Air Wars

Television Advertising in Election Campaigns 1952–1996

Second Edition

Darrell M. West

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TELEVISION ADVERTISING IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS, 1952–1996

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Preface

Since the publication of the first edition of this book in 1993 there have been several new developments in the advertising world: Internet ads for candidates, free television time for one- to two-minute presentations, new technology that allows candidates to manipulate ad images electronically with ease, increasing recognition of the importance of visual messages in ads, changes in the relationship between ads and the news, controversies over the use of ad watches by the media, growing use of issue advocacy ads by independent groups, and computerized ad-buy strategies to target candidate messages. It therefore is timely to have a new edition that addresses each of these developments with new material from the 1996 campaign. Several new chapters on ad buys, voluntary codes, and playing the blame game have been added. In addition, all of the remaining chapters have been thoroughly revised and updated. Chapter 1 discusses how ads are put together. It emphasizes the attention media consultants pay to music, color, editing techniques, audio voice-overs, code words, visual text, and visual images. Chapter 2 shows how candidates buy air time. These decisions—called ad buys—are the most fundamental decisions made in any campaign.

Chapter 3 reviews the messages presented in ads broadcast over the air as well as through the relatively new medium of the Internet. Chapter 4 looks at the relationship between ads and the news, focusing in particular on how reporters cover political ads. Chapter 5 examines controversies over ad watches by the media and other voluntary approaches to policing advertisements.

Chapters 6 through 9 investigate the impact of ads on viewers, looking at what citizens learn about the candidates through ads, the effects of ads on the agenda, candidate efforts through adver-

tising to shift the standards voters use to assess contestants, and the way candidates play the blame game to shift responsibility for negative campaigning to their opponents. Chapter 10 puts advertising within the framework of democratic elections and shows that the risk of voter manipulation remains an important problem in democracies. Several possible remedies for dealing with this problem are discussed.

In each of these chapters, I have undertaken new data collection on the 1996 campaign. This includes interviews with media consultants and political reporters, new material on ad buys, a review of issue-advocacy advertising, content analyses of campaign ads and media coverage of ads, a national survey of local television news directors and newspaper managing editors about ad watches, a review of voluntary approaches to ad oversight, alternative communications avenues such as debates and free television time, a national public opinion survey undertaken during the last week of the 1996 campaign, and the results of focus groups in which voters were shown ads and ad watches.

I would like to thank the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate for grant support on the 1996 phase of this project. Portions of Chapter 2 appeared earlier in "Ad Buys in Presidential Campaigns," *Political Communication* 12 (July–September 1995), coauthored with Montague Kern, Dean Alger, and Janice Goggin.

I appreciate the helpful comments on the first edition that were made by Dean Alger, Craig Allen, Michael Delli Carpini, Brett Clifton, Robert Dewhirst, Richard Francis, Chris Goodwin, Matthew Kerbel, Diana Mutz, and Michell Wilson. Their suggestions made this edition more readable and comprehensive.

The staff members at Congressional Quarterly deserve a big thank you. I am grateful to executive editor David Tarr and his assistant Gwenda Larsen for their help in making this edition possible. Debbie K. Hardin did a masterful job of copyediting the manuscript. Talia Greenberg made sure production ran smoothly. Gary Hallquist of Prime Time Video produced the still photos for this book from ad videotapes. Jack Combs provided invaluable help on the national public opinion surveys conducted for this book.

I also would like to thank the Department of Political Science and the John Hazen White Sr. Public Opinion Laboratory of the A. Alfred Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions at Brown University for their help on this project.

Preface to the First Edition

Few topics have generated greater interest among observers of the media recently than the widespread use of television advertising in election campaigns. Commercials have become one of the dominant means of communication in contemporary races. Citizens are bombarded with millions of dollars' worth of ads during the political season.[1] Today, it is nearly impossible to imagine campaigns without political commercials.

Air Wars: Television Advertising in Election Campaigns, 1952–1992 addresses two central questions about television advertisements. First, how much influence do ads have on viewers? Much has been made about the presumed ability of campaign commercials to alter public opinion, but there have been few detailed historical studies of this subject.[2] Aside from analyses of ad content, which have addressed changes in the television spots themselves, not many projects have examined the effects of political commercials over several decades. This omission makes it difficult to know whether particular results are limited to the election under consideration or represent a more general feature.

