

# Issue Advertising in Political Campaigns

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## Introduction

Political advertisements have faced strong criticism over the years from scholars and others who believe that campaign commercials denigrate democracy by focusing on images rather than important public policy issues. Such criticism stems from the belief that American democracy works best when voters study the relevant issues of a campaign and then cast their ballots for the candidates who will best serve the country. Not only are political commercials incapable of contributing to a reasoned discourse, critics contend, they warp the political system by swaying voters with short messages that stress personality traits and other trivial matters. (For a discussion of the historical debate over political ads, see Kaid and Sanders, 1978; Pinkleton, 1998; and Johnston and Kaid, 2002.)

This negative disposition toward political spots is reflected not just in the scholarly literature but also the mainstream media. The *New York Times*, for example, recently complained that the upcoming 2004 presidential election should be about more than just “mind-numbing commercials” (“The Eight-Month Election,” *New York Times*, 3 March 2004, A26), while the *Washington Post*’s media critic described the “barrage of television ads” that filled the airwaves during the New Hampshire primary as “inescapable” spots that did little but create a few unimportant impressions of the candidates (Howard Kurtz, “Images in Ads Outpace Words in New Hampshire,” *Washington Post*, 22 January 2004, A6).

But not all political advertisements have been judged the same. One form of political communication that has been singled out for praise has been the so-called issue ad—campaign commercials that address serious policy questions in an attempt to

persuade the voter that one candidate is right and another is wrong on a particular matter of public importance. A number of scholars have argued that issue advertisements actually benefit democracy because they educate voters about the positions of candidates and provide citizens with a way to clearly evaluate each office seeker (See Patterson and McClure 1976; Joslyn 1980; Shyles 1983; and Brians and Wattenberg 1996).

So which argument is right? Are political advertisements a threat or a benefit to the American political system? This paper will address these questions by providing a brief examination of issue advertisements. It will describe what they are, where they came from, and how effective they have been both in terms of educating the public and as a tool to help political candidates win elections. These questions are not easy to answer. For one, issue advertisements are difficult to define and identify—and as a result, it has been difficult to determine exactly when issue ads were first used in campaigns. Nevertheless, it is important to at least attempt to examine the concept of the issue ad because of the influence it is perceived to play during American elections.

### **What are issue ads and how do we identify them?**

Much of the research on political commercials has focused on the contrast between advertisements that stress issues and those that create images. The literature is so thick with such comparisons, in fact, that Frank Biocca (1991b) has observed that “we see a preoccupation—one might say an obsession—with the distinction between ‘issue’ and ‘image’ ads” (pg. 48). Likewise, Kaid and Johnston (2001) have pointed out that “no topic has been more dominant across the five decades of research on political advertising than the discussion of whether or not campaign commercials are dominated by image information or by issue information” (pg. 16).

One benefit of these comparisons is that they have forced scholars to explain the difference between issue and image commercials, thus leaving us with many definitions of the “issue ad” from which to choose. Kaid and Sanders (1978), for example, have said that issue advertisements are “spots which were concerned with specific policy issues (such as jobs or roads)” (pg. 60); Patterson and McClure (1976) defined issue advertisements as those that seek to link a candidate “with issue positions that he feels will win him votes” (pg. 102); Shyles (1983) said “it has been generally agreed” that issue information is that which focuses on “topics tied to the civic concerns of the citizenry” (pg. 335); and Devlin (1995) said that an issue ad is one that simply explains a candidate’s “position on an issue” (pg. 193).

These definitions sound simple enough. However, over the years researchers have become increasingly confused over how to identify whether an advertisement discusses issues or creates images. Today’s commercial spots often contain elements of both, thus clouding the water and making it difficult to classify ads with rigid labels. This melding of advertisement content has led scholars like Benoit (1999) to argue that it is time to abandon the old way of classifying political advertisements by themes because modern commercials tend to “string together six or eight diverse topics in a single ad, combining acclaims and attacks as well as policy and character appeals” (pgs. 203-204). Biocca (1991a) agrees, pointing out that “few political ads can be reliably classified as either ‘issue ads’ or ‘image ads’” (pg. 18)—a contention supported by Johnston and Kaid (2002), whose research found that 34 percent of the televised presidential issue ads airing between 1952 and 2000 contained some reference to personality traits and image.

