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Negative, Angry, and Ubiquitous: Political Advertising in 2012

Abstract: Record amounts of money went to purchase television advertising during the 2012 election cycle, resulting in unprecedented volumes of advertising. This increase was due in part to the ease with which outside groups, such as super PACs, were able to raise and spend advertising dollars in the current, post-Citizens United, regulatory regime. Advertising in 2012 was also extremely negative, especially at the presidential level, and frequently evoked the emotion of anger. Yet whether 2012 marks the high point for spending on advertising – and whether the negativity will abate in the next presidential election – remain open questions.

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Introduction

The 2012 election showed no signs of a reduced role for televised political advertising. To the contrary, not only did the volume of political advertising – and spending on advertising – fail to decline in 2012 from previous races; it skyrocketed. This was especially true in the presidential race. Why, in spite of the view that broadcast television advertising is an antiquated means of communication in this Internet era, was so much money spent on 30-s spot advertising? Part of the answer is the creation of super PACs, which were able to raise multiple millions of dollars in 2012. Most of that money was channeled (uncreatively and inefficiently, according to critics) into buying broadcast television advertising (Roebuck 2012).

Although advertising was more ubiquitous than ever in 2012 – the first of our central findings – the result of this influx of advertising was not an ad advantage for Mitt Romney, something one might have expected, given that the vast majority of the spending by outside groups was done by conservative organizations. Instead, as we will

show, the presidential campaign was more balanced in spending than many expected – much more so than in 2008 – and to the extent that one candidate maintained an advantage in airings of advertisements, that candidate was Barack Obama, not Romney. Finally, we will demonstrate that advertising in 2012 was extremely negative by historical standards, with positive ads few and far between, especially in the presidential race.

Tracking Political Advertising

Our data on advertising in the 2012 campaigns come from the Wesleyan Media Project, which was established in 2010 to track advertising in federal and state elections. The Project is a collaboration among researchers at Wesleyan University, Bowdoin College, and Washington State University and is a successor to the Wisconsin Advertising Project, which tracked political advertising between 1998 and 2008. The source for the ad data is a commercial firm based in the Washington, D.C., area: Kantar Media/Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG).

These data provide two types of information. Frequency information tells when and where ads aired, including detailed information on the date, time, market, station, and television show of each airing, along with an estimated cost. In addition to the frequency data, Kantar Media/CMAG provides video copies of the ads themselves to the Project. Coders at Wesleyan, Bowdoin, and Washington State University watched each advertisement and answered an extensive battery of questions about each.¹

Although our data cover ads aired on local broadcast, national network, and national cable, our data do not include ads aired on local cable television. Local cable television has become an increasingly important venue for political advertising over the past few election cycles as television audiences have fragmented (Napoli 2011), and the Obama campaign, in particular, made extensive use

¹ The analyses presented here are based on ongoing coding, which is 97% complete for presidential airings between April 11 and Election Day, 2012, and 88% complete for congressional (House and Senate) airings between June 1 and Election Day, 2012.

Table 1 Volume and cost of advertising in 2008 and 2012.

Race	2008		2012	
	Spots	Est. cost	Spots	Est. cost
House	571,660	\$244,316,548	685,787	\$428,395,190
Senate	578,404	\$217,582,824	925,135	\$544,922,380
President	1,135,042	\$603,450,410	1,431,939	\$950,436,980
All federal races	2,285,106	\$1,065,349,782	3,042,861	\$1,923,754,550

Figures cover January 1 through Election Day.

of it in 2012 (Kay 2012). That said, ads aired on local cable still rarely reach the same size audience as the typical ad aired on a broadcast television stations.

Ad Volume, Cost, and Concentration in 2012 Compared to 2008

Between January 1, 2012, and Election Day, over three million election-related spots aired on local broadcast television, national network television, and national cable television for candidates running for Congress or the presidency, as Table 1 shows. The estimated cost of this advertising is \$1.92 billion. This is a substantial increase in volume (33%) and cost (81%) from 2008 when 2.29 million ads aired at an estimated cost of \$1.07 billion.

The increased advertising in 2012 over 2008 was evident in the race for the US House but was especially pronounced in races for US Senate and the presidency. The volume of advertising increased by almost 347,000 spots in races for the US Senate and by almost 300,000 spots in the race for the presidency (including both general election and nomination spots). If one examines all races on the ballot, including races for governor, attorney general, state legislature, and dog catcher, over 4.2 million spots aired in 2012 at an estimated cost of \$3.08 billion.²

The increase in ad volume is just as stark if we turn our attention to the general election period. Figure 1 shows the volume of advertising airing in the presidential race between June 1 and Election Day in 2004, 2008, and 2012. While the number of presidential ads increased slightly from 2004 to 2008 (753,000–796,000), a huge increase is evident from 2008 to 2012, with ad volumes rising to 1.14 million in the most recent general election.

