

Effective Ads and Social Media Promotion

Political messages are fascinating not only because of the way they are put together but also because of their ability to influence voters. People are not equally susceptible to the media, and political observers have long tried to find out how media power actually operates.¹ Consultants judge the effectiveness of ads and social media outreach by the ultimate results—who wins. This type of test, however, is never possible to complete until after the election. It leads invariably to the immutable law of communications: Winners have great ads and tweets, losers do not.

As an alternative, journalists evaluate communications by asking voters to indicate whether commercials influenced them. When asked directly whether television commercials helped them decide how to vote, most voters say they did not. For example, the results of a Media Studies Center survey placed ads at the bottom of the heap in terms of possible information sources. Whereas 45 percent of voters felt they learned a lot from debates, 32 percent cited newspaper stories, 30 percent pointed to television news stories, and just 5 percent believed they learned a lot from political ads. When asked directly about ads in a *USA Today*/Gallup poll, only 8 percent reported that presidential candidate ads had changed their views.²

But this is not a meaningful way of looking at advertising. Such responses undoubtedly reflect an unwillingness to admit that external agents have any effect on individual voting behavior. Many people firmly believe that they make up their minds independently of partisan campaign ads. Much in the same way teenagers do not like to concede parental influence, few voters are willing to admit they are influenced by television.

In studying campaign communications, one needs to emphasize the overall context in which people make decisions. The same ad or tweet can have very different consequences depending on the way an opponent responds, the nature of media coverage, and the predispositions of the viewer.

These ideas are central to understanding campaign communications. Commercials cannot be explored in isolation from candidate behavior and the general flow of campaign information. An analysis of political spots, digital commercials, and social media outreach requires a keen awareness of advertising principles (such as stereotyping, association, demonization, and code

words), production techniques (i.e., visual images, visual text, music, color, editing, and voice-overs), the role of money, qualities of effective tweets, and third-party validation of campaign messages.

PRINCIPLES OF ADVERTISING

Strategists use the principles of stereotyping, association, demonization, and code words to influence the electorate. A *stereotype* refers to a common portrait or an oversimplified judgment that people hold toward groups or sets of individuals. For example, Republicans are often portrayed as strong on defense but not very compassionate toward poor people or concerned about “fairness.” Democrats are viewed as caring and compassionate toward the downtrodden but in favor of government services. Because ads are brief, campaigners evoke stereotypes knowing they appeal to voters’ commonly held views.

However, ads and tweets cannot create perceptions that do not already exist in people’s minds. There must be a kernel of truth in the stereotype for these types of appeals to be effective. If people do not already think that college professors are absentminded, nurses are caring, or car salespeople are sleazy, it is hard for election ads to play to these sentiments.

Association is based on linking a candidate or cause to some other idea or person. Politicians love to connect themselves to widely esteemed popular objects while tying their opponents to things that are unpopular, controversial, or divisive. Flags, patriotism, and prominent celebrities are examples of objects with which candidates surround themselves. In contrast, opponents are pictured with unpopular causes or organizations or cast in a light that bonds them to unfavorable objects such as higher taxes, funding cuts for social programs, and ties to fringe groups or corporate “big money.”³

It has been popular to portray liberals as leftist-leaning candidates who are not to be trusted. When Kerry received the Democratic nomination, opponents sought to tie him to controversial Vietnam War protester and actress Jane Fonda. The Swift Boat Veterans for Truth ran an ad titled “Friends” that asserted, “Even before Jane Fonda went to Hanoi to meet with the enemy and mock America, John Kerry secretly met with enemy leaders in Paris. . . . Jane Fonda apologized for her activities, but John Kerry refuses to.”⁴

In the campaign for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton used association techniques to tie Obama to controversial African American minister Jeremiah Wright, Obama’s hometown minister at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Using videos of Wright complaining that America was “the No. 1 killer in the world” and that the U.S. government had “started the AIDS virus,” she suggested that Obama was outside the political mainstream because he associated with such a controversial speaker.⁵

However, after endorsements by Warren Buffett and Colin Powell, Obama ran spots touting support by these prominent Americans and used these associations to make the point that he represented a safe choice for America. Combined with his own calm demeanor and steady voice, Obama

defused what could have come to be seen as negative associations with controversial figures.

