

**Michael M. Franz, Paul B. Freedman, Kenneth M. Goldstein,
Travis N. Ridout: Campaign Advertising and American Democracy**

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There is a feeling among political commentators and political scientists in the USA that TV advertisements (ads) in general, and negative/attack TV advertisements in particular, are somehow detrimental to the democratic system. In effect, potential voters are turned off by the negativism and therefore tune out of the election process: they don't participate in political discourse, they don't become activists and, ultimately, they don't vote. *Campaign Advertising and American Democracy* seeks not only to prove, that this hypnosis is but show scientifically, that TV advertising, negative and positive, but "rich in information and laden with emotional content" (S.86) can aid the potential voter by giving them facts they wouldn't normally get from other sources, and therefore eventually improve voter turnout.

The authors' conclusions are that TV advertising produces citizens that know more about the candidates, frequently providing information to those who are most in need of it. The 'ads' do not confuse viewers or disengage potential voters, in fact, they serve to improve assessments of politics and campaigns, raise interest, reduce the feeling that the electoral system needs to be reformed, reduce the perception that money has a damaging impact on elections (whatever that means – you need a lot of money to pay for political advertisements), increase trust in the government and elevate voter turnout in the sense you are more likely to encourage others to vote. They conclude "ads had little direct impact on mobilizing voters, but we also found no evidence that ads were demobilisers." (S.134). However, there is no evidence to show that exposure to TV ads increases other instances of participation like circulating a petition or putting up a yard sign. They also conclude that negative and contrast ads are responsible for higher levels of political information but the tone of these ads has little to do with changing voters' attitudes. That said, citizens exposed to policy based negative/contrast 'ads' have more information and interest than those exposed to 'mudslinging/personality attack' 'ads'. These conclusions come with one important caveat: "these effects, while discernible, are often very modest." (S.138) On the other hand, if these effects only matter at the margin, in politics the margin is what matters. The authors see political 'ads' as 'multi-vitamin supplements' boosting the electoral process.

For most of us, the summary of findings in the last chapter is all we need to read. Only those interested in contemporary political campaigns and the way in which they are conducted, and or those interested in the methodology of a study such as this, should look at the book in detail. The questions of how you measure the effect of political advertising, and what that effect actually is, are indeed interesting. In the commercial world of advertising there is a standard joke that only 50% of advertising works, but no-one know which 50 % it is. The fundamental

questions to me with regards to advertising are how you can calculate the amount of exposure to advertising by prospective voters (or consumers) and what the effect of that exposure is.

Traditional approaches to measuring the effect of 'ad' exposure involve looking at campaign spending, collecting advertising data directly from television stations and asking survey respondents whether they recall seeing campaign 'ads' and if they can recall the content. Fortunately, the authors had access to the *Wisconsin Advertising Project* which, since 2000, has gathered, processed, coded and made available to the scholarly community tracking data collected by *TNS Media Intelligence/Campaign Media Analysis Group*. This commercial firm provides frequency information, which tells when and where 'ads' were aired with precise details on the date, time, market, station and television show, and content information including texts and images. This content was further classified with regards to tone (positive, negative or contrast), objective, sponsorship, issues raised and frequency of key words. This information was then cross-referenced from the data received from various life style studies, for example, the 2000 *American National Election Study* or the 2000 *DDB Needham "Life Style Study"*. These studies collated information about citizens' viewing habits i.e. which TV programs they watched and how often, and political activity, such as intention to vote or displaying a bumper sticker.

However, one of the disadvantages of this book is that the authors assume you can evaluate the veracity of their statistical analysis. Although the diagrams are easily enough to interpret, you need a knowledge of statistics to assess whether ".101 (.038) where $p < 0.01$ " in Table 8.1 (S.108) is significant or not. They, themselves, admit the effects they have found are certainly small.

In conclusion, the authors argue clearly that political advertising can help contribute to a healthy democracy. However, if the effects of this type of advertising are that voters are less likely to want to reform the system or voters having a lower perception that money can play a decisive role in a campaign, then we must conclude that political advertising is, in fact, detrimental to the democratic process.

Drew Bassett (Köln)