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Political Advertising in 2016: The Presidential Election as Outlier?

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Abstract: The 2016 presidential campaign broke the mold when it comes to patterns of political advertising. Using data from the Wesleyan Media Project, we show the race featured far less advertising than the previous cycle, a huge imbalance in the number of ads across candidates and one candidate who almost ignored discussions of policy. This departure from past patterns, however, was not replicated at the congressional level. We draw some lessons about advertising from the 2016 campaign, suggesting that its seeming lack of effectiveness may owe to the unusual nature of the presidential campaign with one unconventional candidate and the other using an unconventional message strategy, among other non-advertising related factors.

Introduction

The 2016 presidential election campaign was unusual in many respects, and that includes its use of political advertising. In contrast to prior cycles in which the balance of ads aired on behalf of the Republican and Democratic nominees was about even, Hillary Clinton's campaign (alone and with her allies) spent vastly more on campaign advertising than did Donald Trump's. And yet Trump won the election. Moreover, despite being ahead in the polls for much of the campaign, Clinton never saw movement in the polls that one might expect with such imbalances in campaign expenditures.

One might draw the inference, then, that advertising no longer matters in elections, an inference made believable in a "post-truth" media environment where a tweet can dominate a news cycle. We urge caution, however, in drawing that conclusion too quickly. As we will demonstrate (1) Clinton's unexpected losses came in states in which she failed to air ads until the last week and (2)

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Clinton's message was devoid of discussions of policy in a way not seen in the previous four presidential contests.

There are three early lessons that one might draw from an analysis of political advertising in 2016. First, the impact of advertising may depend on the larger media environment and knowledge of the candidates. It is much more difficult for advertising to have an impact in a media environment that is saturated with sensational media coverage of the campaign – and of two already well-known candidates – but that does not mean that all advertising fails to work. Second, the message matters. A message that is repeated endlessly does no good unless it resonates with a sufficient number of the right voters. Team Clinton's message that Trump was unfit for the office of presidency may not have been enough. Third, what happens at the presidential level does not always follow down ballot. We will show that the pattern and distribution of political ads in lower ballot races did not differ in dramatic ways from previous cycles, and it is likely that ad effects in those races were similar in size and scope to what the literature has previously uncovered. Notwithstanding the above, however, change may be afoot in how political advertising reaches voters, and the 2016 presidential race may be the harbinger of dramatic change to come in political advertising.¹

The Big Picture

An estimated \$2.83 billion was spent on election-related political advertising on broadcast television and national cable in the 2015–2016 cycle, which rep-

¹ We obtain most of our data on advertising during the 2016 campaigns from the Wesleyan Media Project (WMP), which is a collaboration of researchers at Wesleyan University, Bowdoin College, and Washington State University. The project, which started tracking political advertising 2010, is a successor to the Wisconsin Advertising Project, which tracked political advertising back to 1998. WMP data come from a commercial firm, Kantar Media/CMAG, which tracks the placement of ads on broadcast television in all 210 media markets in the United States. From these data, we can know the station on which each ad aired, the time it aired, its length, and an estimate of its cost. WMP staff then analyzes video of each unique ad, coding it on over 50 different characteristics, including the tone of the ad, whether it is primarily about policy or candidate characteristics and the specific issues mentioned. Intercoder reliability checks on coding found 97 percent agreement between independent assessments of tone for a Kappa score of 0.95 and 83 percent agreement between independent assessments of the personal/policy variable for a Kappa score of 0.76. Because Kantar/CMAG data do not provide information on local cable advertising, we supplement these data with information obtained from NCC Media, which both sells and tracks advertising on local cable television across the US.

Table 1: Volume and Cost of Ads in 2015–2016 Election Cycle.*

| | Ads Aired | Estimated Cost |
|-----------|-----------|----------------|
| President | 1,030,069 | \$845M |
| House | 621,556 | \$335M |
| Senate | 926,426 | \$655M |
| Governor | 463,683 | \$170M |
| Other | 1,251,051 | \$829M |
| Total | 4,292,785 | \$2.8B |

Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

*Ads that focus on public policy issues but do not mention or picture a candidate for office are excluded from the totals.

resents about 4.29 million ad airings (Table 1). Just over 1 million ads aired in the presidential race – including the nomination races – at an estimated cost of \$845 million. In Senate contests, over 926,000 ads aired on broadcast television at an estimated cost of \$655 million, while 621,000 ads aired in races for the US House at an estimated cost of \$335 million. Over 1.25 million ads aired in down-ballot races, in contests from state attorney general and state representative to mayor and county coroner.

To put the over 4 million airings in context, if every one of these ads aired back-to-back, they would be broadcast for nearly 1500 straight days without stop. And ad spending in federal races, at an estimated cost of over \$1.8 billion, accounts for 27 percent of the reported \$7 billion spent on federal campaigns in the 2015–2016 election cycle, according to estimates from the Center for Responsive Politics.²

The sponsorship of political ads in 2016 varied considerably by office, as Table 2 shows. Candidates sponsored about 71 percent of ads aired in the presidential race, with outside groups sponsoring almost all of the remaining spots.³ Interestingly, the political parties were largely absent from the presidential race (as we discuss in more detail below). Advertising was more varied in the races for US Senate, with candidates sponsoring the largest chunk of ads but groups sponsoring a considerable share: 38 percent. It is estimated, in fact, that

2 Total election cost obtained from the Center for Responsive Politics: <https://www.opensecrets.org/overview/cost.php> (Accessed on 19 Dec. 2016).

3 We use the terms interest group and outside group interchangeably, and both in this context refer to ad sponsors that are not traditional party committees, candidates, or private citizens. This includes group who identify as traditional PACs, super PACs, 527 organizations, 501c non-profit groups, business associations, and labor unions.

Table 2: Volume of Ads by Race and Sponsor (Full Cycle).

| | President | | Senate | | House | |
|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | Ads Aired | Est. Cost | Ads Aired | Est. Cost | Ads Aired | Est. Cost |
| Cands | 736,104 | \$472M | 454,492 | \$250M | 379,022 | \$181M |
| Cand/Coor. | 5874 | \$10M | 35,450 | \$14M | 38,322 | \$20M |
| Int. Group | 288,065 | \$363M | 351,895 | \$358M | 93,099 | \$74M |
| Party | 0 | \$0 | 84,589 | \$33M | 111,113 | \$60M |
| Citizens | 26 | \$0 | 0 | \$0 | 0 | \$0 |
| | 1,030,069 | \$845M | 926,426 | \$655M | 621,556 | \$335M |

Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

groups, in spite of airing fewer ads, spent more on ads than candidates did in Senate races. This cost discrepancy (the average cost per ad for Senate candidates was estimated to be \$549 compared to over \$1000 for groups) is likely because groups are not entitled to the lowest unit rate from television stations, meaning they pay whatever the market will bear for premium space in competitive races (Fowler, Franz, and Ridout, 2016, pp. 29–33). Candidates dominated advertising in House races, sponsoring 61 percent of ads. Parties were more relevant in House races, though, sponsoring 18 percent of House ads versus only 9 percent of Senate ads, and parties aired more ads than outside groups in House campaigns.

Previous work on ad trends has noted the decline of party spending in Senate races. Fowler, Franz, and Ridout (2016, pp. 47–48) show that the party share of Senate ads declined from over 20 percent of ads aired in 2000, 2002, and 2008 to about 10 percent of ads aired since 2010. Party spending in Senate races in 2016 was at its lowest share in the time series of data from the Wisconsin and Wesleyan projects. This is particularly noteworthy given the intense focus this cycle on the possibility of a partisan flip in control of the chamber. As we will discuss below, the relative balance of power between political parties and outside groups has shifted to advantage groups, many of whom in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s 2010 decision in *Citizens United v. FEC* are no longer beholden to limits or bans on the raising and spending of large donations for uncoordinated pro-candidate advocacy.