In 2012, one of President Obama's first ads attacked Romney for his close ties to the oil industry. With an ad buy of \$1 million targeted on key states such as Florida, Ohio, Colorado, Virginia, Nevada, and Iowa, the Democrat sought to take advantage of the unpopular industry and rising gas prices to suggest that his opponent "stood with big oil, for their tax breaks, attacking higher mileage standards and renewable energy."⁶ Later, when Romney adviser Eric Fehrstrom said his candidate "could reset his campaign just like an Etch A Sketch," opponents brandished the childhood toy to make their complaint that the Massachusetts governor lacked firm principles.⁷ Late in the campaign, Romney broadcast a radio ad in Miami, Florida, linking Obama to then Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro's niece, Mariela Castro. The spot included a statement from Chavez indicating that if he were American, "I'd vote for Obama."⁸

In 2016, Trump sought to tie Hillary Clinton to the Obama administration. Not only did she serve as secretary of state within that presidency, she supported many of Obama's policies. Unlike Trump who wanted to repeal Obamacare, Clinton promised to maintain it and make it better. Trump derided Clinton as someone who would serve as "Obama's third term," the same way that Obama in 2008 had claimed that McCain would represent "Bush's third term."

To gain credibility, politicians like to associate themselves with popular public figures, sports heroes, astronauts, or Hollywood celebrities. These individuals come from outside the political world and often have a great deal of popular respect. By associating with them and winning their endorsements, politicians attempt to piggyback onto the high credibility these individuals have among voters in general.⁹

Demonization is the process of turning an opponent into an evil being or satanic figure. Wartime enemies are condemned as murderers, terrorists, or barbarians. Political opponents are portrayed as extremists out of touch with the mainstream or guilty of immoral behavior. Adversaries are identified with policy actions that are widely condemned or seen as socially destructive.

For example, an entry in an anti-Bush ad contest sponsored by the MoveOn.org Voter Fund intermingled pictures of Adolf Hitler and George W. Bush making speeches. In a clear effort to demonize the sitting president, the spot concluded with the tagline, "What were war crimes in 1945 is foreign policy in 2003."¹⁰

Meanwhile, commercials sponsored by the Progress for America Voter Fund, a conservative political action committee, attacked Kerry by showing pictures of Osama bin Laden and September 11 hijacker Mohamed Atta. The unmistakable message in these spots was that Kerry was not to be trusted with defending America's security.¹¹

In 2012, Republicans linked Obama with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In a spring advertisement, Rick Santorum morphed Obama into

the unpopular Iranian leader, while a voice-over noted that the latter was a “sworn American enemy.”¹²

In the most recent presidential campaign, Trump sought to blame Clinton for urban unrest and international terrorism. Following terrorist attacks in France and shootings of U.S. police officers in several large cities, the billionaire blamed Clinton for being weak and not bringing people together. Democrats meanwhile derided Trump as a modern-day fascist.¹³ They claimed he appealed to people’s base instincts and used racist and misogynous appeals to rally white, working-class voters.

Code words are shorthand communication devices that play on common stereotypes and connotations associated with particular kinds of language. Even in the limited space of thirty seconds, campaigns can use short messages to communicate broader messages to the public. Many people feel that thirty seconds or a 140-character tweet is too brief a period to convey much in the way of substantive themes, but during election campaigns, single words or expressions can take on enormous importance.

For example, Republicans have used the phrase *law and order* to play to voter conceptions that Democrats were permissive on crime, race, and morality, whereas Republicans could be counted on to protect the social order. Democrats were paired with images and voice-overs of urban riots and social protests to convey complex political messages.

