

Media Coverage and Campaign Advertisements: A Duration Analysis Approach

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Introduction

Political science research has typically recognized campaign advertisements and media election coverage as two of the most important sources of information for voters. Yet scholars have only just begun to examine the links between advertisements and media coverage. Both campaigns and news organizations benefit from these links: campaigns receive “free media” while coverage of campaign advertising gives news organization an inexpensive and appealing way of covering elections. [1] Although advertising can appear in many media for any number of reasons (e.g., to illustrate the tone of the race or strategies of the candidates, etc), television-news organizations see their adwatch coverage as essential to fulfilling their journalistic role as a watchdog, identifying and correcting false information. [2] Experimental studies have shown these segments to simply propagate, rather than correct, false information among the electorate, but proponents of the fact-checking segments argue they still serve a useful function in deterring campaign strategists from promoting blatantly false statements. [3]

Observational studies have shown that advertising coverage makes up a substantial portion of local news organizations’ election coverage. This study examines what characteristics of advertisements, races and media coverage of advertisements (with a particular focus on adwatch) leads to advertisements being pulled more quickly from the air.

Type of Coverage	Ads are Mentioned to...	Theorized Effect
Strategic	Illustrate a point about the tone of the race or strategy and tactics of the campaign.	Unclear, May Decrease Duration
Policy	Illustrate a policy that is being discussed in the race.	Unclear
Character/Non-Policy	Illustrate a character or non-policy issue in the race.	Unclear
Description	Merely describes the advertisement. Seen as “free media” by campaigns that amplifies ad’s message.	Decreases Duration
Ad Watch	Evaluate and correct factual claims made by advertisements.	Decreases Duration

Methods

Data

- Data on all campaign advertising and media coverage of advertising was collected during the sixty days leading up to the 2006 gubernatorial and senatorial elections in eight media markets in five Midwestern states.
- A census of media coverage of advertising from the largest newspapers and four major local television affiliates in each market was analyzed. Coders identified whether coverage was ad-related or ad-focused, the specific ad covered (if applicable) and also noted both the primary and secondary reasons that the ad was mentioned.
- News coverage of a specific ad was merged with detailed information about the tone, content and airdates of the ad collected by the Wisconsin Advertising Project.

Analysis

- The Weibull Accelerated Time Duration Model was estimated. The dependent variable was duration of each unique advertisement.

Results

Coverage, Medium	Coefficients	Standard Error
Policy, TV	-.0843603	.1930241
Strategic, TV	-.0470399	.0993295
Character/Non-Policy, TV	-.0259354	.2232981
Description, TV	.2097986	.3098448
Adwatch, TV	.0491212	.1239085
Strategic, Newspaper	.057	.0708495
Policy, Newspaper	-.0673257	.1409208
Character/Non-Policy, Newspaper	.0780004	.1387653
Description, Newspaper	-.8696724*	.4012186
Adwatch, Newspaper	-.1785823	.1382988
Controls		
Total Campaign Funds	3.91e-09	5.60e-09
Race Competitiveness	.0687014	.1008373
Republican Candidate	-.3673292***	.103006
Incumbency	-.2611629**	.0989543
Contrast Advertisement	.0077025	.1253326
Negative Advertisement	.2733634*	.1189333
Markets		
Chicago	.3105008	.3293087
Cleveland	-.6221898	.4268762
Columbus	.055212	.3402207
Detroit	.1893887	.3167663
Madison	7.961366	456.8511
Milwaukee	.2389728	.3328127
Minneapolis	.0158806	.3320017

■p ≤ .10 *p ≤ .05 **p ≤ .01 ***p ≤ .001

Discussion

Within our control variables, Republican candidate ads and incumbents spots had a significantly shorter duration, while negative advertisements had a statistically longer duration than positive or contrast advertisements.

Discussion, Continued

- Adwatch coverage was indistinguishable from other types of media coverage and did not increase the odds that an ad would be taken off the air. This refutes the literature’s expectation that campaigns would be more likely to take down advertisements that receive negative coverage. Instead campaigns are unresponsive to negative coverage of their advertisements.
- These results, along with earlier experimental studies, suggest that the adwatch format [4] is ineffective in reducing and correcting false advertising.
- Newspaper descriptions of an ad was the only media coverage that was statistically significant, with such ads having a shorter duration than those that did not receive this coverage. Surprisingly, this same type of coverage on television was insignificant.
- Despite the fact that ads run on television, campaigns appear to be more sensitive to newspaper coverage. Overall, however, media coverage does not appear to be a very important factor in deciding whether to keep particular spots on the air at least in the current model specification.

Future Research

Future specifications would benefit from:

- Differentiating between coverage that had the campaign advertising as its focus compared to coverage that merely mentioned the ad.
- Additional content coding from a campaign perspective (e.g., coverage of ads to illustrate policy issues in a campaign might be perceived to be helpful, hurtful or neutral to a campaign’s strategy).
- Adjusting the level of analysis to examine ads by individual TV stations (rather than aggregating across outlets).
- Developing a more precise measurement of campaign funds by subtracting each ad’s estimated cost from the “cash on hand” figure the campaign reports to the Federal Election Commission.

In addition, future work should examine what factors of advertisements themselves lead to individual spots garnering coverage in news media.

Literature Cited

1. Erika Franklin Fowler & Travis N. Ridout, “Local Television and Newspaper Coverage of Political Advertising,” *Political Communication* 26(2009): 119-136.
2. P. Norris, *A virtuous circle: Political communications in postindustrial societies*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.)
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4. K. H. Jamieson, *Dirty Politics: Deceptions, Distractions and Democracy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1992.)