Also notable, advertising volumes in the presidential election of 2016 were down considerably from 2012. Figure 1 shows the volume of ads aired in the top 75 media markets in the presidential races between 2000 and 2016. We limit comparisons to the top 75 media markets because only these markets were available

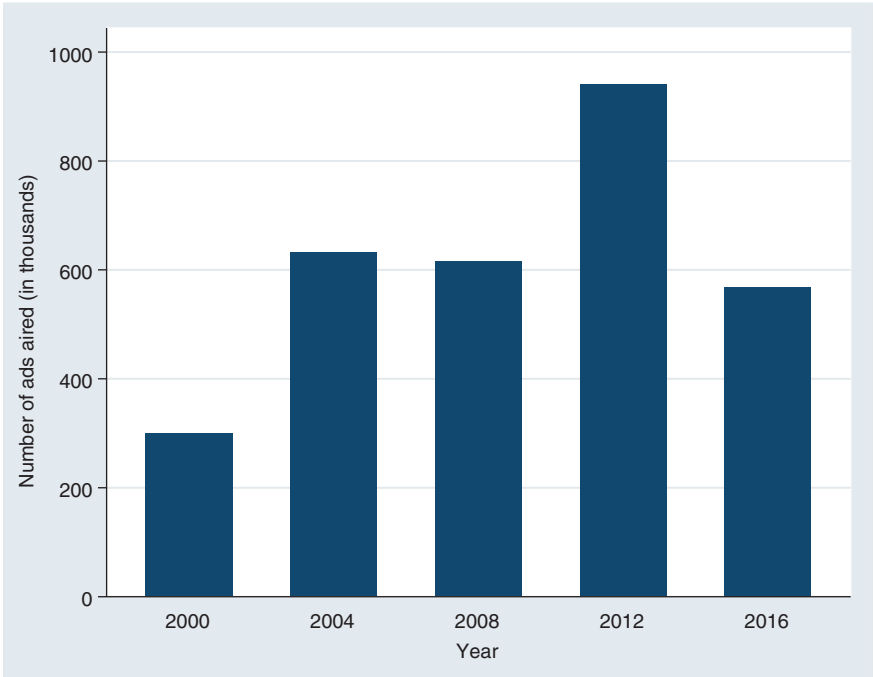


Figure 1: Volume of Ads in Presidential Race (Top 75 Media Markets, January 1–Election Day). Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

in the earlier years.⁴ Ad volumes in 2016 were down by over 300,000 airings from the previous cycle, though levels are comparable to 2004 and 2008. These declines are apparent despite both parties having competitive and long presidential primary campaigns, whereas 2012 featured only one party with a contested nomination race.

In contrast, large declines in the volume of advertising in Senate and House races are not evident. Figure 2 shows the volume of broadcast advertising in US Senate races (left) and US House races (right) in each election cycle from 2008. Although the number of ads in 2016 was down slightly from 2014 to 2012, it remained above 2010 levels (the last cycle featuring races in the same states) and well above 2008 levels. In the House, broadcast television ads were up slightly from 2014 to just over 600,000 but down a bit from 2010 to 2012. These figures include all broadcast ads aired in the 210 media markets across the country, but

⁴ The Wisconsin and Wesleyan archives have ad data for the top 75 media markets in 2000, the top 100 markets in 2002–2006 and all 210 markets since 2008.

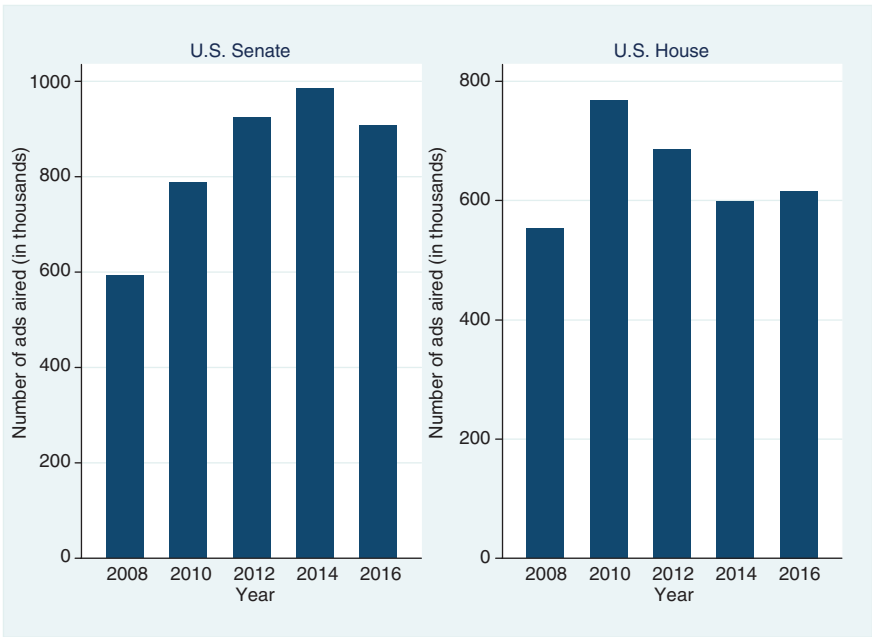


Figure 2: Volume of Congressional Ads by Year (January 1–Election Day).
Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

even a comparison back to 2000 in the top 75 media markets shows only slight declines in congressional ads in 2016 in comparison to previous years.

Indeed, comparing volumes in House races across cycles needs to account for the number of competitive races. There were 43 House races in 2010 rated by *Congressional Quarterly* as “too-close-to-call.”⁵ This was the highest number in many decades (though 1994 was close with 40 such contests). The year 2012 featured 33 toss-ups, in comparison to 20 in 2014 and 19 in 2016. As competitiveness is the primary driver of election spending, it is no surprise that 2010 featured the most political ads. As such, there is very little evidence in these totals of a decline in the emphasis placed by House and Senate candidates on traditional broadcast ad buys.

⁵ Various news outlets rank the competitiveness of congressional elections. *CQ Weekly* has done so consistently since the early 1970s, usually in an October special issue before the election. The publication most often ranks races as safe, favoring one party, leaning to one party, or too-close-to-call. For the past few cycles, CQ has linked to election rankings of the Rothenberg & Gonzalez Political Report (<http://rothenberggonzales.com/>).

Digging into the Presidential Race

There is much to consider in the presidential air war of 2016. In this section, we examine three highlights: (1) ad volumes from top sponsors, and in particular the efforts of the Clinton campaign in key states; (2) the increasing importance of local cable buys as a complement to traditional broadcast airings; and (3) the tone and focus of presidential ads in comparison to previous elections.

The top advertiser in the 2016 presidential race, including the primaries and general election, was the Clinton campaign, which aired over 400,000 ads on broadcast television at an estimated cost of \$258 million (Table 3). In terms of ad count, the Sanders campaign – in spite of not airing any ads in the general election – came in second overall, airing more ads in the cycle than Donald Trump’s campaign. In fact, the Democratic presidential primary looked much similar to typical advertising campaigns, where rivals mutually rely on traditional local broadcast advertisements. As of May 8, for instance, the Sanders campaign had spent an estimated \$73 million, and the Clinton campaign had spent approximately \$62 million on ads on broadcast television. In comparison, only an estimated \$2.3 million had been spent by outside groups in the Democratic contest.

Clinton’s huge ad advantage in the general election is evident in Table 4, which shows the number of broadcast ads and estimated spending on ads by each of the top ad sponsors during the period between September 5 and Election Day.

