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ABSTRACT

The method of campaigning politically on television has changed markedly between 1952, when speeches by candidates were the prevalent mode of television campaigning, and 1972, when 60-second and 30-second spot announcements had almost replaced broadcast addresses. However, studies show that spots do not constitute an important source of political information for any significant number of eligible voters, nor do spots affect voter turnout. A variety of factors suggest the desirability of prohibiting political advertising on television and radio (as in Britain) and of requiring publicly licensed broadcasters to make free time available for all major candidates to appear in an uncontrolled format. (Graphs illustrating various points are interspersed throughout the paper.) (JM)

Broadcast Political Advertisements and the Public Political Debate

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It is no secret that, since 1952 when television first played a part in political campaigning, candidates' use of broadcast media has turned increasingly toward the 60-second and 30-second 'spot' announcement and the 5-minute 'trailer' during prime time and away from the broadcasting of candidates' speeches. In 1952, there were almost no other broadcasts than those of the candidates' speeches. By 1960, exclusive of the four televised debates, of 48 Nixon speeches, 4 were nationally televised, and of 78 Kennedy speeches, only one--the election eve speech--was nationally televised. In 1964, both Goldwater and Johnson televised only one speech a piece. By 1972, 'spot' announcements had nearly driven out broadcast addresses: Nixon broadcast only one speech on prime time television nationally, and McGovern broadcast no 'live' addresses. Nixon did give 13 radio addresses on a range of issues, under the auspices of CREP, usually scheduled just after noon, chiefly to get his views on record and have the speeches reported in the press. McGovern purchased time for a small number of half-hour discussions of issues.

A quantitative measure has been provided by Stanley Kelley of this remarkable shift.[1]

Mean length of party telecasts:

1952	29 minutes
1956	13 minutes
1960	14 minutes

Modal length of televised broadcasts:

1952	30 minutes
1956	5 minutes
1960	5 minutes

Decline in the use of the 5-minute 'trailer' probably had reduced the modal length to less than 60 seconds by 1972.

A corollary measure of the increasing use of 'spots' is provided by the increased expenditures for television (and radio) time which, as broadcast speeches have declined and 'spots' increased, display ever heavier use of advertising 'spots' heavily concentrated in prime time.[2]

Comparison of TV/Radio Network and Local Charges, General Election

	1956	1960	1964	1968
GOP	$ 5.38 M	$ 7.56 M	$13.03 M	$22.51 M
DEMO	4.12	6.21	11.01	15.45
OTHER	.32	.43	.56	2.45
TOTAL	9.80	14.20	24.60	40.40

By 1968, total broadcasting expenses by parties had reached $ 55.73 million, with $ 27.86 million spent by Republicans and $ 27.73 million spent by Democrats, an overall increase from 1964 of 70%.[3]

Although the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 limited spending for media advertising, outlays were still substantial; 1972 time-charges for network and local broadcasts were ahead of 1956

totals. The Republicans spent for all media advertising their legal limit of $ 14.3 million, of which $ 4.3 million was spent for broadcast ads in the general election. Democrats spent $ 6.2 million of their $ 14.3 million limit on broadcast ads during the same period.[4]

Who is reached by this swollen quantity of television 'spots'? Potentially, 'spots' reach a substantial majority of the voting-age population. A.C. Nielsen has reported in 1972 publications that 96% of United States households have television receivers, and that nearly 70% of these households watch television between 7:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. on an average day. When 'spots' are used in saturation during the last two weeks of a campaign, nearly maximum exposure is possible. Moreover, 'spots' reach a cross-section of the voting-age population; selective exposure is apparently overcome. A study of exposure to television ads during gubernatorial campaigns in Wisconsin and Colorado in 1972 displayed nearly equal exposure of partisans to ads of major party candidates.[5]

	Favor GOP	Undecided/DST	Favor DEMO
Seen more GOP ads	31 %	27 %	32 %
Seen equal number	48	53	37
Seen more DEMO ads	21	20	31

Finally, 'spots' reach people who expect to be entertained. It was discovered as early as 1952 that audiences for political telecasts shrank when entertainment programs were also available.[6] That is hardly surprising; prime time television is a vehicle for entertainment. Moreover, judgments of the quality of political 'spots' have employed entertainment standards; viewers were asked to rate ads as "generally

entertaining," "generally boring," or in between."[7] The expectation of being entertained obviously qualifies the impact of political information upon an audience otherwise very large and containing opposite partisans and the uncommitted.