Second, are campaign ads good for democracy? Many observers have voiced complaints about democracy in the United States—for example, that citizens lack knowledge and that the nation's representative institutions are weak.[3] However, few developments have prompted more concern about the overall health of democracy than the reliance by candidates for public office on paid television advertisements. Critics charge that campaign commercials undermine democracy by shortening public discourse to thirty-second segments. Moreover, advertisements are said to distort citizens' assessments of the candidates because of the tendency of individuals to engage in "information grazing." If people only periodically

tune in to the campaign, there is a potential danger to decision making.[4]

The research reported in this book adopts a fundamentally different perspective than is found elsewhere in the media studies field. To explore the impact of the media, scholars have used psychological models linked to citizens' exposure to and processing of information provided by the media.[5] The assumption is that individual attributes, such as background qualities and personal orientations, are the primary explanations of viewers' responses. Although these models have been useful for general analysis, they cannot be used for gauging the impact of campaign commercials. Psychological perspectives common in news studies need to be supplemented with material from the broader fabric of campaign politics. Spot advertising is inherently a political phenomenon in which the context of ad development, broadcasting, and response is quite important. The same type of commercial can have remarkably different consequences depending on the electoral setting and behavior of the candidates. Therefore, I have developed a contextual model of advertising that looks at the structure of the campaign system, the strategic behavior of candidates, and coverage by the news media. Paid advertisements cannot be understood without considering these vital features of the political context.

Chapter 1 introduces the framework on which the book rests. Chapter 2 reviews the methodology of advertising research. The analysis of campaign advertisements poses a number of challenges, including how best to study ads, how to measure viewers' reactions, and how to disentangle the effects of advertising from their possible influences on citizens. In Chapter 2 I discuss how I addressed these challenges.

Chapter 3 investigates the strategic aspects of advertising by looking at the content of ads from 1952 to 1992. I demonstrate that candidates' appeals have varied considerably over the years but that the level of specificity increased in the 1980s and 1990s. Commercials have become quite negative in style of presentation, although this trend is not without precedent in the period immediately after World War II.

Chapter 4 studies changes in media coverage of campaign advertisements since 1952. No aspect of political spots has undergone more dramatic development than this one. Journalistic attention to ads has increased substantially over the past forty years. However, much of the coverage of advertising emphasizes strategic rationales

Lynda Lee Kaid, Marvin Kalb, Patrick Kenney, Margaret Latimer, Richard Marshall, Robert McClure, Jonathan Nagler, Eric Nordlinger, Victor Ottati, Thomas Patterson, Nancy Rosenblum, Annie Schmitt, John Zaller, and Alan Zuckerman made valuable comments on papers drawn from this manuscript. Dean Alger, Tim Cook, Ann Crigler, Marion Just, and Montague Kern shared their reactions with me during our collaboration on the 1992 media project.

Outstanding research assistance was provided by a number of undergraduate and graduate students at Brown University: Rima Alaily, Christopher Goodwin, Leslyn Hall, Jonathan Klarfeld, Sara Leppo, Nancy Lublin, Dan Miller, Cristina Muñoz-Fazakes, Martin Sabarsky, Daryl Wiesen, Matthew Woods, and Jonathan Wyche. This book could not have been written without them. I am deeply grateful to the scores of students who have taken my "Campaigns and Elections" and "Politics and the Mass Media" courses in recent years. The chance to bounce preliminary ideas off bright and engaging students was invaluable.

Videotapes of commercials of past races were provided by Julian Kanter of the Political Commercial Archive at the University of Oklahoma. Patrick Devlin of the University of Rhode Island also made available selected ads from previous elections. Marilyn Fancher of the Broadcast Division at the Republican National Committee helped arrange permission to use the 1988 Bush ads in this research. Frank Greer and Alexa Suma provided access to Clinton's and Bush's 1992 ads, respectively. Video Plus provided copies of Perot's thirty-minute infomercials. In addition, I benefited enormously from a number of lengthy interviews conducted with prominent journalists in 1992: Brooks Jackson of the Cable News Network, Elizabeth Kolbert of the *New York Times,* Howard Kurtz of the *Washington Post,* Mara Liasson of National Public Radio, Renee Loth of the *Boston Globe,* and Tom Rosenstiel of the *Los Angeles Times.* My thanks to these individuals for sharing their impressions with me. Conversations over the years with journalists in Rhode Island also have sharpened my understanding of campaigns and elections. Thank you to M. Charles Bakst, Russ Garland, Katherine Gregg, Scott MacKay, John Martin, and Mark Patinkin of the *Providence Journal;* Dyana Koelsch, Jim Taricani, Doug White, and Patrice Wood at WJAR-TV; Sean Daly, David Layman, and Barbara Meagher of WLNE-TV; Walter Cryan of WPRI-TV; Paul Zangari of WSBE-TV; Steve Kass and

behind the commercials and the electoral consequences for candidates, rather than the content of the commercials.

Chapters 5 through 7 investigate voters' reactions to television spots. Chapter 5 relies on models of learning to examine the effects of advertising on views about the candidates. What do citizens learn about the contestants based on exposure to television ads? I show that ads contribute to citizens' impressions of candidates' prospects and images.

Agenda setting is the subject of Chapter 6. How do ads influence voters' feelings regarding public priorities? Using citizens' assessments of the most important problems facing the country and the most significant events of the campaign, I investigate how ads influence and reflect voters' feelings regarding public priorities. Leaders are able to shift citizens' impressions through the ephemeral and media-dominated world of campaign events as well as through public policy.