Moreover, such advertising was concentrated in fewer media markets in 2012 than in 2008. In the most recent

election, 71 of the country's 210 media markets saw more than 1000 ads aired in the presidential election. The comparable figure for 2008 was 97 media markets, which is displayed graphically in Figure 2. Thus, it is no surprise that viewers living in markets that received advertising were exposed to considerably more ads than 4 years ago. To provide a few examples, television stations in Denver aired 52,000 spots in 2012, more than double the 22,000 spots that aired in 2008 during the general election period. The same was true for Las Vegas: 52,000 spots aired in 2012 and just 22,000 spots aired in 2008. In Cleveland, 42,000 spots aired in 2012 compared to 17,000 spots in 2008. Indeed, there was more advertising in 22 media markets in 2012 than in the most heavily advertised media market in 2008.

What explains the tremendous increase in advertising volumes in the presidential race? Certainly part of the answer is a competitive race aided in large part by the ability of super PACs and other non-party organizations to raise considerable dollars in 2012, much of which was used to sponsor advertising. While the Obama and Romney campaigns were the top advertisers in 2012 (Table 2), the next five places belong to outside groups. American Crossroads, for instance, aired over 81,000 spots, and Restore Our Future (Mitt Romney's super PAC) aired over 62,000 ads across the country. It is remarkable that the political parties, which were important advertisers in the days of party soft money, were relatively bit players in 2012. While the RNC did invest some money in advertising

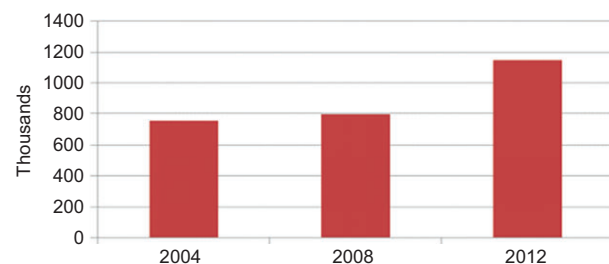


Figure 1 Volume of presidential general election advertising (2004–2012).

² Only about 68,000 of those spots aired on national television at a cost of \$350 million.

Total Presidential ad Airings (June 1 – Election Day)

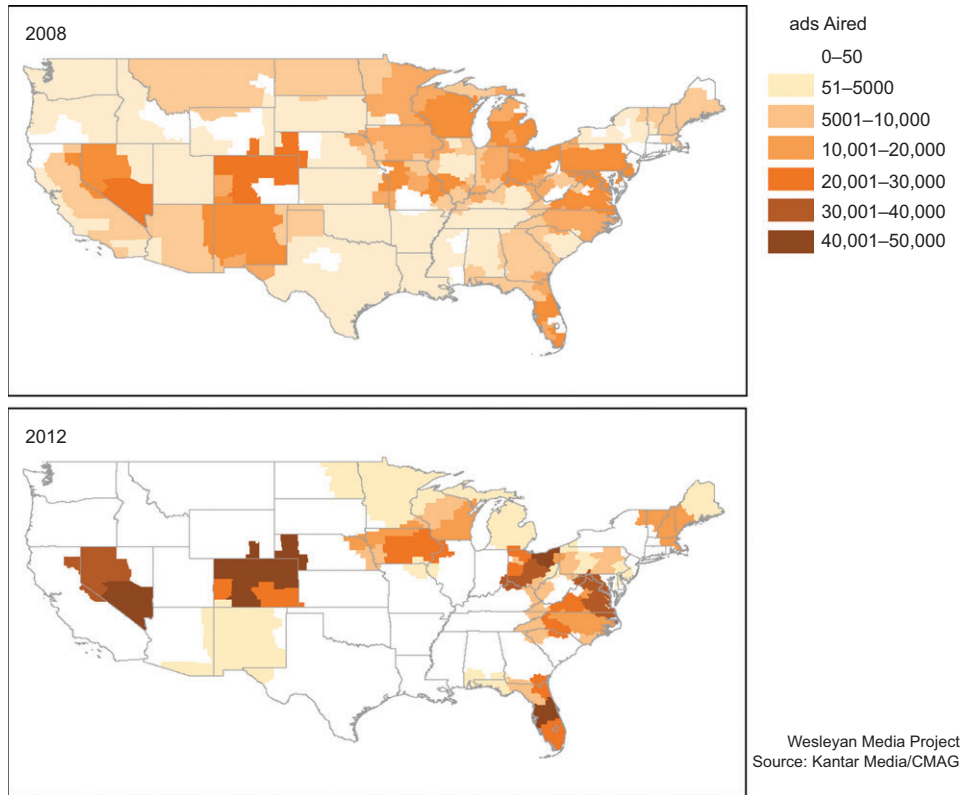


Figure 2 Volume of presidential advertising in 2008 compared to 2012.

in support of Romney, the DNC was virtually absent, helping out only with some coordinated expenditures.

One striking thing about Table 2 is just how many more ads the Obama campaign aired than the Romney campaign. The Obama campaign more than doubled the number of ads aired by the Romney campaign, but Romney had many allies in the ad war. Just over half of Romney’s ads were paid for by non-party organizations, including American Crossroads, Restore Our Future, Crossroads GPS, and Americans for Job Security. By contrast, only 12% of

pro-Obama advertising was sponsored by such groups, mostly by Obama’s super PAC, Priorities USA Action.