Table 3: Top Advertisers in Presidential Race in 2015–2016 Election Cycle.

| | Ads Aired | Est. Cost | Supportive of... |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------------|
| Clinton, Hillary | 402,344 | \$257.6M | |
| Sanders, Bernie | 128,494 | 75.9M | |
| Trump, Donald | 120,908 | 91.2M | |
| Priorities USA Action | 87,478 | 81.1M | Clinton |
| Right To Rise USA | 35,558 | 62.2M | Bush |
| Cruz, Ted | 30,262 | 16.8M | |
| Conservative Solutions PAC | 30,169 | 50.9M | Rubio |
| Rubio, Marco | 24,076 | 14.2M | |
| Rebuilding America Now PAC | 12,214 | 10.8M | Trump |
| Carson, Ben | 12,119 | 4.3M | |
| NextGen California Action Cmte. | 11,373 | 11.9M | Clinton |
| Stand For Truth, Inc | 10,330 | 9.2M | Cruz |
| NRA Institute For Leg. Action | 9638 | 11.1M | Trump |
| Kasich, John | 8297 | 3.5M | |
| Our Principles PAC | 7000 | 8.4M | Anti-Trump |

Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

Table 4: Top Advertisers in Fall 2016 (September 5–Election Day).

| | Ads Aired | Cost | Supportive of ... |
|--------------------------------|-----------|----------|-------------------|
| Clinton, Hillary | 198,689 | \$119.9M | |
| Trump, Donald | 76,068 | 66.3M | |
| Priorities USA Action | 48,926 | 44.3M | Clinton |
| NRA Institute For Leg. Action | 9638 | 11.1M | Trump |
| NextGen California Action Comm | 8332 | 9.5M | Clinton |
| 45committee | 5241 | 3.7M | Trump |
| Rebuilding America Now PAC | 4460 | 3.1M | Trump |
| Future45 | 4120 | 9.9M | Trump |
| Trump, Donald & RNC | 3394 | 6.9M | |
| Clinton, Hillary & DNC | 2480 | 2.9M | |
| Reform America Fund | 2371 | 1.8M | Trump |
| Leading Illinois For Tomorrow | 1791 | 8M | Anti-Trump |
| Johnson, Gary | 1544 | 0.5M | |
| Great America PAC | 1526 | 1.3M | Trump |
| SEIU COPE | 1504 | 2.2M | Clinton |
| El Super Pac Voto Latino | 1308 | 2.0M | Clinton |

Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

The Clinton campaign aired just under 200,000 ads at an estimated cost of just under \$120 million during the last 9 weeks of the campaign, dwarfing the Trump campaign's 76,000 ads at a cost of \$66 million. Clinton's advantage becomes even more stark when one adds in the almost 50,000 spots aired by Priorities USA Action, a pro-Clinton super PAC. There was some outside group spending on behalf of Trump, including the NRA Institute for Legislative Action, which aired about 10,000 ads on broadcast during the general election period, and the Future 45 super PAC and its 501c affiliate, the 45 Committee.

Clinton's advantage on broadcast television was considerable, though it did not extend to all media markets in the country. Figure 3 depicts in blue those media markets in which pro-Clinton ads outnumbered pro-Trump ads between June 8 and Election Day. In red are those media markets in which pro-Trump ads outnumbered pro-Clinton ads. Darker shades indicate a greater ad advantage. The only areas in which Trump held an ad advantage were in Utah, Hawaii, a few small markets in Ohio, northern Virginia and – most importantly – Wisconsin, a state that Trump ended up winning by fewer than 25,000 votes.

However, these totals from June 8 to Election Day (both in total ads and across media markets) mask important variation over time. For example, although Michigan is colored blue in the map, Clinton's advantage came only in the last week of the campaign. Figure 4 therefore shows the number of pro-Trump and

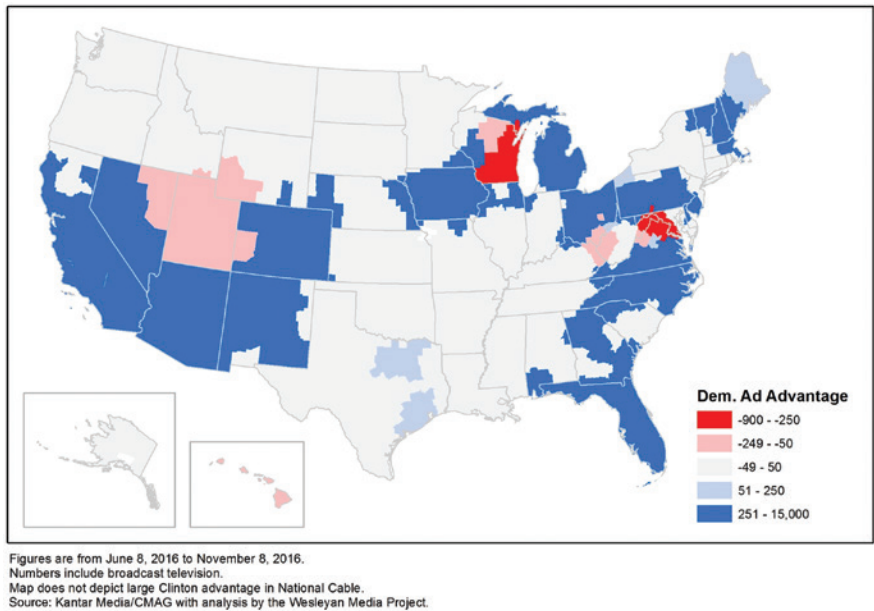


Figure 3: Ad Advantages by Media Market (Presidential General).

pro-Clinton ads aired on broadcast television during each week, both overall (top left panel) and in three key states. Across all media markets, Clinton held an ad advantage in each week of the fall campaign. That ad advantage even grew in the final few weeks of the race when Trump’s advertising finally ramped up.

In Wisconsin, however, Trump and his allies (primarily three groups – Reform America Fund, 45 Committee, and Rebuilding America Now PAC) started advertising in the state in mid-September and continued to advertise, albeit at fairly low but consistent volumes, until Election Day. Indeed, Trump was on the local broadcast airwaves unchallenged by Clinton forces⁶ until the last minute, when she barraged the state with over 4000 ads in the final week of the campaign.

Michigan, a state that Trump won by a mere 12,000 votes, was not really on either campaign’s radar until November 1 when Clinton and Priorities USA Action went on the air aggressively. Still, Trump aired about 1500 ads in the first week of September and Right to Life of Michigan had a small ad buy in the final week of October, meaning pro-Trump ads were the only ads on local broadcast

⁶ The Clinton campaign did hold advantages in national cable (which air across the country) and on local cable in Wisconsin (and Michigan), which will be discussed in more depth below, but these airings are hard to compare to local broadcast, which reaches larger audiences.

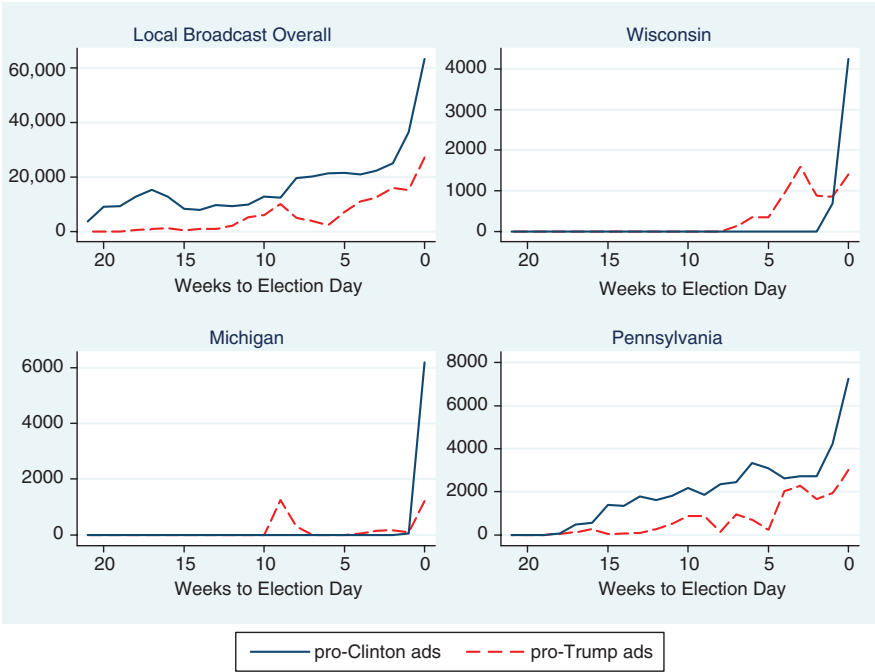


Figure 4: Ads by Week (All Markets, Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania).
Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

stations until the last week of the campaign, when Clinton overwhelmed the GOP camp.