Although the potential audience for 'spots' is immense, for whom do they constitute an important source of political information? The question is simpler to answer in the negative. 'Spots' are not an important source of information for people of strong partisan affiliations; such people make up their minds about their vote before the campaign begins.[8]

	1952	1956
Knew their vote all along	30 %	44 %
Decided when candidates chosen	35 %	32 %
TOTAL	65 %	76 %

Nor are 'spots' an important source of information for people who are strongly interested in the campaign; they, too, make up their minds early. Moreover, the highly interested depend upon a mix of many information media--newspapers, magazines, television and radio; in such a mix, television ads appear insignificant. The following table indicates also that people who care little about the campaign also are much less exposed to media sources of political information of any kind.[9]

Media Exposure and Levels of Political Involvement

Involvement	Media Exposure				
	Low 0	1	2	3	High 4
High 4	5 %	10 %	23 %	41 %	46 %
3	13	24	32	30	31
2	33	35	27	21	17
1	49	31	18	8	6

Nor are 'spots' important for those who split their votes. The ticket-splitter is a highly motivated voter, not similar to the self-styled "independent' voter who is really a disinterested voter. The ticket-splitter rates televised ads very low on an 11-point scale, as the following table shows. For him, important sources are those over which candidates exert the least control.[10]

Rating of Sources of Campaign Information

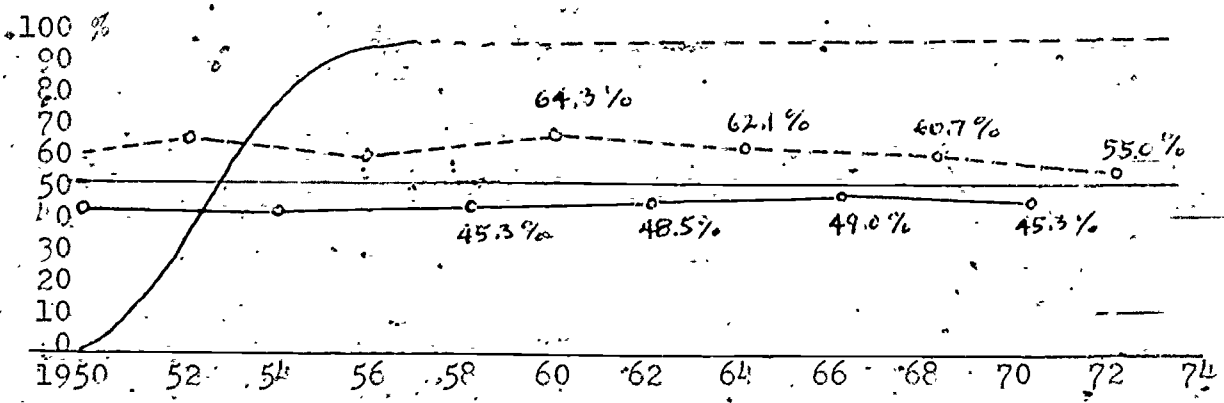
	Undecideds	Ticket-splitters
Interpersonal		
Talk with family	5.5	5.6
Contact with candidate	5.0	5.2
Talk with friends	4.8	5.0
Audio-Visual		
TV news	6.7	6.8
TV documentaries/specials	6.5	6.6
TV editorials	5.7	5.6
TV talk shows	5.6	5.6
TV educational programs	5.6	5.9
TV ads	3.6	3.6

	Undecideds	Ticket-splitters
Print		
News stories and editorials	5.8	5.9+
Newspaper ads	3.8	3.7
Billboards	2.4	2.1

If not political partisans or those highly interested in politcs or ticket-splitters, then who are those for whom 'spots' are an important source of political information? Apparently, the answer is: those who do not care much about the campaign, those who do not care much about the outcome, those who are; therefore, persistent non-voters, those who do not know about the issues and inaccurately perceive candidates' stands, those who are vote "changers" (switch parties from one election to the next) or "floaters" (those who change their minds at least once during the campaign. Although potentially this group could be as large as 25 % of eligible voters who express an intention to vote, their numbers are always seriously eroded by non-voting. Moreover, because of their fundamental disinterest, few pay close attention to the ads. The study in Wisconsin and Colorado found that only 28 % of those exposed to 'spots' paid close attention to them; 42 % paid "some" attention; 29 % paid no attention.[11]

Although television political 'spots' do not constitute an important source of political information for any significant number of eligible voters, what direct evidence have we of the effect of 'spots'? First, the increase in 'spot' announcements--and of television generally--has not affected voter turnout as television ownership has become almost universal, as the following graph illustrates.[12]

Turnout rate Before and After Television Saturation



In fact, there is a higher correlation between newspaper reading and turnout than between television use and turnout:[13]

TV	Newspaper	% Voted	N
own	read	83 %	1,073
don't own	read	73 %	147
own	don't read	61 %	167
don't own	don't read	41 %	103

What influence do 'spots' exert upon the low interest voters for whom they may, presumably, provide an important source of political information? We may reason that 'spots' may provide such voters with information that would tend to influence a preference only if the information were uniformly favorable to a single party candidate. But, as has already been shown, exposure to 'spots' is not uni-partisan. Moreover, attention paid to 'spots' is not seriously skewed by partisan preference:[14]