Democrats, meanwhile, have used a similar tactic regarding the code phrase *right wing*. When Republicans are in charge, Democrats play to voter stereotypes about the GOP being uncaring and insensitive. Using examples of extreme rhetoric and policy proposals that sought to slow the rate of increase in spending on various federal programs, Democrats associated their opponents with extremist images, such as the Ku Klux Klan. Throughout the country, House Democrats used the phrase *right-wing extremists* to refer to their Republican counterparts.¹⁴

Code words are powerful communication devices because they allow voters to associate a particular message with a specific code word. One of the code words most frequently used by Republicans has been *liberal*. In 1988, George H. W. Bush called Democratic candidate Dukakis a liberal thirty-one times in his speeches. The message got through to voters. Whereas 31 percent in May 1988 believed Dukakis was liberal, the figure rose to 46 percent by September 1988.

In 1992, Bush’s use of the term *liberal* rose to sixty-two times. Similar to 1988, the word took on a number of negative meanings, such as being fiscally irresponsible, soft on crime, and dangerously out of touch with the American public. This approach allowed Bush to condemn Clinton with the single word *liberal* without having to voice more detailed descriptions of his opponent’s position.¹⁵

By 1996, the country’s airwaves were filled with ads using the *L*-word. Dole ran ads condemning Clinton as a tax-and-spend liberal and as someone

whose failed policies were liberal. In one speech in September 1996, Dole used the word fourteen times. Republican congressional candidates used the same appeal all across the country. Ads financed by the Republican National Committee criticized Democratic House and Senate candidates as “liberals,” “ultra-liberals,” “super-liberals,” “unbelievably liberal,” “embarrassingly liberal,” “foolishly liberal,” and “taxingly liberal.”

In the 2004 campaign, use of the *liberal* epithet returned to the campaign trail. President George W. Bush criticized Kerry for advocating a return to “massive new government agencies” with power over health care. Through an ad showing a map of a complex federal bureaucracy, Bush charged that Kerry’s health care program would cause “rationing” and that “Washington bureaucrats, not your doctor, [would] make final decisions on your health.”¹⁶ In addition, the Republican National Committee sent a mass mailing to voters in Arkansas and West Virginia accusing “liberals” of seeking to ban the Bible to promote policies on gay marriage.¹⁷

With conservative disgust over the decision of the French government not to support the war in Iraq, the 2004 election introduced the code word *French* to political discourse. Not only did some lawmakers seek to rename french fries “freedom fries,” Bush’s Commerce secretary, Don Evans, accused Kerry of looking French because he spoke the language, was cosmopolitan, and had French relatives.¹⁸ The National Rifle Association also associated Kerry with France by using a mailing with a French poodle wearing a Kerry campaign sweater and having a bow in its hair to condemn the Democrat’s record.¹⁹ During the 2012 GOP primaries, Newt Gingrich ran an ad in South Carolina saying Romney was a moderate who was “just like John Kerry—he speaks French!”²⁰

The same code word popped up in the 2016 GOP primaries. Worried that Republican rival Marco Rubio was gaining on him, Jeb Bush complained in a debate about Rubio’s poor Senate attendance record by saying, “I mean, literally, the Senate, what is it, like a French workweek? You get like three days where you have to show up?”²¹

That year, a variety of negative code words filled the airwaves. Democrats employed words such as *fascist*, *extremist*, and *dangerous* to describe Trump, whereas the billionaire challenged Clinton’s honesty and integrity and stuck her with the moniker of “crooked Hillary.”

PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES

Production techniques for commercials have changed dramatically since the 1950s. Early ads were rudimentary by contemporary standards. Political spots often took the form of footage from press conferences or testimonials from prominent citizens. Many were of the “talking head” variety in which the candidate (or his or her supporter) looked straight into the camera and spoke for thirty or sixty seconds without any editing.

Contemporary ads, in contrast, are visually enticing. Technological advances in television and on the Internet allow ad producers to use colorful images and sophisticated editing techniques to make spots more compelling. Images can be spliced together, and animated images visually transpose one person into another in a split second using a technique called morphing. Catchy visuals, music, and color capture viewer attention and convey particular political messages in a variety of ways.