The other state whose outcome surprised many prognosticators on Election Day was Pennsylvania, which Trump won by about 70,000 votes. Judging by the amount of advertising in the state in the fall, both campaigns must have deemed the state close. In each week, Clinton held an ad advantage, although the advantage tightened considerably in early October but mirroring the national trend, increased again during the final few weeks of the campaign.

Indeed, Clinton clearly mobilized aggressively in the final weeks, both nationally and in these three states. Some political science research would suggest that this was a smart strategy, as political ad effects are assumed to be short-lived. In particular, research estimates that for most races, advertising effects decay quickly, generally lasting only days (Gerber et al. 2011), though in presidential races advertising effects may persist for up to 6 weeks (Hill et al. 2013). Perhaps the Clinton campaign and its allies assumed, given this, that late ad buys would score the maximal effect.

However, research on the question of ad decay is not settled, mostly because of a dearth of studies that test the robustness of the claim. Moreover, it seems

reasonable to argue that such decay may be conditional on many factors [see especially the argument in Bartels (2014) on active processing], including pre-existing opinions of the candidates. Because both Clinton and Trump suffered from record-high levels of disapproval among voters, a more sustained advertising campaign may have been necessary to move pre-existing sentiment. Of course, it is also possible that because both candidates were so well known among the electorate no amount of advertising, even great imbalances of ads from one side, would have the ability to influence vote choice.⁷ If true, then the 2016 presidential contest would truly be *sui generis*. (And of course none of this counts out external influences such as the Comey letter.)

A second factor in the Clinton-Trump contest is also important to consider. Much research on televised political ads uses data from the Wisconsin and Wesleyan archives of broadcast ad buys. But scholars and political operatives know that the media environment is changing, and candidates are increasingly turning to places like local cable to buy ads on shows with more homogeneous sets of viewers. Local cable refers to ads purchased in a media market but on channels other than the major local NBC, CBS, ABC, and Fox affiliates. This would include HGTV in Manchester, New Hampshire, and ESPN in Louisville, Kentucky. In addition to niche channels, local cable can also be purchased for zone areas within media markets, enabling even more targeted advertising than is possible through local broadcast buys, which reach the entire media market. Because the audiences of these cable networks are not as diverse as the broadcast stations and the purchasing can be designated for sub-regions of the media market, buying time on local cable allows candidates to reach a more desirable and niche audience.

One possibility is that the decline in broadcast ads noted above was replaced by a spike in local cable ads. We obtained market-level local cable buys from NCC Media, which tracks that venue. Drawing conclusions based on volume comparisons across broadcast and local cable can be difficult because the size of the audience watching ads on local cable shows can be very small, and the expanse of cable channels allows for more overall “real estate” on

⁷ We do not have tests of ad effects here, but the puzzle of Clinton’s loss is more apparent when one considers late deciders. Initial work suggests the balance of these voters broke for Trump. See, for example, “Voters Really Did Switch to Trump at the Last Minute,” <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/voters-really-did-switch-to-trump-at-the-last-minute/> (Accessed 20 Dec. 2016). That these late deciders did so at the same moment Clinton was on the air is worth additional analysis. For example, it is possible that the content of Clinton’s ads were particularly ineffective (if not producing a backlash against her). We discuss the tone and substance of Clinton’s ads below.

which to buy space. Moreover, the cost to purchase an ad on local cable is typically much cheaper than on broadcast. For example, despite the volume differences shown in Figure 5 described below, NCC Media estimates that local cable received roughly 21 percent of all candidate dollars devoted to television advertising. However, we can make some comparisons across cycles that are instructive.

Although we do not have figures on all ad sponsors, we can show ad volume for Clinton and Trump in 2016 and for Obama and Romney in 2012. These are displayed in Figure 5. Local broadcast and cable totals in the figure cover the period from early June in each year through Election Day. These totals include only candidate-sponsored ads; party and coordinated buys are excluded. For the Democrats, note the differences across elections in each panel. Clinton purchased fewer ads than Obama on local broadcast (this is part of the volume declines noted above) but more advertising on local cable. Indeed, Clinton aired almost 150,000 more spots than Obama on local cable. On the Republican side, Trump aired far fewer ads on local broadcast than did Romney, and he aired just

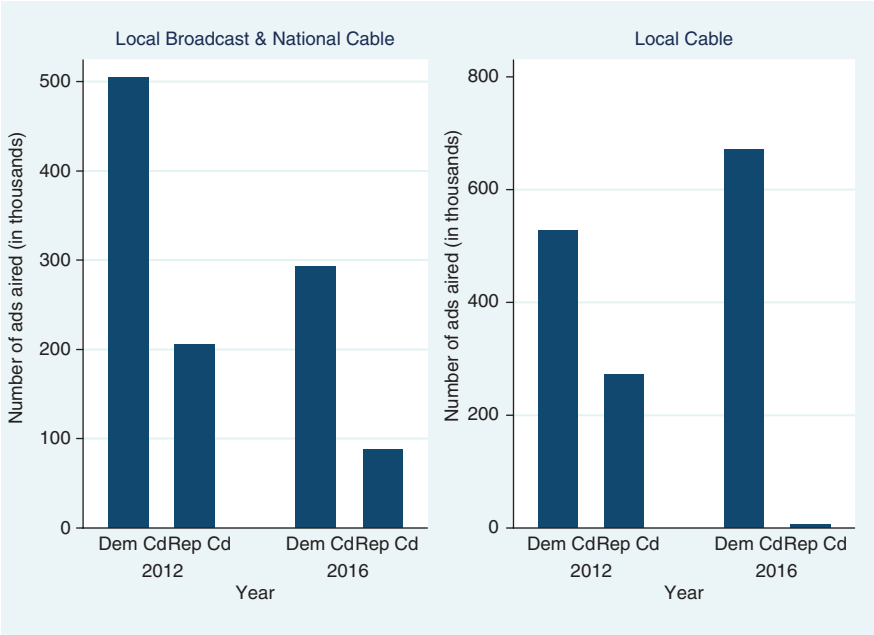


Figure 5: Volume of Candidate-Sponsored Presidential Ads on Broadcast (left) and Local Cable (right).

Source: Kantar Media/CMAG and NCC Media with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

a handful of local cable spots, further widening the discrepancies on air.⁸ Both the broadcast and local cable totals tell a truly unparalleled story of imbalances in political ads.

The literature is silent on the effects of local cable ads on measures of and changes in candidate favorability or reported vote choice, but the evidence on micro-targeting (of which this is a blunt example) suggests the strategy may be effective (Hillygus and Shields 2007). Of course, for targeting to be effective, key assumptions about the voter population must be correct, and in this atypical year, it is possible that the assumptions were faulty. It does seem clear that the Clinton campaign relied heavily on targeted strategies, especially in some key states, such as Wisconsin and Michigan, where her campaign aired local cable advertising rather than broader appeals on local broadcast. Here too the outcome of the election belies a clear inference that such efforts worked.