What we are left with, then, is a fairly muddy picture of the issue ad. If today's campaign commercials contain a hodgepodge of themes that make them impossible to classify, then how can we begin to discuss the "issue ad" as a concept? One way around this is to accept the fact that individual commercials are difficult to categorize and instead follow the lead of some researchers who have found creative ways around the problem. Benoit's (1999) analysis of campaign commercials, for example, avoided classifying individual ads as issue or image advertisements and instead examined the number of times issues were discussed in each particular spot. In this way, Benoit counted individual "utterances," as he put it, rather than individual advertisements. Likewise, Biocca (1991a) suggested that one way to analyze advertisements was to break them down "into smaller components, such as scenes or verbal statements" to determine how often issues were discussed as compared to images. In a different study, Rudd (1986) found his way around the image-issue controversy by examining how issue commercials are actually used to build a candidate's image.

Given the difficulty in settling on any one definition, then, one needs to think not in terms of issue advertisements as a genre but rather how candidates use issues in their political campaign commercials. As such, the remainder of this paper will examine how candidates have used issues in their campaign commercials, a subtle but important distinction from the "issue ad" as an independent concept.

### **The historical use of issues in political commercials**

It is difficult to ascertain exactly when issues were first used in political advertisements, although it seems doubtful that such techniques were employed during most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One reason for this is that for most of

American history it was considered so distasteful for a candidate to personally campaign for office that even the mere discussion of issues before an election was considered “taboo” (Jamieson 1996, 16).

During this period, campaign messages were spread by a candidate’s supporters by such means as banners, songs, broadsides, billboards, public forums, buttons, kerchiefs, bandannas, and the famous torchparades—mediums that are good for sloganeering but not for laying out a logical argument about public policy. The one medium that could have been used for more thoughtful advertisements that discussed issues was the newspaper. But there was no reason for a politician to spend money on advertising space in these weekly and daily publications because much of the press was controlled by political parties, guaranteeing that the editor would support his party’s nominee with highly partisan stories (Jamieson 1986).

Another reason it is doubtful that issues were used in many political commercials during this time is that early American election campaigns were characterized more by harsh personal attacks than reasoned discourse. Although the candidates themselves tried to stay above the fray, partisan editors and other supporters would spew “personal invective and abusive political attacks” on candidates of the opposing party (Sloan 2002, 89). Democrat Andrew Jackson, for instance, was called an “adulterer” and an “ignoramus” by his Whig opponents during the 1828 presidential election (Jamieson 1986, 8), and other politicians—such as Congressmen Matthew Lyon and Roger Griswold—actually attacked each other physically over political disagreements in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Emery et al. 2000; Sloan 2002). Said Jamieson (1986):

Those who pine for presidential campaigns as they were in Jefferson, Jackson, or Lincoln's times and who see our nation's political decline and fall mirrored in the rise of political spot advertising remember a halcyon past that never was. The transparencies, bandannas, banners, songs, and cartoons that pervaded nineteenth century campaigning telegraphed conclusions, not evidence. Their messages were briefer ... than those of any sixty second spot ad. The air then was filled not with substantive disputes but with simplifications, sloganeering, and slander (pg. 12).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, parties began writing platforms that outlined their policy positions. With this development, "it became acceptable for the party's candidate to indicate publicly his views on the platform" (Jamieson 1996, 16). Even so, most candidates would deliver a speech endorsing the party's principles and then remain silent until after the election. That slowly began to change in 1892, when presidential candidate Grover Cleveland used his nomination acceptance speech to forcefully evoke campaign issues by criticizing a Republican tariff plan (Jamieson 1996).

By 1912, when the two major political parties began experimenting with the primary system, it had become more acceptable for presidential candidates to actively campaign and discuss political issues. However, while these issues might be debated more frequently on the campaign trail, they were not particularly prevalent in the early primary advertisements, which stressed personal qualities as a way of distinguishing between same-party candidates who tended to agree on most major public policy matters (Kendall 2000). Between 1912 and 1992, political ads used during the presidential primaries focused more on candidate viability and political slogans, although Kendall (2000) found evidence that most presidential candidates also tried to associate themselves

with certain causes by blending “personal information with information on political issues” in their print and television spots (pg. 127).

With the coming of broadcasting in the 1920s, politicians could reach much larger audiences with their messages. At the beginning, candidates used the radio to broadcast political speeches that could run as long as an hour, but by 1928 broadcast stations began charging for air time, forcing candidates to find more cost effective ways to get out their message (Jamieson 1996).

