

Political Advertising – Good or Bad?

The Heterogeneity of U.S. Research Findings and Their Limited Validity for Europe

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Abstract

Political advertising has always been a contentious issue. In general, this can be explained by the uneasy feeling that advertising, which comes, after all, from the world of commerce, has no place in serious politics. Derived from this, the concern focuses on the presumed effects of advertising on recipients and, in particular, those that go beyond the actual purpose of the advertising (which primarily seeks to affect voter turnout, sympathy for one or the other party or candidate, and the voting decision) and more generally influence attitudes toward politics. Controversies regarding political advertising arise in almost every election campaign because its content is perceived as unfair to opponents, because it “hits below the belt,” or because it violates human dignity. Therefore, concerns about undesirable effects relate primarily to negative campaigning because, unlike the case in commercial advertising, negative advertising in politics is commonplace. Against this background, this chapter summarizes the research on political advertising to determine whether there is a reasonable basis, on the one hand, for the expectations of its sponsors and, on the other hand, for the concerns about its negative effects on target audiences.

Political advertising worldwide is a contentious issue. In general, the question whether politics and advertising, which comes, after all, from the world of commerce, are compatible at all arises. Deriving from this, the concern focuses on the presumed effects of advertising on recipients and, in particular, those that exceed the actual purpose of the advertising (effects on voter turnout, sympathy for one party or candidate or the other, and the voter’s decision) and more generally influence attitudes toward politics.

Controversies regarding political advertising come up in almost every election campaign because its content is perceived as unfair to opponents,

because it “hits below the belt,” or because it violates human dignity. This already demonstrates that concerns about its undesirable effects relate primarily to negative campaigning because, unlike commercial advertising, which usually presents an idyllic world, negative advertising in politics is common. However, the public’s critical reactions toward the design and content of political advertising do not deter political actors from entering the electoral fray with attacks on their opponents.

Against this background, this chapter summarizes the research on political advertising to determine whether there is a reasonable basis, on the one hand, for the expectations of its sponsors and, on the other hand, for the concerns about its negative effects on target audiences. First, this chapter establishes a definition of political advertising to narrow the subject of this review. It then looks at the framework conditions for political advertising, which reflect international differences in attitudes toward these kinds of political messages, before assessing the state of research on its effects. Ultimately, it answers the twofold question of whether the high hopes that campaigners seem to place in election advertising are justified and the extent to which the advertising can be dysfunctional.

Defining Political Advertising

Since most of the research on political advertising originated in the United States and due to the importance of televised spots during U.S. election campaigns, political advertising is often associated with television ads. In her 2004 review of research on political advertising, Lynda Kaid demonstrated how early concepts were oriented toward commercial advertising and, accordingly, assumed that the airtime would be purchased. Especially under the impression of international comparative research, which began around the 1990s, the purchase aspect recedes as a defining feature to consider the fact that, in many countries, the allocation of broadcasting time is controlled and conducted free of charge. In U.S. research, however, the term “advertising” is still used most often. This is explained, on the one hand, by the conditions in the United States where political advertising must be paid for; on the other hand, it emphasizes the purpose of the messages, namely, to promote the sponsor or client.

Eventually, the perspective expands beyond election campaigns and considers advertising media other than television. Thus, Kaid (2004, p. 156) finally developed a broad definition that understands political advertising “as any message primarily under the control of a source used to promote political candidates, parties, policy issues, and/or ideas through

mass channels.” The extension beyond election-related advertising is intended to include promotional activities in any type of political campaign. This definition also incorporates third-party advertising intended to support individual candidates or parties. By specifying “mass channels” as the relevant means of distribution, the definition associates the transmission of advertising through traditional mass media or the internet, which was just emerging as a medium for political advertising at that time, and finally, social networks. Yet the definition is only able to grasp the mass distribution of election posters on the streets to a limited extent.

Due to the extensive body of research on political advertising’s effects, to which European research has contributed significantly in the last two or three decades, this chapter is limited to audiovisual political advertising in the run-up to congressional and presidential elections in the United States. In addition, this focus is interesting against the background that election advertising on television—and especially negative advertising—has also stimulated the debate about the Americanization of European election campaigns that peaked around the turn of the millennium. With the ubiquitousness of the internet and social networks, new channels have emerged for audiovisual election advertising, opening up a new perspective for the question raised here.