People like the visual presentation of information. A Facebook analysis showed “that more than 50 percent of its daily active users in the United States watch at least one video on the site every day.” In addition, Google researchers anticipate that “by 2018, 84 percent of all Internet traffic will be more video.”²² Sometimes, these videos run two to three minutes, whereas at other times, they are short and snappy and last only fifteen seconds.

Visual Images

The visual aspect of advertising is the most important part of commercials. According to the old adage, a picture is worth a thousand words. Contemporary ads use graphic imagery to grab the public’s attention and convey messages. Whereas traditional research focused on the spoken content of ads to determine ways of conveying messages, modern analysts study both audio and visual aspects of advertising.

CBS news reporter Lesley Stahl tells the story of a hard-hitting evening news piece broadcast on Reagan’s presidency in 1984. The story claimed that Reagan had done certain things, such as cut the budget for the elderly, that were contrary to what he said he had done. Accompanying the story was a series of pleasant visual images of Reagan “basking in a sea of flag-waving supporters, beaming beneath red-white-and-blue balloons floating skyward, sharing concerns with farmers in a field.” After the story aired, Stahl was surprised by a favorable telephone call from a top Reagan assistant. Asked why he liked the story, given her harsh words, the Reagan adviser explained she had given the White House four and a half minutes of positive pictures of President Reagan: “They don’t hear what you are saying if the pictures are saying something different.”²³

The visual aspect of campaign advertising is important because it has the most impact on viewers. The reason is simple—people remember visuals longer than they do spoken words. Images also have the advantage of creating an emotional response much more powerful than that which results from hearing the spoken word. Taking advantage of House Speaker Newt Gingrich’s unpopularity in 1996, Democrats across the United States broadcast ads showing pictures of Gingrich side by side with Bob Dole and House and Senate Republican candidates. The message was clear: A vote for the Republican Dole was a vote for Gingrich.

In 2000, George W. Bush positioned himself as a “compassionate conservative” and frequently appeared at election rallies with retired general Colin Powell, a popular African American leader who later became Bush’s secretary

of state. Bush surrounded himself in photo opportunities and ads with women, minorities, and children to convey the idea that he was a different kind of Republican than Gingrich. For his part, Gore relied on pictures of himself with his then wife Mary Elizabeth (Tipper) Gore to communicate the idea that he was a candidate with firm values and a strong marriage. It was a way to distinguish himself from the personal scandals of the Clinton era.

In 2004, terrorism was mentioned in 13 percent of all the ads run after Labor Day.²⁴ Some advertisements mentioned Osama bin Laden by name or showed pictures of him. One Republican Senate candidate in Wisconsin even invoked the visual image of a burning World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, to charge that “Russ Feingold voted against the Patriot Act and the Department of Homeland Security.”²⁵

However, by 2008, public fear over domestic terrorism had faded. In his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani attempted to play to citizen concerns by broadcasting ads reminding people of 9/11. But unlike 2004, when these fears helped Bush win reelection, visual images of past terrorist attacks did not resonate with voters; the electorate was much more worried about the economy.

Indeed, the powerful imagery in the fall general election centered on the economy. With the startling meltdown of major financial institutions in the weeks leading up to the November election, voters saw major companies failing or merging and an extraordinary amount of taxpayer dollars infused into banks and insurance companies. Images of unemployed workers, people losing health benefits, and senior citizens forced to scrimp on needed prescription drugs were commonplace. Through these and other devices, Obama effectively tied McCain to Bush and negative perceptions about the Republican Party’s economic policies.

An analysis of 2008 ads found that the campaign’s most negative ads against the Democrat “always used images that made Obama’s skin appear very dark” and therefore relied on visual imagery to appeal to prejudiced viewpoints. This was based on a body of psychological work demonstrating that “racial prejudices are stronger against African Americans with darker skins.” And these advertising techniques worked remarkably well. People watching Obama ads with light skin gave him negative ratings 33 percent of the time, compared to 45 percent among spots showing him with dark skin.²⁶

When he was campaigning for reelection in 2012, Obama reminded voters that Navy SEAL forces under his direction had killed bin Laden in a daring May 2, 2011, raid in Pakistan. Acting on intelligence reports that linked Al Qaeda couriers to a walled mansion in Abbottabad, the president incorporated visual images of the feared terrorist and claimed credit for the successful attack.