Chapter 7 examines priming in election campaigns: Can political commercials change the standards by which candidates are evaluated? I distinguish priming from defusing and show that at various times television advertising can either elevate (prime) or weaken (defuse) the importance of particular factors in vote choice. Candidates can have considerable success by defusing matters that are problematic for themselves or by playing the blame game so that their opponent is seen as responsible for turning the tone of the campaign negative.

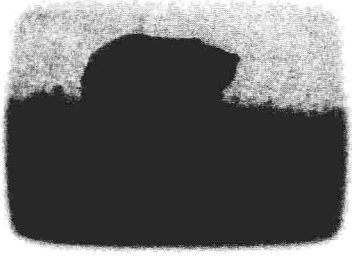
Chapter 8 discusses the significance for democratic elections of the results obtained in this study. Elections are the lifeblood of democratic political systems. They are a means by which ordinary people acting together determine who leads the country. However, the heavy reliance on television advertising at a time when the political system places great emphasis on personal popularity has raised doubts about the quality of the information presented during election campaigns and about how voters make decisions. Chapter 8 reviews these concerns and assesses the contexts in which ads are most problematic.

Many people deserve thanks for their assistance with this project. Steven Ansolabehere, Richard Brody, Doris A. Graber, Kathleen Jamieson, Dorothy Nesbit, and Michael Traugott gave careful readings to earlier versions of this manuscript. Their comments were quite helpful, and I owe them a lot. In addition, Thomas Anton, Kathleen Dolan, Ellen Hume, Shanto Iyengar, Tom James,

Television Advertising in Election Campaigns: A History in Pictures

1964

Johnson's "Daisy" ad shocked viewers in 1964.



1984

Reagan's "Bear in the Woods" ad was the most remembered spot in 1984.

1988

Bush's "Revolving Door" ad was one of the most notorious spots of 1988.

1990

Helms's 1990 spot, "White Hands," helped him win reelection.

Arlene Violet of WHJJ Radio; and Mary Ann Sorrentino of WPRO Radio.

Jeanne Ferris of Congressional Quarterly deserves kudos for her assistance on my manuscript. She made a number of helpful suggestions, which strengthened the arguments developed in this book. Nola Healy Lynch improved the manuscript considerably through a superb job of copyediting, and Laura Carter performed admirably as production editor despite the difficulties of intercontinental communication. Every author should be fortunate enough to have editors like these.

The John Hazen White Sr. Public Opinion Laboratory of the A. Alfred Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions at Brown University, the Institute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina, the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan, and the CBS/*New York Times* survey operation facilitated this analysis by making available data from a number of public opinion surveys. Jack Combs, research administrator at the Taubman Center, and Matthew Woods deserve thanks for making sure that our 1992 surveys ran smoothly. A sabbatical leave at Nuffield College of Oxford University provided a stimulating environment as I was wrapping up this project. My thanks to Byron Shafer for helping to arrange the time for writing.

A special debt of gratitude is owed to John Hazen White Sr., president of Taco, Inc., of Cranston, Rhode Island, and his wife, Happy White. At a time of great crisis within the state, the White family provided a generous endowment for the Public Opinion Laboratory at Brown. This timely contribution helped make possible the analysis presented in this book.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the financial support of the National Science Foundation (SES-9122729), MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Twentieth Century Fund, Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, Everett McKinley Dirksen Congressional Leadership Research Center, and the following units at Brown University: the Department of Political Science, the A. Alfred Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions, the Undergraduate Teaching and Research Assistantship program of the Dean of the College, and the Small Grants program of the Graduate School. None of these individuals or organizations bears any responsibility for the interpretations presented here.

1996

In 1996, Clinton surrounded himself with police officers to buttress his credentials as a leader who is tough on crime.

1996

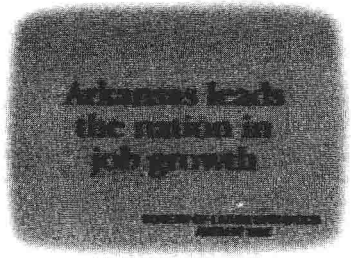
Democrats turned Dole and Gingrich into Siamese twins in the 1996 campaign.

1996

The Republican National Committee attacked Democrats across the country in 1996 for "being too liberal."

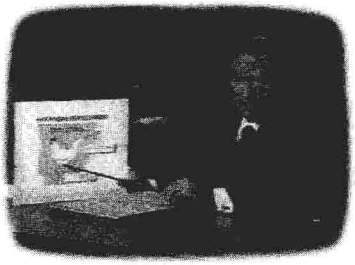
1996

Dole's "American hero" ad documented his war wounds.



1992

Clinton pioneered ads with footnotes to document his claims in 1992.



1992

In 1992, Perot attacked Clinton's job-creation record in Arkansas.

1992

Bush used a desolate landscape in 1992 to argue Clinton was too big of a risk.

1993

"Harry and Louise" helped undermine support for Clinton's health care reform in 1993.

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