Figure 3 displays the number of pro-Romney and pro-Obama ads, along with spending on those ads, for the entire general election period, which effectively began on April 11, the day after Rick Santorum dropped out of the Republican nominating race. As shown by the figure, Romney and pro-Romney affiliates spent more for fewer spots than Obama and his allies. This was due, in part, to the fact that purchasing advertising as a candidate was much cheaper this cycle than purchasing air time through any other organization, because candidates qualify for the lowest unit rate and super PACs do not.³ Therefore, the Obama campaign, by funneling ad buys through its campaign more than through affiliate groups, was able to be more efficient in its spending. As such, for all of the focus on dollars spent in this election cycle, it is more

Table 2 Top 12 presidential race advertisers in 2012.

Barack Obama	511,513
Mitt Romney	207,984
American Crossroads	81,553
Restore Our Future, Inc.	62,557
Crossroads GPS	61,610
Priorities USA Action	58,990
Americans for Prosperity	40,465
Republican National Committee	35,825
Republican National Committee & Romney	33,456
Americans for Job Security	10,410
American Future Fund	7438
Democratic National Committee & Obama	7210

Figures cover June 1, 2012 through Election Day.

³ A difference in cost per ad could also result if the campaigns systematically chose to air their ads at different times of day, during different programs that drew larger or smaller audiences, or due to paying premiums for non-pre-emptible time. While the campaigns did target different audiences, there no evidence that, say, Obama was buying a ton of cheap ads at 2 a.m. while Romney was buying expensive prime-time ads.

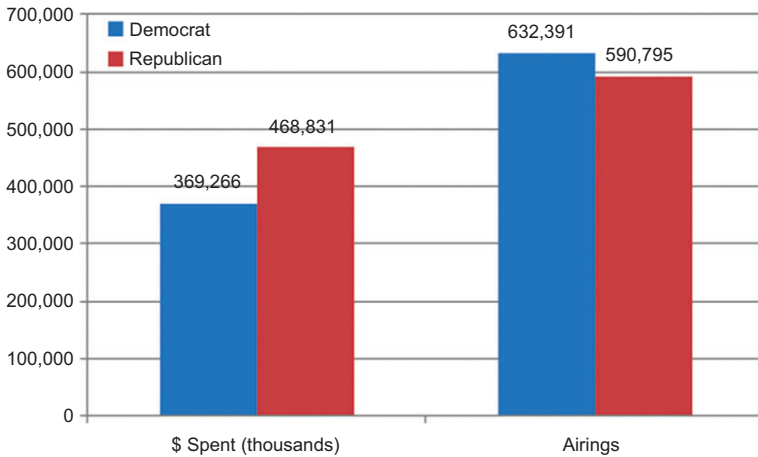


Figure 3 Presidential general election volume and estimated cost totals (April 11 – Election Day).

important than ever to assess the actual difference in ads aired rather than the difference in spending, due to the wide cost differences by sponsor. What matters for influence is the balance of ads citizens actually saw.

Although outside organizations helped Romney catch up to Obama in terms of advertising, they did not catch up entirely. As Figure 4 shows, pro-Obama advertising was more prevalent in a majority of media markets across the country, those colored blue. Most importantly for Obama, many of the markets where he held the largest ad advantages (those outlined in black on the map) were those in true swing states. Although pro-Romney advertising was more plentiful in New Mexico, Minnesota, Michigan, and Maine – states that Obama won with solid margins – Obama held ad advantages in most media markets in

Nevada, Colorado, Ohio, Virginia, and Florida, all of which ended up being true battlegrounds.

While Figure 4 shows the aggregated advantage from June through November, it is important to acknowledge the dynamics involved in the advertising war. Figure 5 uses the market of Cincinnati, Ohio, to illustrate Romney’s reliance on outside groups to keep him on par with the Obama campaign’s own ads. On days in which there was more pro-Obama advertising, the bar is above the horizontal line, while on days in which there was more pro-Romney advertising, the bar is below the line. The top panel displays the overall ad advantage, summing over all sponsors, while the bottom two panels compare the candidate and party ad balance (middle panel) to the outside interest group balance (bottom panel).

Partisan ad advantage in the Presidential Race (6/1/12–11/6/12)

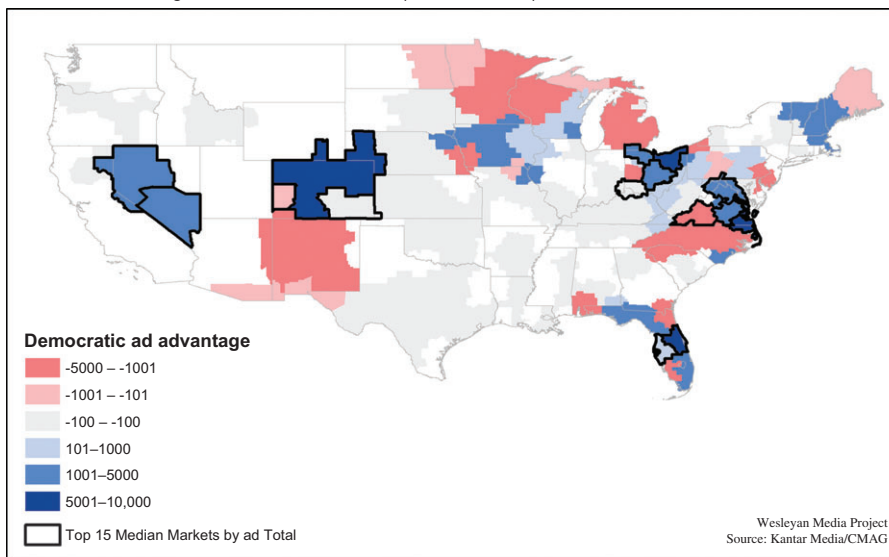


Figure 4 Partisan ad advantage in the presidential race (June 1 – Election Day).