Framework Conditions

Any examination of the benefits or undesirable effects of audiovisual election advertising must bear in mind that political—just as commercial advertising—depends on the cultural context in which it is embedded. That applies to the visuals and to the verbal elements of the advertising. Election advertising must, therefore, be understood against the background of the respective political and electoral systems, and that holds true for the outcome of the relevant research as well.

This has consequences particularly for research on audiovisual election advertising, which comes from the United States, or the comparison of U.S.-based results with research from European countries as the US is an outlier not only because of its electoral system but also regarding the regulation of political advertising. Unlike European countries, there are virtually no restrictions on political advertising in the US, which in this respect is treated the same as commercial advertising. Election advertising on television is not subject to any time restrictions; political actors can buy advertising slots at any time, not only before elections, and as much as their budget allows. The only requirement is that candidate ads show

a picture of the contender; candidates must also reaffirm in the ad that they approve the message (cf. Just & Crigler, 2017, p. 283). In addition, U.S. regulations allow third parties to support candidates through the purchase of advertising time. In every election campaign, political action committees (PACs) appear promoting one candidate or the other and are characterized, above all, by the use of aggressive advertising. Although the names of the sponsors are displayed, those who are really behind the PACs and what they stand for often remains in the dark. This low level of regulation can be explained by the U.S. interpretation of the basic right to freedom of expression, which is placed first and foremost here, without concern about the potential effects of the advertising on its audience. In contrast, European countries have comparatively strong restrictions on political advertising, which is usually allowed only as election advertising in the last several weeks before election day (cf. Holtz-Bacha, 2017). This, along with the fact that there are countries that do not even allow electoral advertising, rather points to an approach of social responsibility that does not want to leave ideological advertising to the free play of market forces. On top of that, the regulations as well as occasional discussions about abolishing or introducing election advertising reflect uncertainties about the effects on the electorate.

In addition to the peculiarities of the respective electoral system, in particular whether votes are given to candidates or parties, the differences in regulation have consequences for the period, amount, and scope of election advertising, and these, in turn, affect its content and design. Some countries even go so far as to impose specifications on the style and visual design of advertising. If there are such restrictions, they are typically aimed at preventing manifestations of negative advertising. For the visual packaging, there may be bans on the use of national symbols to keep them out of the electoral battle. The country-specific regulations thus determine whether the political actors have access to television at all for their advertising and to what extent advertising time is available to them. Any regulatory specifications for the design of advertising restrict them in their strategies, which are manifested in the text and visuals. The interpretation of the results of international comparative studies on the amount and the verbal and visual content of election broadcasts should, therefore, consider the legal framework and not simply attribute differences to nation-specific strategies.

What Do We Know About the Effects of Political Advertising?

The figures for audiovisual election advertising in the 2020 US presidential campaign reflect the importance attached to the ads, and in comparison with European countries, for example, they demonstrate the exceptional role the use of ads has for US elections. For the 2019/2020 election cycle, Ridout, Fowler, and Franz (2021, p. 467) recorded 2.35 million airings of political advertising on television. The period between early September, when party conventions nominated the presidential candidates, and Election Day in early November accounted for 804,000 airings in 2020. Compared with the previous presidential election, these figures represent a doubling. And the election revealed one more factor: While candidates have significantly increased their online advertising, it has not been at the expense of traditional television advertising (Fowler et al., 2020, p. 57; Franz, 2020). Although 2020 can be expected to have been an exceptional year in terms of audiovisual advertising due to the pandemic and candidates' reducing personal appearances, thereby relying all the more on ads, these figures clearly highlight the discrepancy with the situation in Europe. In Germany, for example, parties receive a maximum of eight slots each for their spots on the two public service channels, and parties not represented in the Bundestag receive only two. Moreover, the commercial channels, where advertising time must be paid for, are booked only by the larger parties that can afford the costs. Therefore, unrestricted access has given election advertising on U.S. television a starring role in political campaigns. In addition, the election campaigners benefit from an element of surprise due to the interstitial placement of ads. With the significant number of broadcasts, they can count on a repetition effect. The high level of investment in audiovisual election advertising also indicates campaigners' belief that this type of voter appeal has an impact. Indeed, there are numerous studies that have fed this hope. By and large, there is a consensus that ads matter, but determining how they matter is not as easy.

