

Learning About the Candidates

Early efforts to study the impact of ads emphasized learning about substantive matters. Do the media provide information that increases voters' knowledge of where candidates stand on the issues? To the pleasant surprise of scholars, research from the 1970s revealed that voters who watched ads got more information than did those exposed only to television news.¹ Experimental work also supported claims about the educational virtues of commercials.² Ads did not help candidates create new political images based on personality. Rather, political commercials allowed viewers to learn about the issues.

Notwithstanding the undeniable trend of these studies, researchers have persisted in their efforts to examine the effects of advertising. Great changes have taken place in the structure of political campaigns since earlier research was completed. New electoral arenas have arisen that do not have the stabilizing features of past settings. Furthermore, recent campaign experiences run contrary to interpretations that emphasize the educational virtues of commercials. Television is thought to have played a crucial, and not very positive, role in a number of races, a state of affairs that has renewed concern about the power of ads to alter citizens' beliefs.³

Indeed, recent studies have found that voters do not often cast ballots based on the issues. Citizens form many impressions during the course of election campaigns, from views about candidates' issue positions and personal characteristics to feelings about the electoral prospects of specific candidates, and those views are decisive. As ads have become more gripping emotionally, *affective models* that describe feelings are crucial to evaluations of candidates' fortunes.⁴

Favorability is an example of an affective dimension that is important to voter choice. Citizens often support the candidates they like and oppose those they dislike. If they dislike all, they vote for the ones they dislike the least. Anything that raises a candidate's favorability also increases the likelihood of selection.⁵ Candidates devote much attention to making themselves appear more likable. Values that are widely shared, such as patriotism and pride in national accomplishments, help candidates increase their favorability ratings among voters. Conversely, hard-hitting ads are used to pinpoint the opposition's flaws.

The opening up of the electoral process has brought new factors such as electability and familiarity to the forefront. *Electability* refers to citizens' perceptions of a candidate's prospects for winning the November election. Impressions of electability can increase voters' support of a candidate because citizens do not want to waste their votes. *Familiarity* is important as a threshold requirement. Candidates must become known in order to do well at election time. The development of a campaign structure that encourages less widely known candidates to run makes citizens' assessments of a candidate's prospects a potentially important area of inquiry.

Advertising and the Electoral Context

Past work on television advertising has focused on a particular kind of electoral setting—presidential general elections. For example, Thomas Patterson and Robert McClure's findings were based on the campaign that ended in Richard Nixon's 1972 landslide victory over George McGovern. The ads' apparent lack of effect on voters' assessments of the candidates is not surprising in light of the lopsided race and the fact that by the time of the initial survey in September public perceptions of the two candidates had largely been determined. In that situation, it was appropriate for Patterson and McClure to conclude that people "know too much" to be influenced by ads.⁶

However, as Patterson and McClure have pointed out, other electoral settings display greater opportunities for advertising to have measurable effects. Nominating affairs and Senate races show extensive shifts in voters' assessments of the candidates. Presidential nominations often have unfamiliar contenders vying for the votes of citizens who hold few prior beliefs about the candidates. In

these settings, television commercials can play a major role in providing crucial information about the candidates.

Advertising is particularly important when news media time is scarce. In 1980, Ken Bode, then a reporter for NBC, recounted a letter written to him by Sen. Robert Dole, R-Kan., following his unsuccessful nominating campaign: "Dear Ken, I would appreciate knowing how much coverage my campaign received by NBC from the date of my announcement to my final withdrawal. I've been told my total coverage by NBC amounted to fourteen seconds."⁷

Senate races also have become heavily media oriented. Candidates spend a lot of money on television advertising, and Senate contests have taken on the roller-coaster qualities of nominating affairs. Many Senate elections feature volatile races involving unknown challengers. Because some observers have speculated about the effects of advertising, it is important to study advertising in nominating and Senate campaigns to determine whether the impact of advertising varies with the electoral setting.

Citizens' Knowledge and Evaluations of Candidates

Elections in recent decades represent an interesting opportunity to study the impact of political commercials. According to electoral surveys, citizens' assessments of the candidates varied widely depending on electoral setting. Presidential general election candidates were the most well known, with a range of recognition levels from a low in 1992 for Bill Clinton (73 percent) and Ross Perot (67 percent) to a high for Gerald Ford (95 percent) in 1976. The average recognition level in presidential general elections was significantly higher than for nomination candidates or Senate contenders. By the end of the campaign in 2004, 88 percent of respondents recognized John Kerry and 90 percent recognized George W. Bush (see Table 5-1). However, it took Kerry a long time to gain this recognition level. In March, only 57 percent recognized him and in mid-September, 73 percent recognized him. As discussed later, Kerry's relative lack of recognition gave Republicans an opportunity to use advertising to create unfavorable portraits of the challenger.