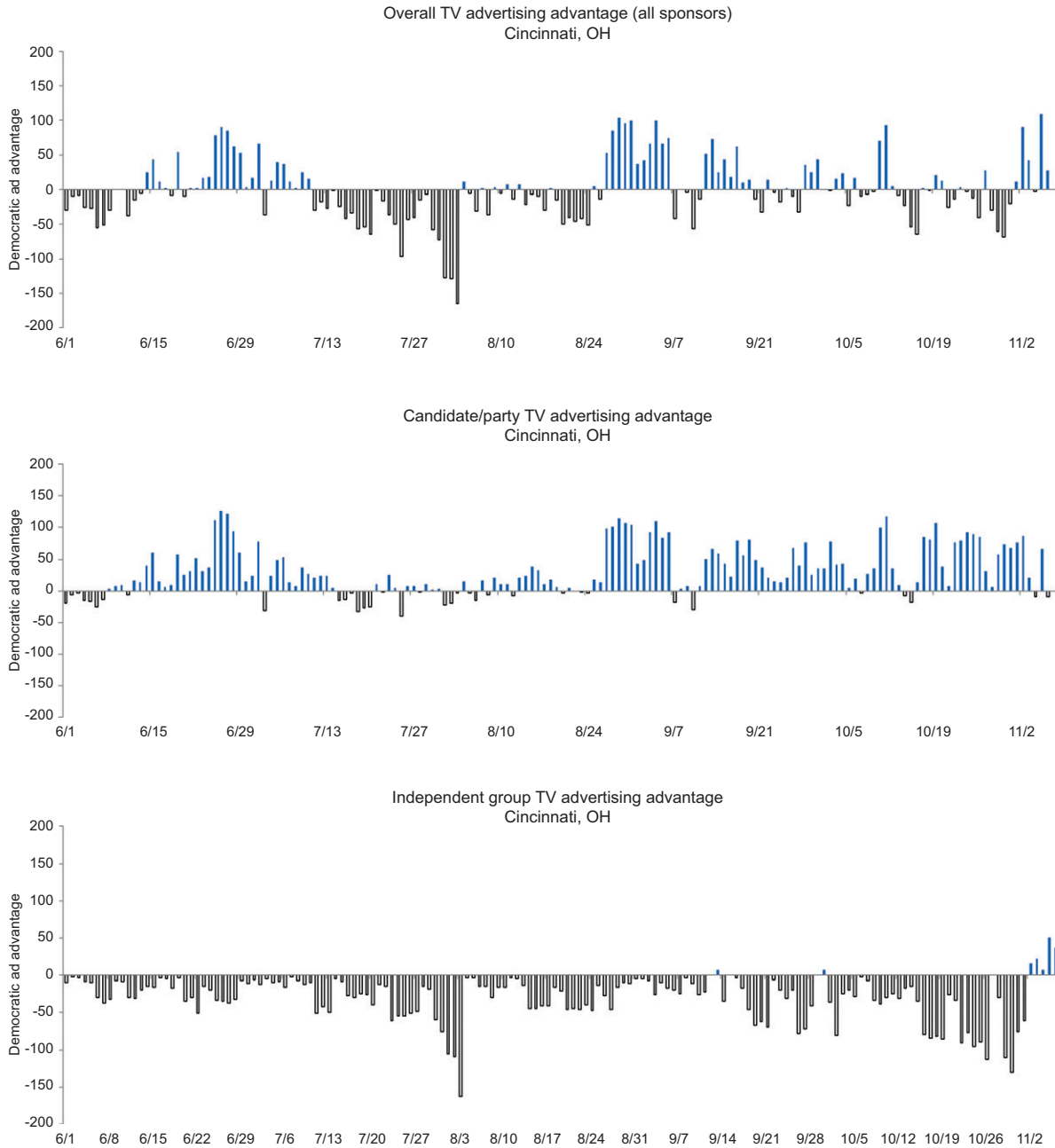


Figure 5 Presidential ad advantages over time in the Cincinnati, Ohio, media market, overall and by candidate/party versus interest group sponsors.

As shown by the figure, although conservative-leaning interest groups helped Romney maintain an advantage in July and early August, that advantage disappeared in late August and early September. From late September through Election Day, the ad war in Cincinnati was fairly evenly matched (at least at in the market aggregate, ignoring specific ad placements across days) with ad advantages moving back and forth between the candidates over time.

