commission, none of his funds were spent on polling, compared to Boxer who spent \$135, 234 on polling. Although Levine clearly spend the most on advertising, the most money spent in a campaign does not guarantee a win. Levine was also received a lot of negative coverage by the news, with 65% of his coverage being negative, the highest of all the candidates. All these features combined created a campaign where Levine was not received well or competently, helping Boxer to win the primaries against him.<sup>13</sup>

Advertising in the race between Campbell and Herschensohn did not to make a difference. The main factors that contributed to success for Herschensohn was he was more conservative than Campbell, helping him secure the primary Republican seat. These results show

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 1065

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 1066.

that advertising is limited, and cannot always be the factor that makes a candidate successful. Success depends on multiple aspects, such as party affiliation and the candidate themselves.<sup>14</sup>

During the general election, Seymour received more negative coverage than Feinstein. Seymour was constantly being referred to as “unaccomplished” in news stories. Boxer and Herschensohn’s negative advertisements swung back and forth until October when polls showed the Herschensohn was in the lead. Advertisements quickly became negative towards Boxer, with 47% of news reports being negative about her.<sup>15</sup> Evidence showed that Hersch attack ads towards Boxer were working, and he was leading in the polls, showing that negative advertisement can be beneficial to the person leading them.

Herschensohn was predicted to be the clear winner in this race, yet he did not win. The weekend before the election, information was released describing how Herschensohn frequently visited strip clubs, as well purchased pornographic material. Herschensohn campaign centered around traditional values. This caused 70% of news stories that week to be negative about Herschensohn, giving Boxer enough room to come in and narrowly win, taking the seat with 47% to 43%. Advertisement is not the only factor in Boxer win over Herschensohn though. Other factors that influenced the vote were, “Party identification, ideology, and education in expected direction”<sup>16</sup> Boxer is a Democrat and Herschensohn is a Republican, therefore creating a difference in who voters will elect. Each candidate views on certain issues also effected the way people voted, directly linked to Hersh’s lifestyle contradictions. It is clear thought that

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1067

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1068.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1068.

advertisement was affecting the way the vote was going to swing until Herschensohn's personal life was exposed to the public.

Advertisements are also effective when positive. Beniot found that, "Televised political advertising increased issue knowledge, perceptions of the candidates' character, altered attitudes, affected candidate preference; influenced agenda-setting, and altered vote likelihood", showing that the amount of money of advertising by candidates is typically a good investment. Beniot took an approach called the Functional Theory in which he explains that candidates can show their desirability in three ways: acclaims, attacks, and defense. Acclaims are positive features of a candidate and their policies. Attacks are against other candidates. Defense is a candidate who has been attacked defending themselves.<sup>17</sup>

The study found unsurprisingly that incumbents attack less and acclaim more. Incumbents spend about 75% of their advertisements acclaiming, and only 17% on their time attacking other candidates. Incumbents also use their passed deeds to acclaim, using leverage that challengers do not have.<sup>18</sup> This makes sense because incumbents already have name recognition and do not need to be heard as loudly as those who are new to running. These make incumbents advertisements unique to them. Both incumbents and challengers spend majority of their time focusing on policy over character. Beniot also found that Democrats discuss policy in advertisement more than Republicans do, even though they were moderately equal.<sup>19</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup>William Benoit and David Airne, *Non-Presidential Political Advertising in Campaign 2004*, (Washington, Human Communication, 2007), 95.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 107

content of the advertisement makes a difference based on the candidate, and the way the candidate structures the piece.

The study also tested whether different mediums, such as television and radio, broadcasted different types of advertisements. The study found that there was not a difference between radio and television advertisements. Television and radio spend 70% of time acclaiming, and then 30% attacking. They did differ in what the commercials emphasized. Television advertisements spend most over half the time on policy and less on character.<sup>20</sup>

Whether or not a candidate sponsored an advertisement or not also effects the type of advertisement. Candidate sponsored advertisements only attacked 26% of the time verses party affiliated advertisements. Candidate and party advertisements were equal on their what they focused on. Both groups focused more on policy than other themes. Senate advertisements stress policy more than House advertisements, which makes sense because winners have been proven to spend more of their time on policy than character, versus losers who devote an equal amount of time to character and policy. Advertisements focus on different types of policy and character. When addressing policy, ads focus on past deeds and general goals majority of the time, only mentioning specific future plans 5% of the time. When addressing characters, the ads focused on personal qualities and leadership significantly more than ideals, which were only mentioned 17% of the time.<sup>21</sup>

The events surrounding the campaign at the time also highly effected the advertisement and the candidate. During the 1992 California race studied by West, the Rodney King beating

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 101-103.

case was taking place in Los Angeles. This not only took up a lot of news coverage, therefore decreasing coverage of candidates and the elections, but also shifted voters view to something besides the election. It also influences candidates and their advertisements to where they try to focus on big topics at the time.<sup>22</sup> This can also be seen true in the 2010 midterms elections when, “The poor economy and relatively high rates of unemployment undoubtedly helped Republican recruitment of challengers”.<sup>23</sup> During this time, Republicans in the House picked up more seats in the house than either party had since the Great Depression.

The success of the advertisement depends on multiple factors. A negative advertisement can be successful in one environment, but detrimental in another environment. The effect of the advertisement also depends on the political atmosphere at the time because of events surrounding it. The candidate’s likability also effects the way an advertisement is perceived. Even though all these factors differ, and the effectiveness of political ads cannot be narrowed down to a simple formula, they can be effective. Herschensohn ad was proving to be effective until his personal life interfered. Statistics have shown how enthusiasm is effective as well. The effectiveness of ads is very dependent on the circumstances around it, but that does mean they are not effective.

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<sup>22</sup> West, *Political Advertising*, 1064.

<sup>23</sup> Erika Fowler and Travis Ridout, Advertising Trends in 2010, (Washington, The Forum, 2010), 1.

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