Given this, it is important to consider the content of each candidate's ads. We know from prior work that ad imbalances are strongly correlated with changes in vote share, but we also know that the content of ads can condition those effects (Ridout and Franz 2007). Consider first simple measures of ad tone. For all of the vitriol in the 2016 presidential election (in rallies, the debates, on cable news programs), the tone of political advertising was actually less negative than it was in 2012. The Wesleyan Media Project (consistent with the Wisconsin Advertising Project before it) classifies negative ads as those that solely mention an opponent, positive ads as those solely mentioning the sponsor, and contrast ads as those mentioning both. As shown in Figure 6, which compares the 2016 campaign to the previous four cycles, 2016 was less negative than 2012 as measured both by the proportion of pure attack ads and the proportion of positive advertising on the air. The 2016 election did, however, earn the distinction of the second most negative in the last decade and a half.

The candidates took different strategies when it came to the tone of their advertising, though, as Figure 7 shows. Nearly half of all Clinton campaign airings were negative whereas over half of Trump campaign airings were contrast spots, which discussed Clinton negatively but also provided information about Trump. Similar to prior cycles, the party and outside groups were attack dogs; their airings on behalf of both candidates were much more negative than the candidate-sponsored advertising.

⁸ We also have from NCC Media local cable totals for some groups. The top ad sponsor was Priorities USA, with 275,000 spots. Pro-Trump groups mustered 121,000 spots across markets, repeating the massive ad imbalance across parties demonstrated above for broadcast buys. In total, about 40 percent of the ads aired on local cable in the presidential race were from outside groups.

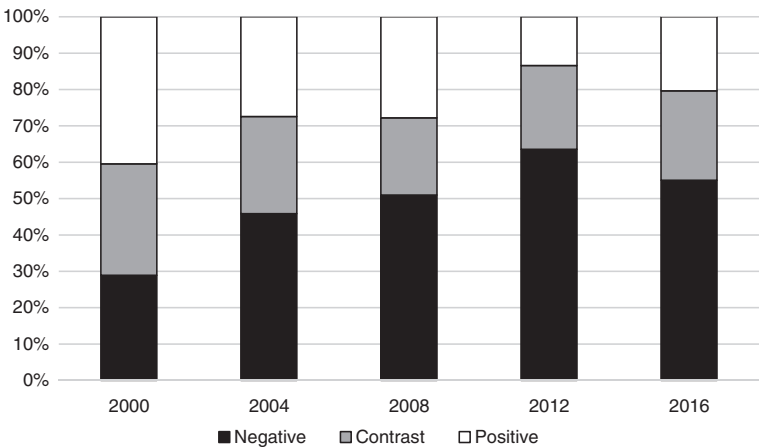


Figure 6: Tone of 2016 General Election Presidential Advertising (June 8–Election Day).
Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

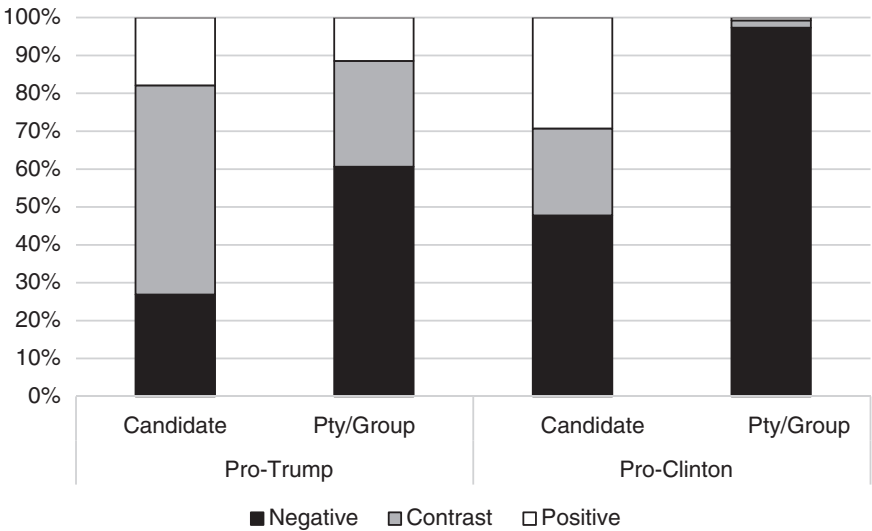


Figure 7: Tone of 2016 General Election Presidential Advertising by Sponsor (June 8–Election Day).
Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

The advertising tone breakdown alone, however, hides an important difference in strategy that made 2016 advertising very unusual. Namely, the majority of the Clinton campaign’s negative advertising attacked Trump’s characteristics and

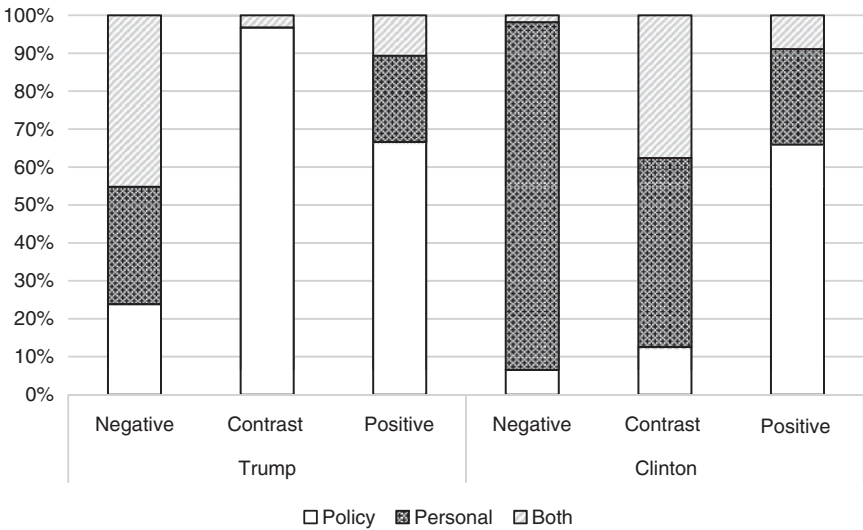


Figure 8: Tone and Substance of 2016 Presidential Candidate Advertising (June 8–Election Day). Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

personality. In other words, the attack ads were personal-focused as opposed to policy-focused (Figure 8). Fewer than 10 percent of ads attacking Trump focused on his policies whereas about 90 percent was focused on Trump as an individual. Clinton’s contrast ads were similarly devoid of policy discussion. By and large, it was only in ads promoting Clinton that the campaign actually discussed policy, and those ads comprised only 30 percent of her overall mix on air. Clearly, the Clinton campaign’s strategy was to disqualify Trump based on his temperament, not on his policy positions, in ads like “Role Models” and “Mirrors” featuring Trump’s voice and children and/or young girls listening. By contrast, about 70 percent of ads from Trump and his allies that attacked Clinton contained at least some discussion of policy, and when there were contrasts drawn between the two candidates, those contrasts were almost all policy-based such as the “Two Americas” ads, which explicitly compared how Hillary Clinton’s America would differ from Donald Trump’s America.