These patterns, however, varied across media markets, even within the same state. Figure 6 reveals the

daily difference in pro-Obama and pro-Romney advertising over the course of the campaign in two Ohio media markets: Cleveland and Dayton. Looking at the Cleveland panel, it is clear that Obama maintained an ad advantage during May, June, and most of July, with the balance of advertising more even in August. In September, during and after the Democratic and Republican national conventions, pro-Obama advertising again overtook pro-Romney advertising, and Obama maintained an ad lead for most days during the rest of the campaign.

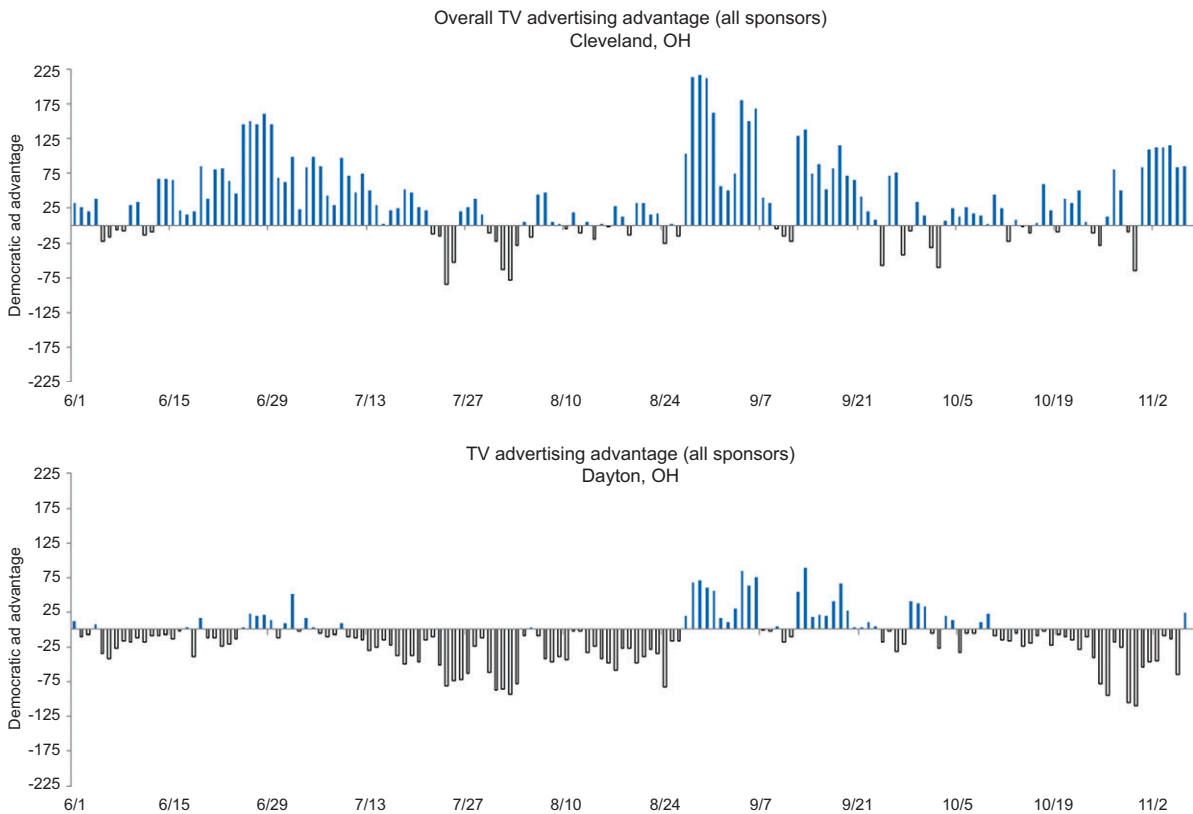


Figure 6 Obama-Romney ad advantage by day in Cleveland and Dayton.

The story is somewhat different in Dayton, as the bottom panel reveals. Although pro-Obama advertising was more prevalent for part of May, pro-Romney ads outnumbered pro-Obama ads for the rest of the summer until the party conventions. At that point, the tide turned and more pro-Obama ads were aired throughout September. But Romney held the upper hand in Dayton during October up through Election Day. Thus, two media markets within one state exhibited highly different patterns of advertising.

We chose these two markets to illustrate the larger point: advertising volume and ad advantages in 2012 varied widely by market within (and not just across) battleground states. One can see this visually (without the dynamic component) in Figure 3 by noting both the red and blue areas within states like Wisconsin, Ohio, and Florida. In short, though it is tempting to assess ad advantages at the state-level, such analyses would miss much of the important variation within markets and over time.

Not only did the campaigns air different amounts of advertising in different markets on different days, but they targeted their advertising to different programs as well. Table 3 reveals that Romney and his allies pursued

a fairly traditional strategy of ad targeting: placing the vast plurality (45%) of their ads during local news programs. This makes some sense, in that one is likely to find a lot of swing voters watching local news broadcasts (Ridout et al. 2012). But it also illustrates that the Obama campaign was aiming for narrower segments of the viewing audience than was Romney. Thus, a greater percentage of pro-Obama advertising aired during talk shows and reality programs than did pro-Romney advertising.