Since electoral advertising has been a feature in the US since the 1950s and because of the large numbers of ads, which have increased steadily from election to election, there is an extensive body of research on U.S. political advertising. The majority of this research is devoted to content analyses; the findings, however, are relevant to the question posed here only if they are related to effects. The investigation of effects is naturally of particular interest to those who commission the advertising. First and foremost, their concern is whether the financial outlay is worthwhile and whether the ads work in the campaigners' interests, i.e., whether they win them votes. This question is expanded since indirect effects can be

assumed, i.e., the ads have an effect on variables that influence the voting decision. The interests of academic research, however, are broader than those of campaigners because they also investigate the effects of advertising that go beyond the immediate electoral context and may also affect those not yet eligible to vote.

Similar to media-effects research in general, overviews of studies on the effects of audiovisual electoral advertising have demonstrated that any effects, if they appear at all, are dependent on a multitude of variables, making generalizations difficult if not impossible (e.g., Fowler et al., 2022, ch. 7, 8; Kaid, 2004). Such influencing variables include the electoral level in U.S. presidential elections or down-ballot elections. Furthermore, regarding the ads, the following variables can play a role: characteristics of the sponsor of the advertisement, the channel (in the case of audiovisual advertising on television, the internet, or social media), and characteristics of the formal design and content of an ad. On the part of viewers variables such as personal characteristics and, for example, their political interests or party identification may also have an influence on the effects of the advertising.

Effects can arise in the aggregate and in the individual voter. However, several studies indicated that ads have little impact on voter turnout. Sides et al. (2021, p. 15) suggested that the main effect of ads lies less in mobilization than in persuasion. Similarly, from their research, Spenkuch and Toniatti (2018) concluded that campaign advertising has virtually no effect on the overall voter turnout but does have an influence on vote shares. This is supported in a study by Law (2021, p. 544), who calculated estimates based on data from the 2008 election that 60% to 70% of advertising effects can be attributed to persuasion and only 30% to 40% to mobilization. Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign has shown that political advertising is also used to demobilize voters and present them with reasons why they should not vote for the opponent (Magleby, 2020, p. 369).

In an electoral system in which candidates are determined not by the parties but in primaries and finance their campaigns largely out of their own pockets, election advertising also plays a significant role in fundraising. In fact, a major portion of any candidate's electoral war chest comes from donations of individuals (Magleby, 2020, p. 362) who are targeted by all kinds of advertising and personal contacts. In addition, findings on whether larger expenditures on election advertising and the intensity of airings lead to greater success at the polls are not definitive (Coppock et al., 2020, p. 6). Liberini et al. (2020) noted that the 2016 Trump campaign invested more in Facebook ads than Hillary Clinton did and managed

to get his supporters to turn out to vote, and that this advertising had a negative effect on Clinton's liberal supporters. Konitzer et al. (2019, p. 12), however, found evidence that there could be a boomerang effect in vote intention through additional spending late in the campaign, which the authors interpret as a consequence of oversaturation.

A meta-analysis of 40 field experiments supplemented by nine original experiments provided evidence that campaign contacts, including different types of advertising, have minimally persuasive effects (Kalla & Broockman, 2018). These findings are further corroborated by 59 real-time experiments that varied sender, message, receiver condition, and context (Coppock et al., 2020). Other research has suggested that the effects of ads in U.S. presidential elections are rather small but can make a difference in down-ballot elections (Sides et al, 2021, p. 2). A plausible explanation is that voters in lower-level elections have less information about candidates and issues than in presidential elections. In fact, voters are more likely to be persuaded by a candidate they don't know much about, and this includes considerable changes in beliefs and vote choice (Broockman & Kalla, 2021). Ads broadcast after Labor Day, i.e., in the last two months of the election campaign, prove to be effective, while those broadcast earlier in a campaign do not significantly influence the outcome of the election.

According to the persuasion decay concept (e.g., Gerber et al., 2011), persuasive effects of electoral ads subside over time, and a large part of them decays quickly. Whereas the immediate effects in subnational elections are more substantial than those at the national level, they also deteriorate more quickly (Hill et al., 2013). However, this process does not seem to apply to all groups of voters predisposed in the same way (Bartels, 2014, p. 538). The fact that candidates, nevertheless, buy airtime for their ads on a large scale even in the early phase of election campaigns may mean that their objective is to become known and to position themselves at an early stage before attacks by opponents attempt to tarnish their image (Magleby, 2020, p. 372).

How uncertain the potential impact of ads is can also be illustrated by the example of negative advertising—considered a hallmark of US election advertising. Negative advertising in the US is a must for election campaigns, and that can be attributed, on the one hand, to the political and electoral system centering on candidates and, on the other hand, to the virtual absence of any restrictions on election advertising.