In total, over 60 percent of ads supporting Clinton were solely about candidate characteristics, while only about 25 percent were focused on policy. This is a huge difference from Trump’s advertising, over 70 percent of which was focused on policy, and it is a huge difference from every other presidential campaign for which we have comparable data (Figure 9). In a typical campaign, ads that focus on candidate character have comprised less than 20 percent of total ad airings,

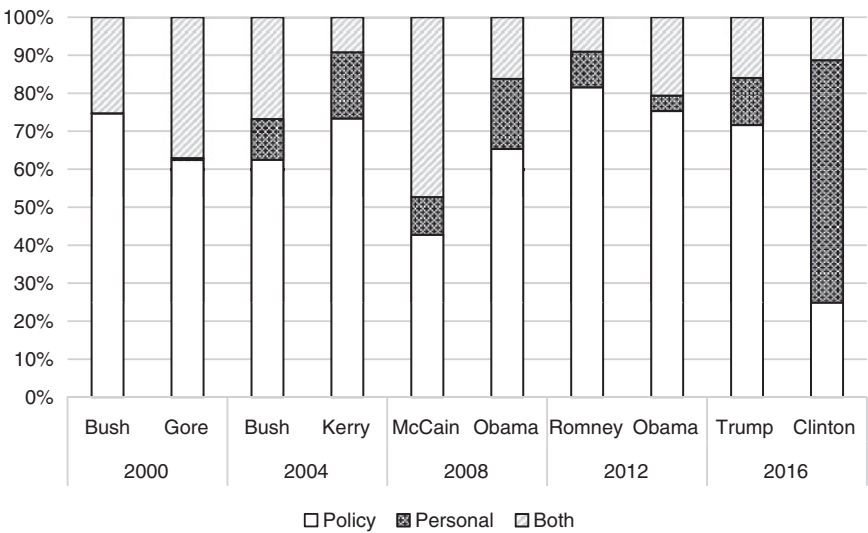


Figure 9: Substance of Presidential Advertising over Time (June 8–Election Day).
Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

and in some years like 2000, there were hardly any ads that focused on the candidates’ character.

For all of the talk of the unusual advertising campaign that Trump ran in 2016, his message strategy was more traditionally policy-focused. Ironically, it was the Clinton campaign that deviated sharply from the conventional playbook when it came to messaging despite following conventional norms in terms of volume, placement and targeting of ads. Indeed, only one in four Clinton campaign ads focused on policy, which is by far the lowest percentage we have seen since data from Kantar Media/CMAG have been available. How exactly this message strategy may have played into voting decisions will be discussed at more length in the conclusion.

Outside Group Efforts

Outside groups (non-candidate, non-party organization) continued to be an important sponsor of political advertising in 2016. In the wake of the Supreme Court’s shift to a more deregulatory perspective on campaign finance, begun in earnest with *Citizens United v. FEC*, outside group spending has jumped considerably. In 2016, outside groups accounted for about 28 percent of all ads aired in federal races, as Figure 10 shows. This percentage is very similar to 2012 and 2014

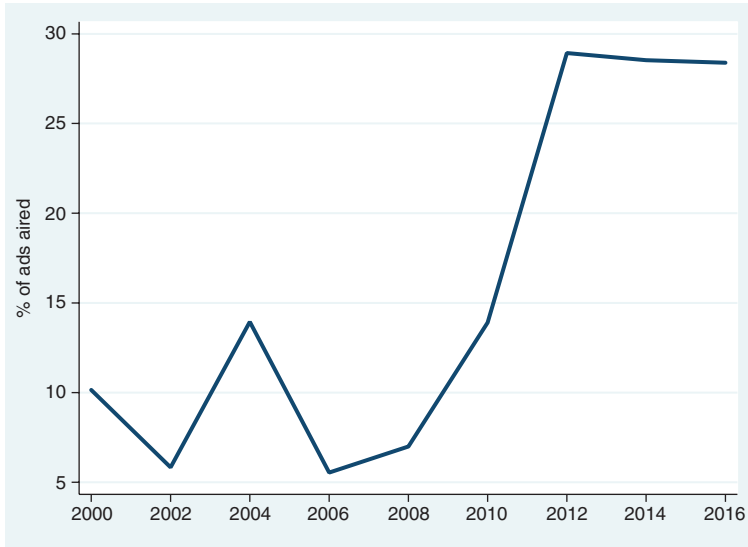


Figure 10: Percentage of All Ads in Federal Races Sponsored by Groups.
Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

but is a large increase over the previous six election cycles, none of which saw more than 15 percent of advertising come from groups.

Of course, the extent to which groups were involved varied considerably across races. Figure 11 shows the percentage of ads aired after September 4 that was sponsored by outside groups in the presidential race and in the most-advertised House and Senate races. During that time period, groups (including super PACs, 527s and 501cs) sponsored about a quarter of all ads in the presidential race. But group sponsorship ranged from under 10 percent in some House races to just about 50 percent in California’s 21st congressional district. Groups also paid for just about half of all ads in the Senate races in Nevada and Pennsylvania – and over 40 percent in New Hampshire, Missouri and Florida.⁹

⁹ There are many types of outside groups that now sponsor ads in federal elections. Of particular interest to many are the presence of mandates for some groups to disclose their donors to either the IRS (for 527s) or Federal Election Commission (for PACs and super PACs). 501c4 non-profit groups do not have to disclose publicly their donors; as such they are often referred to as “dark money” groups. Previous work has demonstrated that dark money is more prevalent early in election cycles and that ads aired closer to elections are more likely to be from full disclosure groups. See “Outside Group Activity, 2000–2016,” Special Report from Wesleyan Media Project, August 24, 2016: <http://mediaproject.wesleyan.edu/releases/disclosure-report/>.

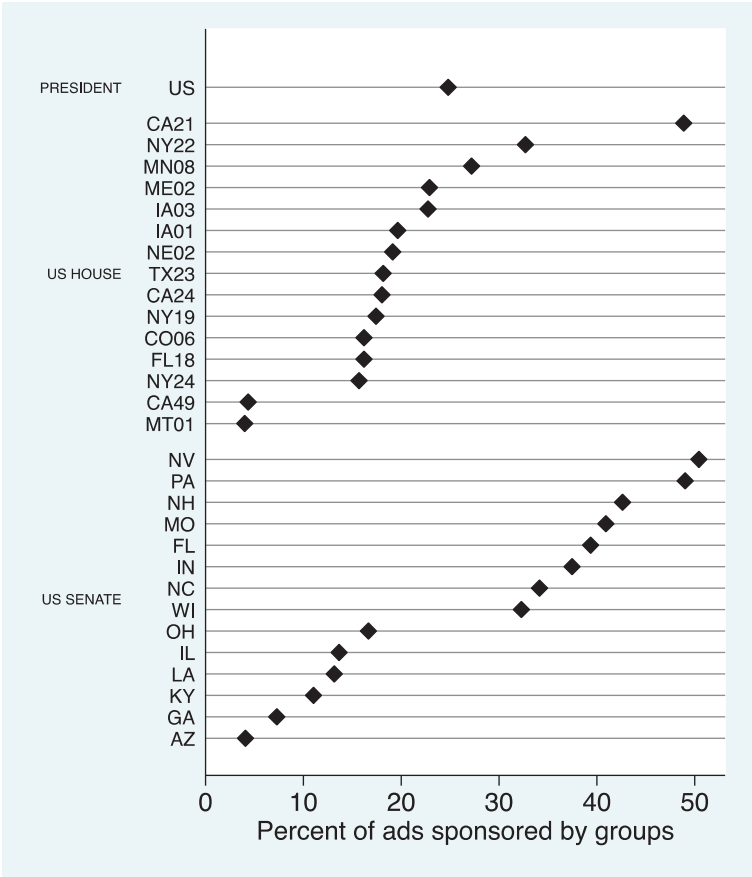


Figure 11: Percentage of Group-sponsored Ads by Race in 2016 (September 5–Election Day). Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project. Only races with at least 10,000 ads are shown.

