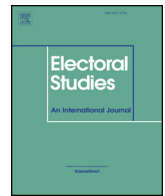




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The mobilizing and demobilizing effects of political TV ads: A midterm election study[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Does exposure to political TV ads affect voter turnout? And does the effect depend on whether the ads are positive or negative? Comparing areas that in 2014 were accidentally exposed to intense political advertising to areas that were not, we find that exposure to political commercials stimulates the electorate when the volume of negative ads is equivalent to the volume of positive ads. As the volume of negative ads increases, however, the effect of exposure on turnout significantly decreases and even reverses in sign. This research helps reconcile important debates in the literature, as it is the first aggregate-level study to find evidence consistent with the separate mobilizing and demobilizing effects of political advertising identified in laboratory experiments.

Televised political commercials have become all but ubiquitous in the U.S.¹ Yet the effects of political advertising on voter turnout are still a matter of debate in the literature. While experimental research conducted in a laboratory setting has shown political ads to have substantial mobilizing and demobilizing effects depending on their tone (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995), scholars examining the impact of actual campaigns using aggregate data have been hard pressed to find effects on voter turnout of ad exposure (Simon and Stern, 1955; Huber and Arceneaux, 2007; Krasno and Green, 2008; Keele and Titiunik, 2014) or of campaign tone (Krasno and Green, 2008). In this paper, we reconcile these contradictory findings with results from the first aggregate-level study to find evidence consistent with the separate mobilizing and demobilizing effects found in laboratory experiments. We do so by improving upon the methodology used to analyze observational data, by using more precise measures of media exposure, and by devising a research design that enables us to uncover significant campaign effects that may have been conflated in prior studies.

Using a carefully constructed comparison of areas that in 2014 were accidentally exposed to intense political advertising to areas that were not, we show that exposure to political TV ads increases precinct-level turnout by an average of 2–3 percentage points, whenever the volume of negative ads is equivalent to the volume of positive ads. As the

volume of negative ads increases, however, the estimated effect of exposure on turnout significantly decreases. In the extreme, areas in our dataset that were exposed to the highest volume of negative advertising are estimated to have lower turnout levels than areas not exposed to any ads. The differences are not statistically significant, however.

To isolate the effects of political TV ads on voter turnout, we follow an identification strategy that combines features of the research designs pioneered by Huber and Arceneaux (2007) and Krasno and Green (2008). Like Huber and Arceneaux (2007), we exploit the natural experiment that occurs when ads meant for states with competitive elections are aired in states without competitive elections as a result of a mismatch between media markets and state boundaries. In so doing, we overcome the bias of most observational research designs by breaking the links between media exposure and unmeasured determinants of political behavior (because of strategically targeted advertising or the use of self-reported measures of exposure), on one hand, and concurrent on-the-ground campaign activities, on the other. Like Krasno and Green (2008), we use actual voter participation records to avoid the bias that might be introduced from self-reported measures of intent to vote and we distinguish the ads by tone allowing negative ads to have a different effect on turnout than positive ads. However, we use more precise measures of political TV ad exposure than existing aggregate-level studies by taking into consideration the TV ads broadcast

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¹ Since the late 1990s/early 2000s, the number of political TV ads aired has almost tripled (Ridout et al., 2016). In 2014, more than \$1.4 billion was spent on about 2.5 million airings in federal and gubernatorial races alone (Fowler and Ridout, 2014).

not only via cable and satellite but also over-the-air. In addition, we study the impact of out-of-state ads, allowing us to focus on specific pathways through which exposure to advertising has an effect on turnout, effects that might have been conflated in previous studies.

Specifically, we study the effects of exposure to televised political commercials aimed at voters in North Carolina or Georgia on South Carolina's precinct-level voter turnout in the 2014 midterm elections. South Carolina provides us with an ideal setting for our study. In the 2014 election, South Carolina did not have any major competitive races and almost two-thirds of its population was accidentally exposed to significant amounts of advertising from bordering states.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We begin by developing a theoretical framework of the mechanisms by which political TV ads might affect turnout and discuss their complexity and heterogeneity. In this section, we also theorize about the pathways captured by our estimates. Next, we detail our research design and explain how it differs from previous work, including the justification for our case selection, description of data, and model specification. Finally, we summarize the results, discuss them, and offer concluding remarks.

1. Theoretical framework

There are two main mechanisms for televised political commercials to affect turnout: activation and motivation.