Issues were clearly being discussed in the radio ads of 1948. In that year, Harry Truman’s presidential campaign ran a series of comedic advertisements in the middle of the afternoon that raised issues of concern to women. Jamieson (1996) described one ad as follows:

Borrowing blatantly from the conventions of hit radio shows of the time, the programs ricocheted with snide one liners. Each program opened and ended with a cut from ‘The Missouri Waltz,’ Truman’s signature music. In one, after a brief introduction, the announcer played Eddie Cantor’s ‘Now’s the Time to Fall in Love.’ In the fashion of a hit show of the time, at the point when Cantor sang ‘Tomatoes are cheaper, potatoes are cheaper’ the announcer shouted ‘Stop the Music!’ A litany of prices that had increased under Republican inflation followed. Next a woman blamed inflation on the Republicans who dropped price controls. The telephone rang. A voice asked for the Democratic record. The announcer complied by playing ‘Every Day I Love You a Little Bit More’ (pg. 27).

The first television political spots appeared during the 1952 presidential election. While some critics complained that Dwight D. Eisenhower was using the airwaves in 1952 to sell himself in the same fashion as one sells soap, subsequent research has shown that issues were used in ads during that election and have become a big part of most

television political advertising campaigns (See West 1994-1995; Benoit 1999; and Johnston and Kaid 2002).

West (1994-1995) found that the number of ads focusing on issues rose steadily from 6 percent in 1952 to 43 percent in 2000. Johnston and Kaid (2002) agree. Their study found that issues were raised in advertisements more in the 1950s and 1960s before giving way to a rise of image advertising in the 1970s and 1980s. The trend reversed itself in the 1990s, they said, when candidates returned to the use of public policy questions in their commercials. Said the authors: “The campaigns in the 1990s and the first one in this decade have featured the highest percentage of issue ads” (pg. 295). Research by Benoit (1999) illustrates this trend further, finding that issues were discussed 60 percent of the time in advertisements that ran between 1952 and 1996, although he points out that most advertisements “do not go into depth on these issues” (pg. 206).

As the scholarly literature shows, issues have become a major part of the advertising landscape during political campaigns. Given this historical evolution, the next question that must be addressed centers on how effective these ads are both in terms of educating the public and helping the candidate win elections.

### **How effective are political ads that discuss issues?**

There has been widespread debate over how well political commercials educate the public ever since Patterson and McClure (1976) first suggested that advertisements do a better job than the evening television news of disseminating a candidate’s issue positions to the citizenry. In their groundbreaking work analyzing the ads of the 1972 presidential election, the authors painstakingly illustrated how important foreign and

domestic issues were discussed far more in the candidates' commercials than they were by network news programs.

For example, Patterson and McClure (1976) found that President Richard Nixon ran 65 minutes of advertisements that discussed his foreign policy while the evening news spent only 15 minutes on the same issue. In addition, while the network news spent 5 minutes on inflation, military spending, and corruption in government, Nixon's campaign covered these issues in 25 minutes worth of commercials. The same was true for Senator George McGovern, Nixon's Democratic opponent in the election. McGovern ran 60 minutes worth of ads covering military spending, taxes, and Vietnam, compared to the 10 minutes the network news devoted to those issues. "Spot commercials do more to educate the public about the issues than they do to manipulate the public about the candidate," Patterson and McClure wrote (pg. 111). "Through commercials, presidential candidates actually inform the electorate. In fact, the contribution of advertising campaigns to voter knowledge is truly impressive" (pg. 116).

Subsequent research has supported this argument. One recent study concluded that voters are more likely to remember a candidate's issue positions by watching political commercials than by watching television news (Brians and Wattenberg 1996). In addition, the study by Brians and Wattenberg found that advertisements help citizens evaluate candidates and decide for whom to vote. "Although many political analysts denigrate political ads," the authors noted, "...we find that they likely contribute to accurate information about the issues, as well as active use of issues in candidate evaluations" (Brians and Wattenberg 1996, 185).