Attention Paid to Televised Political Ads

	Favor GOP	UnD/DST	Favor Demo
Closer attention to GOP ads	22 %	4 %	2 %
Equal	74	91	81
Closer attention to DEMO ads	4	5	17

And, in all the studies I have seen, it has proved impossible to separate the effect of television ads from the effect of television exposure generally, therefore it is impossible to know whether candidate-controlled exposure ('spots') or uncontrolled exposure (news) affects low-interest voters. For example, a study of the effects of the "democrats for Nixon" 'spots' in 1972, which ridiculed McGovern's positions on defense spending, welfare and his alleged inconsistency, showed that over the last six weeks of the campaign voters became more aware of Nixon's and McGovern's beliefs on spending and consistency, but could not directly attribute that change to 'spots.'

Percent Improvement in Understanding

	McG on Defense	Nixon on defense	McG Consistency
High Interest (high exposure)	+23	+19	-3
Low Interest (high exposure)	+33	+12	+9
Moderate Interest (high exposure)	+30	+26	+1
Low Interest (low exposure)	+12	+8	-4
High Interest (low exposure)	+8	+27	-8

Moreover, when we subtract the change that occurred without exposure, the difference between high interest and low interest voters is small indeed, probably within the error margin for a sample of this size (±5 %) and therefore insignificant.[15] It does not follow, then, from what empirical evidence there is, that low interest voters are more likely to be influenced by 'spots' than other segments of the voting public.

Although there is no evidence that 'spots' have so far exerted important effect upon the political decision process, there are still reasons for concern about their continued use. First, persistent employment of 'spots' reinforces the notion that an electoral decision is no more important than selection of an antacid. Such a long-range cultural impact is predictable and undesirable. Moreover, most memorable 'spots' have employed fear-appeals and/or over-simplification of an opponent's position in order to arouse doubts that cannot easily be allayed in the short term of a campaign. For example, the Democratic party ad in 1964 picturing a girl licking an ice-cream cone while a voice explained that strontium 90 was building up in milk supplies due to nuclear testing, and that Barry Goldwater opposed the test ban treaty. Or, Nixon supporters' law and order 'spots' in 1968, of the Connally group's ads in 1972 for Nixon that showed a hand sweeping toy ships and planes off a table-top while a voice explained that McGovern planned to emasculate American defenses. Such ads seem to fall into the category of things euphemistically labelled "dirty tricks." Finally, continued use of 'spots' may render the electoral decision more irrational if false or misleading information is given to people who do not care enough to check its accuracy.

Therefore, although my worries about the effects on political debate and decision-making of the decline and near-disappearance of broadcast discourse appear to be unfounded in terms of measurable consequences to date, there do seem to be some reasons for taking action. What action? the prohibition of all political advertising on television and radio, which has been repeatedly proposed and is the status quo in Britain, is still desirable. Such a prohibition ought

to be linked with a requirement that publicly licensed broadcasters make available free time for all major candidates to appear in an uncontrolled format preempting all other television programming simultaneously.[16] Such arrangements would substantially remove the apprehensions many have had that televised political 'spots' may subvert the full discussion of issues and the full disclosure of candidate competence.

Endnotes:

[1]"Campaign Debates: Some Facts and Issues," Public Opinion Quarterly, 26 (Fall, 1962), 359.

[2]Figures have been rounded to proportion of millions of dollars from FCC data reported in Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, 27 (September 12, 1969), 1702.

[3]Ibid., p. 1701.

[4]Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report, 31 (May 12, 1973), 1134.

[5]Charles K. Atkin et al, "Quality versus Quantity in Televised Political Ads," Public Opinion Quarterly, 37 (Summer, 1973), 216.

[6]Kelley, "Campaign Debates: Some Facts and Issues," p. 356.

[7]Atkin, "Quality versus Quantity," p. 216.

[8]Angus Campbell, Phillip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes, The American Voter, An Abridgment (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1964), pp. 41-2.

[9]V. O. Key, Jr., Public Opinion and American Democracy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), p. 358.

[10]Walter DeVries and Lance Tarrance, Jr., The Ticket-Splitter (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Erdmanns Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 75-6.

[11]Atkin, "Quality versus Quantity," p. 216.

[12]The data on turnout rate is adapted from a chart in Angus Campbell, "Has Television Reshaped Politics?" Columbia Journalism Review, I (1963), up-dated with figures from Congressional Quarterly Almanacs for 1970 and 1972.

[13]William A. Glasser, "Television and Voting Turnout," Public Opinion Quarterly, 29 (Spring, 1965), 78.

[14]Atkin, "Quality versus Quantity," p. 216.

[15]Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure, Political Advertising: Voter Reaction to Televised Political Commercials. Citizen's Research Foundation Study, No. 23 (1974).

[16]Twentieth Century Fund, Voter's Time: Report . . . on Campaign Costs in the Electronic Era (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1969), developed these proposals.