As another indicator of the amount of specific targeting by the Obama campaign, his advertising aired on at least 30 different national cable networks, ranging from the Syfy to the Hallmark Channel. The Romney campaign, by contrast, aired no national cable. Groups airing ads on Romney's behalf, such as American Crossroads and Crossroads GPS, put their advertising on a small number of national cable stations, mainly news channels and the big cable networks with large viewing audiences as opposed to those networks serving more niche audiences.

While the story of advertising in the presidential race is an interesting one, there was also considerable advertising in lower-level races. Table 4 shows the 10 US Senate races with the highest volume of advertising. The Montana

Table 3 Presidential ad placements by program type.

Pro-Obama ads		Pro-Romney ads	
Newscast (Local only)	32.1%	Newscast (Local only)	45.1%
Talk	18.5%	News Forum/Interview	12.8%
News Forum/Interview	10.8%	Talk	12.8%
Reality	7.1%	Game show	6.2%
Situation comedy	7.1%	Situation comedy	3.7%
Game show	6.0%	Entertainment magazine	3.6%
Entertainment magazine	3.6%	Reality	2.8%
Drama/Adventure	2.8%	Drama/Adventure	2.2%
Soap opera	2.5%	Soap opera	1.8%
Newscast (Cable/Network only)	1.4%	Newscast (Cable/Network only)	1.4%
Police/Suspense/Mystery	1.3%	News magazine	1.2%
News magazine	1.2%	Police/Suspense/Mystery	1.0%

Senate race tops the list, with over 110,000 ad airings. Given the small size of Montana media markets, however, these ads were relatively cheap compared to advertising in most US Senate races (\$12.8 million, which is less than half as much as all other races in the top 10).

The race between Representative Tammy Baldwin and former Wisconsin governor Tommy Thompson ranked second in terms of airings with nearly 74,000 spots aired at an estimated cost of \$32.2 million. Outside interest group involvement in these top Senate races ranged from 0% in Massachusetts, where Scott Brown and Elizabeth Warren pledged to keep outside interest groups at bay, to nearly 50% of airings (48.3%) in the Virginia Senate contest.

Table 5 shows that Georgia's 12th district ranked first in volume of airings in US House races by a wide margin (more than 10,000 more airings than any other House race). Other top races included those in California's 24th district, followed by Illinois' 17th, New York's 21st, and California's 52nd, all of which had over 13,000 ad airings from June 1 through Election Day.

Table 4 Top US Senate races by ad volume and outside group involvement.

Race	Airings	Est. cost	% Airings by groups
Montana	110,471	12.8 M	25.6
Wisconsin	73,981	32.2 M	32.2
Ohio	58,358	43.1 M	42.8
Virginia	52,708	47.2 M	48.3
Missouri	50,266	25.6 M	22.3
Nevada	49,559	29.5 M	35.1
Massachusetts	48,740	37.7 M	0.0
Indiana	47,781	32.2 M	42.5
Florida	39,680	33.9 M	35.9
Arizona	36,089	28.3 M	19.2

Figures cover June 1, 2012, through Election Day.

Issue Content of Races

Was the 2012 campaign all about the economy? It certainly was for Republican advertisers, as Table 6 shows. Nearly three in four pro-Romney ads (those aired by the Romney campaign, the Republican Party or outside group allies) that aired between April 11 and Election Day mentioned jobs or unemployment. Moreover, 17.2% of pro-Romney ads mentioned the recession or the economic stimulus. While 41.5% of pro-Obama ads (the vast majority of which were sponsored by the Obama campaign) mentioned jobs, the most frequently mentioned issue in pro-Obama advertising was taxes.

With the exception of jobs, the issue emphases of the two sides were quite different. While 43.8% of pro-Obama ads mentioned taxes, only 23.5% of pro-Romney ads did. And while 21.4% of pro-Obama ads mentioned education, fewer than 1% of pro-Romney ads mentioned the topic. Similarly, while pro-Romney advertising

Table 5 Top US House races by ad volume and outside group involvement.

Race	Airings	Est. cost	% Airings by groups
GA-12	27,762	10.8 M	19.3
CA-24	16,193	3.0 M	18.3
IL-17	15,804	6.9 M	24.4
NY-21	14,264	5.3 M	21.4
CA-52	13,273	11.1 M	22.3
UT-04	12,912	7.1 M	31.0
CA-36	12,710	3.0 M	14.5
FL-18	12,646	10.4 M	23.5
NY-27	12,336	5.7 M	20.9
PA-12	12,078	12.3 M	27.4

Figures cover June 1, 2012, through Election Day.

Table 6 Top issues in the presidential general election campaign (April 11 – Election Day).

Pro-Obama ads		Pro-Romney ads	
Taxes	43.8%	Jobs	73.5%
Jobs	41.5%	Deficit	53.1%
Education	21.4%	Gov't spending	25.4%
Deficit	16.3%	Taxes	23.5%
Health care	12.4%	Recession/Economic stimulus	17.2%
Medicare	11.5%	Health care	15.9%
Women's health	10.2%	Business	8.4%
Trade	8.6%	China	7.7%
Economic disparity	8.0%	Energy policy	7.1%
Abortion	7.7%	Trade	7.0%
Business	6.5%	Welfare	6.0%
Housing	6.5%	Medicare	3.4%
Energy policy	6.3%	Housing	2.5%
Recession/Economic stimulus	6.2%	Gov't regulations	2.4%
Gov't regulations	5.7%	Economic disparity	1.2%

placed considerable attention on government spending, pro-Obama advertising virtually ignored that issue. The Obama campaign and their allies also paid considerable attention to women's health and abortion in their advertising, but pro-Romney advertisers did not touch those issues in theirs.