At about the same time that Patterson and McClure were conducting their research, Atkin and Heald (1976) found a moderate correlation between a voter's exposure to campaign commercials and his or her knowledge of the candidates and their issue positions. "The evidence indicates that advertising exposure is functionally related to knowledge, agenda, interest, affect, and polarization," the authors argued (Atkin and Heald 1976, 227). Like Patterson and McClure, Joslyn (1980) also found that ads—while biased—were as good or better than television and print media at "transmitting information about candidate policies..." (pg. 97).

Not everyone agrees, though, that political advertisements help educate the public. Jamieson (1996) has argued that advertisements do more to reinforce existing political views than they do to create new beliefs. Research by Zhao and Chaffee (1995) showed that political commercials were much less consistent than television news in educating voters about political issues. In their study, Zhao and Chaffee argued that television news was a good source of political information for voters who paid close attention to it. As the authors noted: "The attention a person pays to campaign news on television does indeed enhance the likelihood of acquiring political issue information ... In half of the surveys attention to advertising is not a significant predictor of issue knowledge" (Zhao and Chaffee 1995, 51).

Even those who believe in the power of political commercials to inform the public have recognized their limitations. Despite their assertion that ads are more effective than television news, Patterson and McClure (1976) acknowledged that political advertisements "fail to inform fully about any single issue" and fail "to inform about the full range of election issues" (pg. 129). Joslyn (1980) concurred and pointed out that

political candidates are often unwilling to state their positions on the issues in their ads. For example, his analysis found that candidates gave their specific position on an issue in only 19 percent of all ads while in 38 percent of the ads, the candidates gave only a vague idea of where they stood (Joslyn 1980).

Moreover, not all issue advertisements are viewed equally by the citizenry. According to one study, issues raised in advertisements sponsored by interest groups—such as the Sierra Club—were viewed by voters as more credible and persuasive than issue ads sponsored by candidates (Groenendyk and Valentino 2002). In addition, the study by Groenendyk and Valentino found that voters tend to remember the issues raised by advocacy group commercials more easily than they remember the issues discussed in a candidate-sponsored advertisement. Groenendyk and Valentino gave two reasons for this: a candidate is seen as less competent on the issue than an advocacy group; and a candidate is viewed as self-serving.

The attitudes of voters may also influence the effectiveness of campaign commercials. Garramone (1983) illustrated that voters who approach TV commercials with a desire to learn about an issue are more likely to absorb the messages of that commercial than are viewers who are much less motivated. As Garramone (1983) put it:

The pattern of findings indicates that motivation for attending to a political ad influences the processing of the ad and subsequent effects on issue knowledge and impression formation. Individuals attending to learn issue stands were more likely to do so and were also more confident in their having done so than were individuals attending to form a personality impression (pg. 72).

Regardless of whether the use of issues in political ads informs the public or not, there is evidence to suggest that a candidate's standing with the electorate can be

enhanced if he or she uses issues rather than images in their campaign spots. Kahn and Geer (1994) illustrated that advertisements containing issue discussions were likely to convince voters that a candidate was competent on the issue raised in the commercial. For example, respondents who saw a commercial promoting a candidate's concern for education viewed that candidate as qualified to deal with education. Kahn and Geer (1994) also found that voters are more tolerant of negative advertisements when those ads focus on issues and are supported by evidence.

Another study concluded that a well-designed political advertising campaign will not only "increase the electorate's knowledge about the candidate and his featured issue positions," but also "elevate emphasized issues and attributes higher on the voters' agenda of decisional criteria" (Atkin and Heald 1976, 228). Put another way, political ads can help voters learn about the issue positions of the candidates and then push those issues onto the voters' radar screen, thus helping a candidate influence the issues citizens consider when they enter the voting booth. Likewise, Kaid and Sanders (1978) found that issue advertisements—more so than image ads—result in voters having a more positive evaluation of a candidate.

Political nominees who are well known to the public have also found that issues are much more effective in their advertising campaigns than are images, while those who are not familiar to the public do better with image spots (West 1994-1995). Moreover, candidates tend to turn to issue ads during general elections more so than in primaries, where candidates from the same party focus on personality as a way to differentiate themselves from opponents who are substantively similar to them (West 1994-1995).

### **Conclusion**

The use of issues in political commercials is not simple to discuss. Throughout its murky history, the issue advertisement has been both difficult to define and identify. Moreover, scholars have disagreed over how effective they are in informing the public about the issue positions of the candidates. Nevertheless, a clear understanding of how issues are used in political campaigns is important, especially as America moves into the 2004 presidential campaign.

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