After Mitt Romney said in a debate that he would end federal funding of the Public Broadcasting Service and the *Sesame Street* character Big Bird, Obama ran a commercial saying the GOP preferred Wall Street. The ad argued, “Bernie Madoff. Ken Lay. Dennis Kozlowski. Criminals. Gluttons of greed.

And the evil genius who towered over them? Big. Yellow. A menace to our economy. Mitt Romney knows it's not Wall Street you have to worry about, it's *Sesame Street*.”²⁷

In 2016, scenes of terrorist attacks and Black Lives Matter protestors marching through the streets of American cities permeated GOP messaging. With the world reeling from terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, the United States, Bangladesh, and elsewhere, Republicans argued that people were being attacked because America was weak. In an age where international alliances were shifting and nonstate actors such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Al Qaeda, Al Shabaab, and Boko Haram were murdering opponents, conservatives felt the United States should take border security more seriously and keep Islamic terrorists out of the country.²⁸ The graphic violence helped Trump criticize Clinton and argue that America needed to get tougher to defend itself.

Visual Text

Visual text is a print message appearing onscreen, generally in big, bold letters. Printed messages grab viewers' attention and tell them to pay attention to an ad. Ross Perot's 1992 ads used visual text scrolling up the screen to persuade the American public to vote for him (see appendix for texts of memorable ads in recent elections). Spots for Clinton in 1996 used big, splashy text onscreen to make the political point that Republicans wanted to “CUT MEDICARE.” Dole sought to characterize Clinton as “LIBERAL” and “UNTRUSTWORTHY.” In 2000, Democratic ads often noted that Texas ranked “50TH” in family health care, and Republican ads complained that Gore was guilty of “EXAGGERATIONS.” Republican ads against Obama in 2008 superimposed text such as “INEXPERIENCED” or “NOT READY” to argue that the Democrat lacked the necessary credentials for the chief executive position. Obama countered by saying that McCain was “more of the same.” Romney complained in 2012 that Obama was “radical” in his vision for America. Advertisers have found that memory of a message is greatly enhanced by combining visual text with spoken words and descriptive images.

Music and Sounds

Music sets the tone for an ad. Just as party hosts use upbeat music to accompany festivities or an educational institution plays “Pomp and Circumstance” to set the scene for a graduation ceremony, campaign ads use music to convey the mood of a particular commercial.

Uplifting ads use cheery music to make people feel good about a candidate. For example, the 1984 campaign featured an independently produced ad called “I'm Proud to Be an American” that used music from country singer Lee Greenwood's song by that same name. The music played over scenes of Reagan, the American flag, and cheerful scenes of happy Americans. It conveyed the message that things were good in America and people should vote for Reagan.

Conversely, somber or ominous music in an ad seeks subliminally to undermine support for the opponent. In George H. W. Bush's "Revolving Door" ad in 1988, dark and threatening music accompanied scenes of prisoners walking through a revolving door while an announcer attacked Dukakis's record on crime. The sounds of drums, the footsteps of guards on metal stairs, and threatening voices were integral to the ad's message that voters should reject Dukakis in the November election because he was soft on crime.

In 2012, Obama used a videotape of Romney singing "America the Beautiful" while visual text reminded viewers that the GOP nominee had shipped jobs to China and Mexico, had a Swiss bank account, and stored money in Cayman Islands financial institutions. Democrats used the juxtaposition of music extolling the virtues of America with a contrary message to complain that the candidate was hypocritical. Romney responded with a web video complaining about Obama's singing of Al Green's song "Let's Stay Together."

Color

Color communicates vivid messages in ads. Media consultants use bright colors to associate their candidates with a positive image and grayish or black and white to associate opponents with a negative image. In 2000, for example, the NAACP-sponsored spot about the dragging death of James Byrd was broadcast in black and white to make the point that something dramatically different and calamitous had taken place and viewers should pay close attention.