Moreover, negative advertising in the US is usually equated with attacks on one's political opponent or with a format that contrasts the opponents' characteristics and political positions. Generally, although negative advertising is supposed to be unpopular with the electorate, it appears to succeed.

Voters learn about the character and political positions of the targeted candidate through the ads, and possibly about those of the attacking candidate as well, and they remember negative ads better than positive ads (cf. Basil, Schooler, & Reeves 1991; Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007). Campaigners, however, fear negative advertising's potential backlash effect. This occurs when a negative ad has an unfavorable effect on its sponsor, instead of, as intended, on the attacked, which can happen when viewers perceive the attack as unfair (e.g., Fridkin & Kenney, 2004; Garramone, 1988; Pinkleton, 1997). To avoid this risk, candidates often prefer to hold back negative ads and leave the attacks on their opponents to the party or the Political Action Committees. Female candidates may even be subject to a double bind regarding the use of negative ads and, thereby, face an additional risk (e.g., Bauer & Santia, 2021; Gordon, Shafie, & Crigler, 2003): Whereas aggressive advertising is a common campaign tool in the US and women must prove themselves to be tough enough for politics and for the position they seek, attacking people does not align with the female role stereotype. Therefore, they run the risk of being rejected by the electorate for using aggressive ads.

Regarding the effects of negative advertising on turnout, research has yielded contradictory results. There are good reasons to assume that aggressive advertising alienates citizens from politics and diminishes their willingness to vote. With a view to the effects on general attitudes toward politics, political institutions, and actors, the potential effects of negative advertising point beyond the electoral context. Conversely, the image that negative ads provide of politics and political actors could also mobilize people to participate in elections. With their studies on the detrimental effects of exposure to negative advertising, Ansolabehere et al. (1994, 1999) have fueled the discussion. Their findings pointed to demobilizing effects, a weakening of political efficacy, and further polarization of the electorate. Therefore, Ansolabehere and Iyengar claimed that “[n]egative campaigning transforms elections into an entertaining spectator sport” (1995, p. 145). Other research, however, has been unable to confirm these findings. Based on their meta-analyses of studies on negative campaigning, Lau and collaborators concluded that, although negative ads are unsuitable for attracting votes, they have no detrimental effects on turnout and attitudes toward politics (Lau & Rovner, 2009; Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007). Other authors have suggested that negative campaign messages can even stimulate participation in the political process. For instance, research by Brooks and Geer (2007), who distinguished between negative and uncivil message content, did not find evidence of adverse effects on political engagement and attitudes toward politics. Rather, they found evidence that the

least-liked candidate messages, namely negative, uncivil, and trait-based messages, increase political interest and the likelihood of participating in an election (p. 12). Similarly, Crigler et al. (2006) compared responses to different types of negative campaign communication and argued that their effect is mediated by the emotions they arouse among voters. Their results confirm the harmful effect of attack ads on the attacking candidate and offer some support for their demobilizing effect, whereas issue-based, fear-arousing communication can encourage democratic participation (pp. 153–154). The complexity of the process, with a variety of intertwined variables, leads the authors to conclude, “The jury is still out on the impact of attack advertising” (Crigler et al., 2006, p. 155).

An additional incentive for campaigners to employ negative advertising is that negativity and conflict have high news value, and aggressive commercials, therefore, often become the subject of reporting and, thereby, generate broader public attention. Television repeats the ads, and newspapers describe them in discussions about their form and content, giving the sponsor free advertising time. The classic example of an ad that was broadcast only once but that everyone knows to this day due to the public response is the so-called Daisy Girl spot, produced for Lyndon B. Johnson’s campaign for the 1964 presidential election. The powerful, contrasting images of a little girl counting the petals of a daisy and an exploding atomic bomb represent a prime example of a negative spot that received lasting attention. This kind of free media exposure is suited to generate indirect persuasive effects (Konitzer et al., 2019).

With the widespread use of the internet and social media, election campaigners opened up new channels for audiovisual election advertising. These are also less expensive than purchasing television airtime, and they allow the micro-targeting of specific market segments and individual voters. Along with the employment of social media for electoral advertising came new phenomena such as big data and its marriage to neuromarketing (Hegazy, 2019), dark ads (e.g., Madrigal, 2017), and all kinds of deceptions such as deepfakes (Kietzmann et al., 2020) that have further provided new research challenges. While television advertising is public and, thereby, subject to public discussion and possibly fact-checking, social media ads target a narrowly defined audience and, therefore, easily escape public scrutiny.