First, political TV ads might boost turnout simply by informing or reminding the electorate that there is an election going on. We call this mechanism activation. In the process of watching TV, viewers are exposed to information about the upcoming election. The simple reminder of the election might activate their interest, which, in turn, might lead to their participation. Despite the fact that few ads mention “Election Day” or explicitly remind viewers to vote (Krasno and Goldstein, 2002; Krasno and Seltz, 2000), political commercials might, nevertheless, make the public aware of the election (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Finkel and Geer, 1998; Freedman et al., 2004).²

The effect of TV ads on turnout through the activation mechanism can only be positive by definition, and its magnitude will depend on, among other things, whether the electorate was already aware of the election. In the extreme case, if everybody already knows about the election, the activation effect of political ads should be zero. Conversely, if nobody knows about the election, the activation effect should be positive and potentially significant, as becoming aware of the election is a necessary first step towards participating in it. In general, we expect political ads to have higher activation effects in low-salience elections, i.e., elections without get-out-the-vote (GOTV) initiatives or on-the-ground campaigns, and among citizens who are not well-informed or politically engaged. For example, we anticipate smaller activation effects in presidential elections than in midterm elections, and in non-battleground states than in battleground states. The content and tone of the ads should not influence the size of the activation effect since an ad will function as an election reminder in the same way regardless of whether it is about one specific race or another or whether or not it is a negative ad. Additionally, we should expect diminishing marginal returns. Once the entire electorate has been informed or reminded that there is an election coming up, the activation effect of additional ads should be null or close to it.

Second, political TV ads might affect voter turnout by informing or priming voters about certain traits of the candidates, parties, and issues at stake as well as by reminding them of the demeanor of politics as usual. Scholars have found political advertising to be informative (Atkin and Heald, 1976; Brians and Wattenberg, 1996; Alvarez, 1998;

Gilens et al., 2007) and even persuasive at times (Huber and Arceneaux, 2007). In addition, similar to television news, political ads draw attention to some aspects of the election while ignoring others and, thus, might determine what comes to mind when voters ponder whether or not to participate (Gerber et al., 2011). Like television news, then, political ads might also “help to set the terms by which political judgments are reached and political choices made” (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, p.114). We call this mechanism motivation, as it refers to the power that ads might have to provide or take away motivations for the electorate to vote. We can envision several scenarios. For example, political ads, with their informational and emotional content, might (a) generate enthusiasm for a particular candidate, party, or issue position (Atkin and Heald, 1976), (b) inspire strong dislike for a particular candidate, party, or issue position, which might also be a powerful motivator for participating in an election (Fiorina and Shepsle, 1989), (c) dissuade voters from voting for a particular candidate, party, or issue position, after they had decided to do so and leave them with no good alternative other than abstention (Krupnikov, 2011), or (d) turn people off from politics all together by reminding voters of the animosity involved (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995). While the first two would increase turnout, the latter two would decrease it. In general, through this mechanism, political ads might stimulate voter turnout by increasing the degree to which voters care about the outcome of the election or decrease voter turnout by convincing the electorate of the absence of good choices.

Unlike activation effects, we expect motivation effects to be more pronounced (in either direction) in high-salience elections, where the stakes are higher. Also unlike activation effects, we suspect that the tone and the content of the advertising campaign matter when it comes to motivation effects. For example, in lab experiments, ads that speak positively about candidates have been found to be mobilizing while ads that speak poorly of candidates have been found to be demobilizing (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995). Motivation effects might be heterogeneous based on the partisanship balance of the ads (Huber and Arceneaux, 2007) and be particularly strong for certain segments of the population, such as non-partisans (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995), those with a low level of political knowledge (Freedman et al., 2004), and those with an initial low intention to vote (Hillygus, 2008), among others (Fridkin and Kenney, 2011).

The net effect of political advertising on turnout can be understood as the combination of the effects they have through the different pathways within the activation and motivation mechanisms. Sometimes the effects will offset each other, sometimes they will reinforce each other. The size and direction of the net effect might, therefore, depend not only on the type of election (presidential versus midterm, competitiveness, salience, etc.) but also on the content of the campaign (tone, partisanship balance, etc.), and the characteristics of the electorate (underlying engagement, partisanship, level of information, etc.).

The complexity and heterogeneity of political advertising effects on turnout might partly explain the mixed results found in the literature. For example, while some scholars have found that exposure to political TV ads mobilizes the electorate (Finkel and Geer, 1998; Freedman et al., 2004; Gimpel et al., 2007; Hillygus, 2008; Geer, 2008), others have found that it might actually demobilize it (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1999; Goldstein and Freedman, 2002). Still others—typically exploiting natural experiments—have found no effects in either direction (Simon and Stern, 1955; Huber and Arceneaux, 2007; Krasno and Green, 2008; Keele and Tituniuk, 2014). Similarly mixed is the evidence on the effect of campaign tone on political engagement. Studies have found that negative ads increase voter participation (Freedman and Goldstein, 1999; Wattenberg and Brians, 1999; Kahn and Kenney, 1999; Goldstein and Freedman, 2002; Djupe and Peterson, 2002; Geer and Lau, 2006; Gann Hall and Bonneau, 2013), depress it under certain circumstances (Lau and Pomper, 2001; Stevens et al., 2008; Krupnikov, 2011), or have no discernible effects (Finkel and Geer, 1998; Lau et al., 1999; Clinton

² While many ads are aired during news programs, they also appear on a wide range of other types of broadcasts, including films, sporting events, game shows, and soap operas. Thus, even individuals not interested in politics are inadvertently exposed to televised political commercials.

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