The 1992 Bush campaign developed an ad called "Arkansas Record" that featured a vulture looking out over a dark and barren landscape to make its point that Clinton had poorly governed Arkansas. That year, Bush also used a low-quality, grayish photographic negative of Clinton from an April 20, 1992, *Time* magazine cover to exhort voters to defeat the Arkansas governor in November. The cover with the photographic negative of Clinton was titled "Why Voters Don't Trust Clinton." Bush's ad juxtaposed a nice color image of himself to reinforce the message that voters should not vote for Clinton.

A 1996 Dole commercial took a color videotape clip in which Clinton said if he had it to do over again, he would inhale marijuana, and rebroadcast the image in black and white to make Clinton look sinister. The opposite technique (going from black and white to color) was used by Gore in his 2000 ad called "Veteran." It opened with a black-and-white photo of a youthful Gore in Vietnam, then shifted to color frames of Gore with his wife.

Editing

Editing determines the sequencing and pacing of an ad. The *sequencing* of ad images refers to how images in one scene are related to following scenes. For example, the 1984 Reagan ad "Morning in America" showed images of Reagan interspersed with scenes of Americans at work and a country at peace. The sequencing linked the president with the popular themes of peace

and prosperity. These images were accompanied by music that enhanced the emotional impact of the ad.

An Obama attack ad in 2008 showed a shifty-eyed McCain grimacing, raising his eyebrows, and smiling awkwardly to suggest he was not the right man for the presidency. At a time of domestic crisis, according to the spot, the United States needed someone better equipped to handle economic and foreign policy issues.

The *spacing* of an ad refers to whether the images flow smoothly or abruptly from scene to scene. Abrupt cuts from image to image create a jarring effect that tells viewers something bad is appearing before them. Such cuts are commonly used to convey negative feelings in attack ads.

Voice-Overs

Through an off-screen announcer, a voice-over provides a road map that knits together visual scenes. A campaign ad is composed of different pictures that convey particular points. The announcer guides viewers through these scenes to clearly communicate the message of the ad.

Typically, attack ads use male announcers to deliver blistering criticisms, but Dole made history in 1996 by using a female announcer to condemn Clinton's "failed liberal drug policies." The use of a woman for the voice-over was designed to soften any potential backlash from going on the attack and to appeal to women concerned about drug use and moral permissiveness in American society.

However, in 2000, both George W. Bush and Gore reverted to the historical pattern and relied more frequently on male announcers for the audio components of their ads. One exception was a Bush ad called "Compare," which used a female announcer to criticize Gore's prescription drug plan. Female narrators are used for health care ads because market research reveals that women make the preponderance of health care decisions in U.S. households. Another exception took place in 2004 during a Bush ad known as "Wolves." This spot used the image of a pack of wolves to argue that the United States was surrounded by dangerous enemies. It used a female announcer to take the edge off what was a hard-hitting attack on the opposition.

THE ROLE OF MONEY AND SUPER PACS

The financing of campaign ads has changed dramatically in recent decades, and this has influenced communication vehicles. In the post-Watergate reforms of the 1970s, candidates generally paid for the bulk of their advertisements out of so-called hard-money contributions. These were gifts given directly to candidate organizations for voter persuasion. Campaigners would use these funds to produce and broadcast ads that were put out on the airwaves under a candidate's direct sponsorship. Both the Republican and Democrat nominees broadcast ads designed to frame the contest and set the agenda of political dialogue.

Over time, though, a series of loopholes appeared that transformed campaign ad financing. Interest groups and party organizations began to exploit a loophole that allowed unlimited amounts of money (so-called soft-money gifts) to be spent on voter education and get-out-the-vote efforts. Originally created by the 1976 *Buckley v. Valeo* Supreme Court case on the post-Watergate reforms, this loophole was designed to strengthen political parties and outside groups and allow them to mobilize and educate supporters. Donors could give whatever money they desired without being limited to the \$1,000 per individual and \$5,000 per organization rules for hard-money contributions.