Somewhat surprisingly, there was even less focus on jobs in the races for US House and US Senate (Table 7). Taxation was the top issue discussed in both Democratic and Republican advertising, while jobs was second on the Republican side (35.5% of ads mentioned jobs) and third on the Democratic side (24.9% of ads mentioned jobs). Medicare, an issue traditionally owned by the Democratic Party, was the second most-mentioned issue in pro-Democratic advertising for Congress. Republican advertising was much more likely to mention healthcare, the deficit,

and government spending than was Democratic advertising, while Democratic advertising was more likely to mention Social Security and education. The issue of women's health, which received considerable attention in the presidential race, also received some attention in races for the US House and Senate – but primarily on the Democratic side.

Tone of the Races

Commentators described the 2012 presidential race as a particularly negative one by historical standards. The data bear this out, as Figure 7 reveals. In 2012, only 14.3% of the ads aired in the presidential race between June 1 and Election Day were purely positive Ads, those that mentioned only a sponsor. Another 28% were contrast

Table 7 Top issues in races for US Congress (June 1 – Election Day).

Democratic ads		Republican ads	
Taxes	35.4%	Taxes	40.8%
Medicare	33.0%	Jobs	35.5%
Jobs	24.9%	Health care	29.1%
Social security	17.8%	Deficit	24.5%
Deficit	13.4%	Gov't spending	23.4%
Education	13.0%	Medicare	18.1%
Trade	8.5%	Business	14.2%
Health care	7.7%	Recession/Econ stimulus	12.9%
Business	7.5%	Energy policy	10.3%
Veterans	7.0%	Gov't ethics	7.0%
Gov't spending	6.4%	Gov't regulations	4.5%
Women's health	6.1%	China	4.1%
Gov't ethics	5.7%	Social security	4.0%
Local issues	5.3%	Education	3.3%
Energy policy	4.9%	Military	3.1%

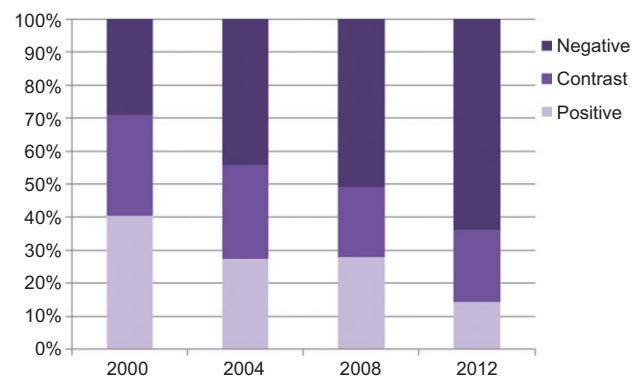


Figure 7 Tone of presidential general election ads by year. Note: Data from 2000, 2004 and 2008 come from the Wisconsin Advertising Project. Data from 2012 come from the Wesleyan Media Project.

Table 8 Presidential general ads by sponsorship and tone.

	Positive	Contrast	Negative
Candidate	19.2%	26.5%	54.3%
Group	5.1%	9.7%	85.2%
Party/coordinated	11.5%	37.4%	51.1%
Total	14.3%	22.0%	63.6%

Figures cover June 1, 2012, through Election Day.

or comparative ads, those that mentioned both a sponsor and the opponent. Fully 64% of the ads aired in the presidential race in 2012 were purely negative ads, those that mentioned only an opponent. The percentage of negative ads aired in the presidential race has risen considerably over time. In 2000, it was 29%. It rose to 44% in 2004 and 51% in 2008.

The reason for so much negativity in 2012 is not entirely clear. Part of it may have to do with the increased sponsorship of ads by outside groups, though the candidates themselves were more negative than in prior cycles as well. Fully 85% of ads sponsored by non-party organizations were purely negative, and another 10% were contrasting, leaving only 5% positive (Table 8). Party-sponsored ads, including coordinated expenditures, were also predominantly negative; 51.1% purely negative with only 11.5% positive. Candidates, although they aired more positive ads than the groups or parties, were also largely negative in their advertising.

Another reason negativity may be on the rise, as Geer (2012) suggests, is because of a desire on the part of the news media to frame politics in terms of conflict. Increasingly, ads are aimed at getting news coverage as much as they are at persuading voters, and one sure way to attract media attention to an advertisement is to make an attack against an opponent (Fowler and Ridout 2009).

Given the large number of attacks in the 2012 presidential race, it is no surprise that the dominant emotion conveyed by advertising was anger (Table 9). Fully three in four ads aired during the presidential general election made an appeal to anger. The next most frequent emotional appeal was to fear, followed by enthusiasm, sadness, and pride. Only 1% of presidential ads made an appeal to humor in 2012.