The increased involvement of groups in electoral politics, especially since 2010, has coincided with a decline in ad sponsorship by parties. We noted this earlier with respect to Senate elections, and we show the trend for presidential elections in Figure 12. In 2000, over half of the ads that aired in the presidential race were sponsored by political parties. These were primarily “soft money” ads where parties used unregulated accounts for spots they claimed were “issue advocacy” or “party building,” despite the ads’ containing mostly promotional or attack appeals for or against the party nominees. The Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act of 2002 forced parties to raise and spend only regulated

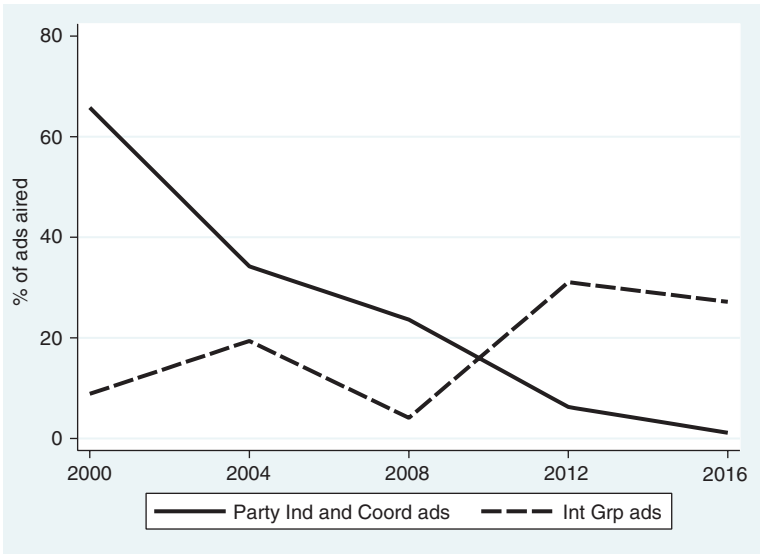


Figure 12: Proportion of Group and Party Airings in Presidential General Elections. Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

“hard money.” Concurrently, outside groups benefited from the deregulatory perspective of the Supreme Court, noted earlier. Moreover, Barack Obama in 2008, followed by all of the major party nominees in 2012 and 2016, opted out of general election public funding, allowing them to raise hundreds of millions of dollars outside of the party. As such, the percentage of party ads has steadily fallen each election cycle, bottoming out in 2016.

Looking Down-ballot

While advertising in the presidential race in 2016 did not follow traditional patterns, advertising in Senate and House races generally did. For one, advertising was concentrated in the states with the most competitive races. Table 5 shows that the Senate races with the most ads were in Pennsylvania, Indiana, Ohio, North Carolina and Missouri – all races that were ranked as highly competitive at some point in 2016. There is no evidence of any major candidate disengaging from political ads or being outspent in the same manner as Donald Trump.

Second, the political parties continued to be comparatively more involved in these races than in the presidential, though with considerably fewer ads than

Table 5: Top Senate Races by Ad Totals (General Election).

| | Dem Cand | Dem Party | Dem Groups | GOP Cand | GOP Party | GOP Group | Total | Est. Cost |
|----|-------------|--------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|---------|-----------|
| PA | 16,543 | 10,440 | 33,892 | 13,039 | 3045 | 29,907 | 106,866 | \$85M |
| IN | 26,198 | 13,995 | 10,366 | 9,108 | 9190 | 17,786 | 86,643 | 39M |
| OH | 5060 | 541 | 17,772 | 18,704 | 2264 | 30,927 | 75,268 | 53M |
| NC | 14,596 | 16,054 | 12,667 | 9798 | 4543 | 11,419 | 69,077 | 32M |
| MO | 8800 | 13,794 | 11,899 | 14,115 | 5290 | 14,144 | 68,042 | 36M |
| NV | 11,692 | 8037 | 17,596 | 5722 | 6090 | 18,847 | 67,984 | 42M |
| WI | 26,548 | 2434 | 7908 | 10,648 | 1560 | 12,644 | 61,742 | 27M |
| FL | 11,197 | 208 | 4478 | 15,198 | 4547 | 17,170 | 52,798 | 39M |
| NH | 5284 | 8258 | 12,062 | 6493 | 1330 | 11,217 | 44,644 | 86M |
| LA | 4222 | 0 | 38 | 15,288 | 0 | 3179 | 22,727 | 11M |

Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

outside groups. All told, the parties sponsored 10.6 percent of general election ads in US Senate races, and another 4.3 percent of ads were paid for with party coordinated spending (Table 6). Groups sponsored almost 40 percent of ads aired in the general election (and 30 percent in primary races), while candidates paid for almost 46 percent of the spots. The candidate share of ad airings was much higher in primary races, where candidates paid for two in three ads.

The tone of Senate advertising was also quite similar to recent years, with just over 50 percent of ads being negative ads (Figure 13). Although this percentage is higher than for any year for which we have data (now nine election cycles), it is very similar to the level of negativity in every election cycle since 2008, a year in which negativity spiked somewhat.

For contests in the US House of Representatives, shown in in Table 7, we see that the top race was that for Maine’s 2nd congressional district, a race that most pundits labeled a pure tossup. The race drew almost 27,000 general election ads at an estimated cost of \$8.2 million. Montana’s at-large congressional race and

Table 6: Sponsorship of Senate Ads.

| | All | | General | | Primary | |
|-------------|---------|-------|---------|-------|---------|-------|
| Candidate | 454,492 | 49.1% | 354,778 | 45.6% | 99,714 | 67.0% |
| Coordinated | 35,450 | 3.8% | 33,291 | 4.3% | 2159 | 1.5% |
| Group | 351,895 | 38.0% | 307,114 | 39.5% | 44,781 | 30.1% |
| Party | 84,589 | 9.1% | 82,506 | 10.6% | 2083 | 1.4% |
| Total | 926,426 | | 777,689 | | 148,737 | |

Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

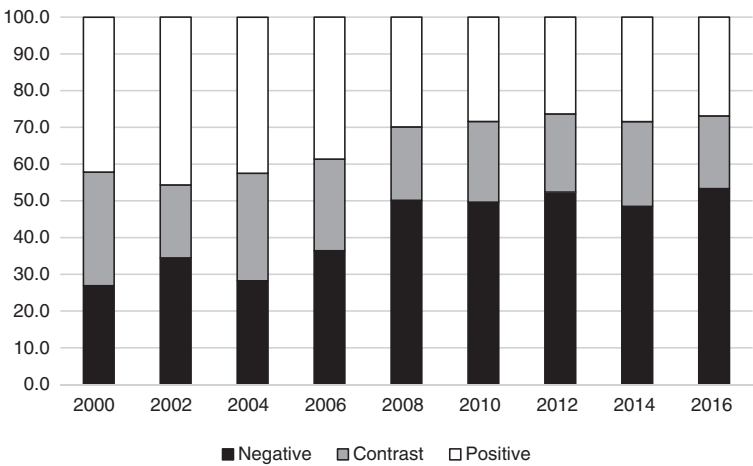


Figure 13: Tone of Senate Advertising Over Time (September 1 to Election Day).
Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

Table 7: Top House Races by Ad Totals (General Election).

| | Dem Cand | Dem Party | Dem Groups | GOP Cand | GOP Party | GOP Group | Total | Est. Cost |
|------|-------------|--------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------|-----------|
| ME02 | 6513 | 3469 | 5961 | 5006 | 4535 | 1417 | 26,901 | \$8M |
| MT01 | 11,160 | 0 | 884 | 9377 | 1395 | 0 | 22,816 | 2.5M |
| MN08 | 2982 | 4822 | 2841 | 2615 | 1606 | 2038 | 16,904 | 14M |
| NY22 | 4510 | 2020 | 5966 | 417 | 2614 | 0 | 15,527 | 3.2M |
| TX23 | 1802 | 5795 | 1773 | 2637 | 2342 | 896 | 15,245 | 11M |
| NY19 | 3296 | 2722 | 650 | 1308 | 3393 | 1645 | 13,014 | 5.6M |
| NY24 | 1445 | 4513 | 878 | 3176 | 1830 | 961 | 12,803 | 3M |
| NE02 | 2988 | 2497 | 1300 | 1031 | 3433 | 1149 | 12,398 | 5M |
| FL18 | 5346 | 0 | 0 | 413 | 3786 | 2086 | 11,631 | 6M |
| CA49 | 592 | 6638 | 504 | 3672 | 0 | 0 | 11,406 | 5M |

Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

Minnesota’s 8th congressional district also drew substantial general election advertising.