This loophole accelerated in the 1990s when President Bill Clinton used large amounts of soft-money contributions to the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to run ads extolling his virtues and lambasting those of the Republican opposition. Rather than using the money for get-out-the-vote or party-building activities, the DNC ran commercials that were virtually indistinguishable from hard money-financed candidate spots. Republicans did the same thing through the Republican National Committee to criticize Clinton and campaign against Democratic House and Senate candidates.²⁹

The ensuing controversy over these funding practices (and a postelection investigation into Clinton's campaign spending) eventually led to enactment of the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) sponsored by John McCain and Democrat Russell Feingold. Among its key principles were the outlawing of soft-money gifts at the national party level (although state party organizations still could accept these contributions), an increase in individual contributions to \$2,000 per candidate per election cycle, and a requirement that candidates personally appear in ads saying they paid for their commercials and took responsibility for their contents.

Under these rules, groups still could run issue ads that talked about specific policies. For example, they could say that Republicans were harming poor people or that Democrats loved to raise taxes. But ads broadcast by these organizations in the sixty days before a general election could not engage in electoral advocacy. Groups could not criticize the policy stances of a specific federal candidate without registering as a political action committee and being subject to disclosure requirements.

In 2010, however, the Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling called *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* that created dramatic loopholes in the McCain/Feingold campaign finance system. Based on the case of a non-profit organization that sought to air a documentary critical of Hillary Clinton, justices voted five to four to strike down major pieces of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act. Specifically, it allowed individuals, businesses, and unions to contribute large amounts of money to so-called super PACS, which then could broadcast ads and otherwise seek to influence the election.

This ruling opened the floodgates of wealthy individuals and corporations contributing millions of dollars to finance a torrent of harshly negative advertisements. Commentator David Axelrod accused the Court of helping "robber barons trying to take over the government."³⁰ Rather than accept

public financing of \$92 million for the general election, both major-party candidates in 2012 and 2016 opted out to rely on private funding. Some analysts were so concerned about this new system of campaign discourse that they asked, “Can forty-six rich dudes buy an election?” This reaction was based on the fact that during the GOP primaries, forty-six individuals contributed two-thirds (\$67 million) of all the individual gifts to super PACs that year.³¹

In 2016, billionaire Trump self-funded most of his nomination campaign. Telling voters essentially that he was “too rich to be bought,” he appealed to people’s cynicism about career politicians and their reliance on special interests. He argued that his wealth insulated him from influence peddling and gave him the political independence to drive meaningful change.

Yet his early unwillingness to accept outside funds meant that by summer, he was at an extreme fundraising disadvantage vis-a-vis Clinton. At the end of May, she had \$42 million in campaign cash on hand, compared to \$1.3 million for him.³² That complicated his planning for the party convention as well as reserving time for television advertising and voter outreach. By the end of the campaign, Clinton had raised around \$1 billion, far exceeding Trump’s \$600 million.³³

Super PACs were the major way in which large gifts came into the electoral process. A *Washington Post* analysis in spring 2016 found that “half of all super-PAC money comes from 50 donors.” Overall, contributors gave \$607 million to 2,300 super PACS, and 41 percent of it came from fifty families (thirty-six on the Republican side and fourteen in the Democratic Party).³⁴

EFFECTIVE TWEETING

In addition to television advertising, social media have become a substantial part of campaign outreach. For example, candidates in 2012 made frequent use of Twitter and Facebook. With Obama having 27 million Facebook followers and Romney having 2.3 million, the campaigns relied on grassroots networks to disseminate their messages.