Although not as negative as the presidential race, the races for Congress were also predominantly negative (Figure 8).⁴ Just over half (51.9%) of the ads aired between September 1 and Election Day in races for the US House or Senate were negative ads. This was actually a slightly lower percentage of negative ads than aired in

⁴ Note that no data are available for 2006.

Table 9 Emotional appeals in presidential general election.

Emotion	% of ads with appeal
Anger	74.03
Fear	34.38
Enthusiasm	30.88
Sadness	26.55
Pride	10.93
Humor	1.05

Figures cover June 1, 2012, through Election Day.

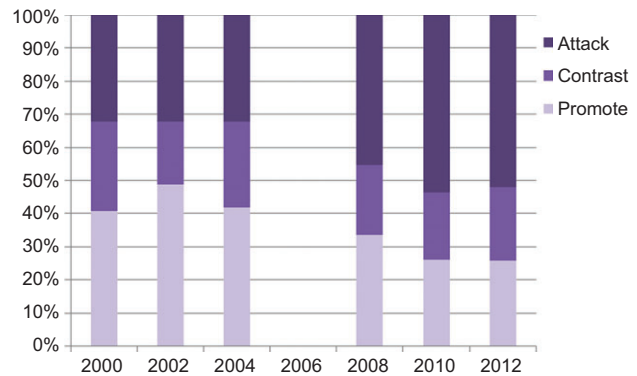


Figure 8 Tone of congressional races by year (September 1 to Election Day).

Note: Data from 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2008 come from the Wisconsin Advertising Project. Data from 2010 and 2012 come from the Wesleyan Media Project. Data from 2006 are unavailable.

Congressional races in 2010. But the percentage of positive ads in 2012 was lower than in any other set of congressional races going back to 2000. All told, there is a fairly visible trend of increasing negativity over time in the races for US House and US Senate.

Conclusions

The 2012 election was a record-pulverizing election for televised advertising. In this historic year, there was more money spent and more ads aired than ever before, which translated into a very negative and angry year for political messaging. The barrage of ads started early in battleground markets and persisted through the bitter end. Though the actual outcome of 2012 left much unchanged, careful analyses accounting for dynamics at the market-level will be needed to unpack the influence of this advertising, and in a particularly polarized electorate, it is worth remembering that the bulk of ads were likely aimed at two key audiences: the small number of voters in the center who were undecided and members of the news media.

Can we expect more negativity in advertising in the future? As evidenced by their overwhelming use of the tactic, campaigns clearly believe that negativity is beneficial to their cause, even if academic evidence about the influence of negative ads on electorate turnout is more mixed (Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007). We know that media privilege negativity in their coverage (Fowler and Ridout 2009), and as long as they continue to highlight negative tactics, which further amplify perceptions of a negative campaign (Ridout and Fowler 2012), we can almost certainly expect such negativity to continue.

Another factor linked to negativity is the large and increased role of interest group sponsors of advertising. Despite the unprecedented involvement of outside groups, very few members of the public know anything about these groups, meaning that there is little accountability for nasty ads. Experimental evidence suggests that though interest group ads are not more persuasive than candidate ads, they do result in less backlash to the favored candidate (Brooks and Murov 2012), which suggests that outsourcing negativity as a campaign tactic makes sense. Indeed, the most effective ad of 2012, according to analysis conducted by the research firm, Ace Metrix, was a negative ad aired by the outside group Priorities USA Action.

On the other hand, the 2016 presidential race will not feature an incumbent, and with less of a record to attack, it is possible that contenders will take more time to define themselves with positive biographical spots prior to going on the attack. Popular press accounts suggest that Mitt Romney, like John Kerry before him in 2004, may have missed opportunities to define himself before being defined by his opposition. However, it will be important to do further analysis of survey data throughout the campaign – and to take into account people’s exposure to the Bain ads, for instance – before writing the definitive story on whether the Obama campaign’s attempt to paint Romney as an out-of-touch plutocrat was successful.

Will the volume of negativity continue to rise? There is no sign that the Supreme Court or Congress is able or willing to act to reign in unlimited spending by outside groups in elections. However, there are limits to the availability of local broadcast and cable inventory– there simply was not much more ad time left to purchase in Ohio markets in 2012. Thus, the volume of activity may depend upon whether the electoral battleground widens in geographical scope from 2012. Indeed, prices were so inflated that presidential campaigns were turning to national cable and even national network television, believing that it was more cost effective than buying broadcast television in local markets (Feltus 2012).

One thing we do expect to rise and rise significantly, especially in light of limited television air time, is spending on digital advertising efforts. Many of the outside groups did not run very sophisticated campaigns in 2012, and their donors may insist that they become more multimedia in their strategy in 2016. It is also clear that ad spending by outside groups, though unlimited, is not very efficient. As groups evaluate their tactics for future cycles, it is possible that they may choose to encourage donors to give directly to candidates or to shift some of their money away from television advertising and direct it toward social media, mailings, and even newspapers and billboards. Still, even if the volume of television advertising decreases, it is likely to remain the dominant means by which campaigns communicate with voters.

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