In contrast to the presidential race, both the Democratic and Republican parties poured considerable resources into these House contests. Including both general election and primary ads, parties were responsible for 24.3 percent of ads, if one includes both party and coordinated expenditures together (Table 8). This is significantly greater than the 14.9 percent of ads sponsored by outside groups. Clearly, although parties have almost abandoned the presidential race – and have

Table 8: Sponsorship of House Ads.

| | All | | General | | Primary | |
|-------------|---------|-------|---------|-------|---------|-------|
| Candidate | 373,199 | 60.8% | 249,918 | 53.1% | 123,280 | 86.0% |
| Coordinated | 38,322 | 6.2% | 37,423 | 7.9% | 899 | 0.6% |
| Group | 91,558 | 14.9% | 74,740 | 15.9% | 16,818 | 11.7% |
| Party | 111,113 | 18.1% | 108,707 | 23.1% | 2406 | 1.7% |
| Total | 614,191 | | 470,788 | | 143,403 | |

Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

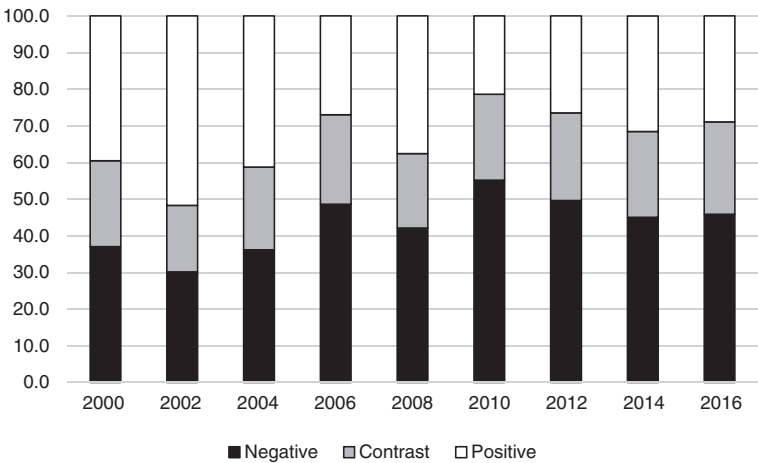


Figure 14: Tone of House Advertising over Time (September 1 to Election Day).

Source: Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

taken a backseat to groups in Senate races – they remain an important player in races for the House.

The tone of House races was also relatively similar to recent election cycles, with just slightly more negative ads and slightly fewer positive ads than 2014 (Figure 14). But levels of negativity in 2016 were down from 2010 to 2012. As with volume comparisons across cycles in House races, though, levels of negativity depend on the number of competitive elections, and 2010 and 2012 featured more competitive races.

Conclusion

There was a huge imbalance in advertising at the presidential level in 2016, with Clinton and her allies pummeling Trump and his allies in almost every media

market in the country. Pro-Clinton advertising dominated on local broadcast, national cable and even local cable television. Decades of research (e.g. Zaller 1992) suggests that in the face of such imbalanced message flows, the advantaged candidate should benefit at the polls. And yet in spite of those advantages, Hillary Clinton lost many of the states that saw the most political advertising. Is the message from 2016 that political ads just do not work anymore?

Although the impact of advertising in 2016 on the outcome of the general election race was likely minimal, we urge caution in concluding that television advertising is no longer effective. For one, we never expect advertising to have a large effect in a presidential race. Research has demonstrated that advertising effects are smaller in presidential contests than in other down-ballot races (Ridout and Franz 2007), and this may be especially true in a presidential race that features two well-known candidates, a former First Lady and a celebrity who has been on Americans' television screens for decades. Because voters have a large store of pre-existing information about the candidates, they are less open to influence by advertising. Nevertheless, advertising is an important way in which candidates can talk directly to voters, and research does suggest that advertising advantages do correlate with movement in the polls (Ridout and Franz 2007; Sides and Vavreck 2014). Despite the fact that pro-Clinton advertising dominated the airwaves overall, in several of the pivotal states – especially Michigan and Wisconsin – Donald Trump actually had ad advantages on local broadcast up until the very last week of the campaign, which may well have mattered.

Second, in a presidential race, advertising must compete with almost limitless media coverage of the race, which tends to neutralize the impact of the advertising. Perhaps the intense media coverage in 2016 was driven less by the messages of political advertising as it has been in the past and more by Donald Trump's Twitter account. Although the Clinton campaign may have viewed the news media's focus on Donald Trump as beneficial to them, they also claimed to have trouble getting coverage of policy statements.¹⁰ Yet the Clinton campaign itself did not focus on policy in its own messaging either, a tactic that very well may have hurt their candidate, which leads to our next point.

Third, all ads are not equally effective. Even though the ad advantage may have been in Clinton's favor, it does no good if the message does not resonate with voters. Of course, the jury is still out on how effective Clinton's message

10 As evidenced by the discussion at Harvard's IOP Campaign Managers Conference "Campaign for President: The Managers Look at 2016," last accessed 12/22/16 at <http://iop.harvard.edu/get-inspired/campaign-managers-conference/campaign-president-managers-look-2016#general>.

was, but evidence suggests that negativity in advertising can have a backlash effect on the sponsor (Pinkleton 1997) and that personally-focused, trait-based negative messages (especially those that are uncivil) tend to be seen as less fair, less informative and less important than more substantive, policy-based messaging (Fridkin and Geer 1994; Brooks and Geer 2007). In stark contrast to any prior presidential cycle for which we have Kantar Media/CMAG data, the Clinton campaign overwhelmingly chose to focus on Trump's personality and fitness for office (in a sense, doubling down on the news media's focus), leaving very little room for discussion in advertising of the reasons why Clinton herself was the better choice. Trump, on the other hand, provided explicit policy-based contrasts, highlighting his strengths and Clinton's weaknesses, a strategy that research suggests voters find helpful in decision-making (Mattes and Redlawsk 2014). These strategic differences may have meant that Clinton was more prone to voter backlash and did nothing to overcome the media's lack of focus on Clinton's policy knowledge, especially for residents of Michigan and Wisconsin, in particular, who were receiving policy-based (and specifically economically-focused) messaging from Trump. As such, it may very well be that Clinton misallocated advertising funds (both hyper-targeting on local cable and advertising in non-traditional battlegrounds like Arizona rather than in the Midwest, for example) and a lack of policy messaging in advertising may have hurt Clinton enough to have made a difference.

While advertising patterns in the 2016 presidential race were certainly a departure from the past, it seemed to be business as usual in the House and Senate. The tone of these races was very similar to the past few election cycles, as was the volume of advertising. And the sponsorship of advertising, with outside groups taking on a heavier role in the Senate than House, also reflected the past few elections. Indeed, it is almost surprising that so much has stayed the same with television advertising given the recent rise of digital media and social media.

But will down-ballot candidates in the future read the outcome of the 2016 presidential race as a signal that spending millions on television advertising just is not necessary? While many might consider such an approach in 2018, we think it would be unwise for candidates to use Trump as a model. For sure, future campaigns will invest heavily in new approaches to reach voters, from local cable to digital and web-based advertising. But at least in 2016, it seems that these additional tactics are viewed as just an "add-on" way to reach voters (a complement if you will) rather than as a replacement for more traditional ad buys on local broadcast stations. In sum, the race between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton violated so many of our rules of political science that generalizing from it strikes us as risky – at least for now.

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