Since channel, content, and reception situations differ, it is to be expected that digital ads also have different effects than those broadcast on television. It appears that, regardless of content, the channel alone makes a difference (Kaid, 2003). However, comparative content analyses demonstrated that electoral ads on social media are different from those

on television (e.g., Crigler et al., 2011; Fowler et al., 2021). This suggests that digital ads serve different campaign goals than classic TV ads do; in fact, Motta and Fowler (2016) ascertained that using TV commercials is preferable for persuasion, while online ads are especially effective for mobilizing partisans. This was also the assumption of Fowler et al. (2021, p. 147) based on their content analysis of the online and TV ads used in the 2018 election campaigns that showed reduced negativity, lower issue content, and increased partisanship for Facebook ads. Accordingly, the mobilizing function, aimed at supporters and followers, is seen as an amplifier for political polarization.

While Broockman and Green (2014, p. 281) expressed doubt that online ads have substantial impact, Liberini et al. (2020), whose study yielded significant effects on voter behavior, concluded that micro-targeted ads on Facebook matter. These effects were particularly pronounced among users who were targeted based on ethnicity, gender, location, and political orientation (p. 29). The authors also found that highly targeted users are less inclined to change their minds and more likely to adhere to their voting choices than less-targeted users, and they interpreted these findings as evidence that advertising on Facebook intensifies political polarization (p. 30).

Micro-targeting, however, is not always as well-received as campaigns hope it will be due to the personalized approach. A study by Hersh and Schaffner (2013) showed that voters apparently prefer broad-based appeals of non-targeted advertising to the particularistic promises of micro-targeting. Moreover, mistargeting has negative consequences when mistargeted voters penalize the ad sponsor because they get the impression that the candidate has different priorities and does not represent the voter's interests.

Since online ads also encourage users to share the content (Kaid, 2006), ads are further spread via social networks, reaching a larger audience and possibly gaining credibility. By clicking, sharing, and commenting on the ads, recipients deliver immediate feedback to the campaigns on the ads' effectiveness (Brodnax & Sapiezynski, 2020).

Conclusion

All in all, this small excerpt from the extensive research on the effects of election advertising in the US shows that the findings are mixed. Studies have looked at all kinds of effects—cognitive, attitudinal, affective, and behavioral—and findings range from “no impact” to “significant impact.”

Effects, if they exist, are mediated by a variety of variables that lie with the ad's sponsor, its design, and its content (formal properties, visual design, text, theme, tone, etc.) as well as with the characteristics of the individual viewer. In addition, the findings of these numerous studies cannot be easily summarized or compared because they chose different methodological approaches and often referred to small samples and regionally specific situations.

As election campaigners hope, persuasion, according to Coppock, Hill, and Vavreck (2020, p. 1) "is presumed to be conditional on who says what to whom and when, and getting this recipe right is thought to be critical for changing minds." This assessment confirms the difficulty of identifying implications or success for election campaigners from the many studies conducted on election advertising in the US. It also reflects that research is continually in search of influencing variables and also seems strongly attached to the traditional S-O-R model.

Since the US is, in addition, an exceptional case with regard to election advertising, the findings of U.S. research can hardly be transferred to European countries. Election advertising is too closely linked to the political system, the media system, and the way election campaigns are conducted in the United States. It is not only the legal regulations that affect the employment of audiovisual election advertising in Europe but also the differences in (political) culture that are expressed in advertising. Just like commercial advertising, election advertising is shaped by the (political) culture of a country, which is expressed, not least, in the visuals: "In order to generate attention, advertisers must try to couple the advertising messages with such ideas, beliefs, values and cultural patterns [...] or with such socio-cultural developments [...] that they assume will be accepted or even desired by their clients and the target audience and in any case connotated with positive emotions" (Schmidt, 2002, pp. 103–104, translated by the author). Advertising is, therefore, always culturally bound, and this results in differences that make it difficult to generalize findings from US research to European countries, for example. To be able to assess the effects of election advertising in Europe, considerably more research would be needed.

Is political advertising good or bad? Research does not allow an answer to this question because of the heterogeneity of the findings and methodological uncertainties. The fact that campaigns invest heavily in advertising suggests that they expect to benefit from it in the political competition. But which scientific results they rely on when they spend millions and millions of dollars on election advertising remains their secret. There are numerous concerns and fears about the effects of election advertising on

voters and on those not yet eligible to vote; whether they are justified cannot be answered unequivocally. We know a lot—but still not enough.

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