Obama adviser Axelrod sometimes engaged in Twitter wars with Romney’s strategists. For example, in January 2012, Romney’s site tweeted, “More Americans have lost their jobs under @BarackObama than any president in modern history.” Shortly thereafter, Axelrod responded with a tweet saying, “@MittRomney A picture’s worth a thousand misleading words. This chart tells the story [with a link to a Bureau of Labor Statistics table showing twenty-two months of job growth].” Eric Fehrstrom, a senior Romney strategist, responded, “@davidaxelrod Sometimes you don’t need a picture to tell a story. The numbers speak for themselves—1.7 million jobs lost under Obama.” Axelrod replied, “@EricFehrn Dude, none of my business, but shouldn’t you be in debate prep instead of trying to explain yourself to me?”³⁵

During the 2012 party conventions, Twitter became a major part of the online conversation. Around 9.5 million tweets were sent during the week of

the Democratic convention, compared to 7 million during the Republican gathering. President Obama's acceptance speech generated the most traffic, with 52,756 tweets per minute, followed by Michelle Obama (28,000 tweets per minute), Bill Clinton (22,087 tweets per minute), Joe Biden (17,932 tweets per minute), Mitt Romney (14,289 tweets per minute), Marco Rubio (8,937 tweets per minute), Clint Eastwood (7,044 tweets per minute), and Paul Ryan (6,669 tweets per minute).³⁶

In 2016, Donald Trump relied extensively on tweeting. With millions of followers, he was able to bypass the traditional media and communicate directly with voters. He used his social media platform to criticize opponents, promote his own ideas, and drive free media coverage. For example, during the primaries, he complained that Jeb Bush was "low energy," Cruz was "Lyin' Ted," and John Kasich was a "loser" who only carried his home state of Ohio.

An analysis of his tweets going back to 2009, when he first started tweeting, shows that his favorite words were *I, you, Trump, he, @RealDonaldTrump, we, thank, my,* and *#Trump2016*. Among his favorite campaign adjectives were *great, weak, failed, nasty, lightweight, crazy, dopey, dumb, and wacko*.³⁷ Despite the negative tone, Trump's speech comments and tweets were remarkably successful in driving the nomination narrative. After starting with a field of seventeen, Trump was the lone Republican standing at the end of the primaries.

Public opinion surveys found in 2016 that "44% of U.S. adults reported having learned about the 2016 presidential election in the past week from social media, outpacing both local and national print newspapers."³⁸ The most prevalent source of social media information was Facebook, with 68 percent of Americans using it, compared to 28 percent for Instagram, 26 percent for Pinterest, 25 percent for LinkedIn, and 21 percent for Twitter.³⁹ This was a sign of the way in which the current communications environment has shifted for political candidates.

THIRD-PARTY VALIDATION

Politicians do not rank very highly in the constellation of persuasive communications agents. On the list of trusted occupations, political leaders rank down with car salespeople. Voters see them as self-interested individuals who pursue their special interests as opposed to the common good. For these reasons, candidates turn to "third-party validators," meaning people outside their campaign with higher credibility, to help them win voter support.

One such agent is news reporters. Ads broadcast for free during the news or discussed in major media outlets have several advantages over those aired purely as commercials. In an age of cynicism, viewers trust the news media—at least in comparison with paid ads—for fairness and objectivity. William McGuire has shown that the credibility of the source is one determinant of whether the message is believed.⁴⁰ The high source credibility of the media gives ads aired during the news an important advantage over those seen as plain ads.

In 2012, a number of ads sought to enhance their credibility by featuring news reporters. A Crossroads GPS commercial relied on CNBC footage with reporter John Harwood discussing economic growth numbers and pointing out that it was “the worst job-adding quarter in two years.” When asked why politicians include journalists in their ads, pollster Mark McKinnon said, “We try really hard to get credible third-party messengers to deliver facts. . . . A fact coming from you is much more believable than a fact coming from us.”⁴¹

Other validators can include nonpartisan groups, think tanks, academics, or celebrities. Each of these generally has higher credibility with the general public than those who operate in the political realm. So politicians use them to enhance their own credibility and win support for their side. They help candidates break through the information clutter and build political support.

CONCLUSION

Many things affect the use, interpretation, and impact of campaign ads and social media appeals. No single perspective can explain why a particular message works well at a particular time but backfires in a different context. One must look at the political environment; the nature of public opinion; how reporters cover messaging; the way in which ads are edited and financed; and the strategies of stereotyping, association, demonization, and code words used by campaigners. Each of these factors contributes to the way voters see campaign communications and judge the candidates.