Citizens' perceptions of candidates' likability and electability have varied extensively. Of recent nominees, Ronald Reagan has been the best liked (66 percent in 1984), and George Bush (23 percent in 1992), Dole (25 percent in 1996), and Perot (18 percent in

TABLE 5-1
Changes in Voter Perceptions of George W. Bush and John Kerry During the 2004 Campaign

| 2004 Campaign | March 10-14 | April 23-27 | June 23-27 | July 30 -Aug. 1 | Sept. 12-16 | Oct. 1-3 | Oct. 9-11 | Oct. 14-17 | Oct. 28-30 |
|--------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|--------------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| Bush | | | | | | | | | |
| Recognition | 82% | 81% | 84% | 83% | 85% | 88% | 87% | 88% | 90% |
| Favorability | 43 | 38 | 39 | 40 | 47 | 44 | 45 | 43 | 48 |
| Electability | 44 | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | 49 |
| Caring | 63 | — | 57 | 59 | 58 | — | 46 | 44 | 48 |
| Shares your priorities | 45 | — | 41 | 41 | 47 | 47 | 50 | 45 | 49 |
| Conservative | 53 | 56 | — | — | — | — | — | 66 | — |
| Approve handling of Iraq | 49 | 41 | 36 | 38 | 46 | 45 | 42 | 42 | 45 |
| Ability to handle crisis | 53 | 44 | 44 | 43 | 51 | 51 | — | 46 | 50 |
| Leadership | 67 | — | — | 58 | 63 | 62 | 62 | — | 62 |
| Keeps his word | — | — | 58 | 48 | 55 | 59 | 58 | — | — |
| Says what he believes | 51 | 53 | 58 | 48 | 55 | 59 | 58 | 59 | 60 |
| Kerry | | | | | | | | | |
| Recognition | 57% | 60% | 64% | 72% | 73% | 81% | 78% | 83% | 88% |
| Favorability | 28 | 27 | 29 | 39 | 31 | 40 | 38 | 39 | 41 |
| Electability | 35 | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | 33 |
| Caring | 70 | — | 64 | 72 | 64 | — | 56 | 51 | 53 |
| Shares your priorities | 41 | 37 | 42 | 47 | 44 | 43 | 44 | 44 | 42 |
| Liberal | 39 | 43 | — | — | — | — | — | 56 | — |
| Ability to handle crisis | 33 | 39 | 33 | 39 | 32 | 41 | — | 42 | 40 |
| Leadership | 61 | — | — | 58 | 50 | 56 | 54 | — | 52 |
| Keeps his word | — | — | 51 | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Says what he believes | 33 | 29 | 34 | 35 | 30 | 35 | 37 | — | 37 |

Source: CBS News/New York Times national surveys.

Note: Entries indicate the percentage of voters holding various impressions of the candidates.

1996) the least liked. The 2004 Republican nominee, George W. Bush, was liked by 48 percent, compared with 41 percent who liked Kerry. This put them around the midpoint of likability over the past few decades. In regard to electability during the fall, McGovern in 1972 was the candidate seen as least electable (1 percent), whereas George Bush in 1988 was seen as the most electable (85 percent), followed closely by the 83 percent in 1996 who believed Clinton was the most electable. In 2004, more voters (49 percent) saw Bush as electable than Kerry (33 percent).

Voters furthermore have a sense of the policy issues and personal traits associated with each candidate. Foreign policy considerations were prominent in 1972 for McGovern and Nixon because of the Vietnam War, whereas domestic matters dominated thereafter. In terms of personal traits, this period began with candidates' experience being the most cited and ended with leadership being the most cited.

In 2004, George W. Bush was seen as having slightly stronger leadership skills (62 percent) than Kerry (52 percent) and as saying what he believed (60 percent, compared with the 37 percent who felt that way about Kerry). Kerry was seen as slightly more caring (53 percent) than Bush (48 percent). In terms of the issues, Kerry held an advantage over Bush in improving health care, protecting Social Security, and improving schools, whereas Bush was seen as better at bringing fiscal discipline to the government.

Of course, it remains to be seen how political commercials influenced perceptions of the candidates. In general, Senate races showed the strongest advertising effects, with exposure to campaign ads associated with high recognition of political contenders. The average difference in recognition between respondents who scored high on ad viewing and those who scored low was twenty-seven percentage points.⁸ Senate campaigners typically are not as well known as presidential contenders, which means that political commercials can be more influential in raising the visibility levels of those who run for senator.

Presidential elections showed a lower association for recognition based on advertising exposure. The largest general election difference in recognition came during the 1988 Bush–Dukakis race. These men were among the least known of recent party nominees. Dukakis was not known nationally, and despite having been vice president for eight years, Bush was not particularly visible in that office.

In the nominating process, the magnitude of the difference varied according to how well known the individuals were. Candidates who were not well known used advertising to advance their name recognition. For example, in April 1976, polls from the Pennsylvania primary revealed that Jimmy Carter had a difference of twenty-one points between the high and low ends of his ad exposure scale. Dukakis and Gore also showed substantial differences in 1988—eighteen and twenty-one percentage points, respectively. In 1992, Pat Buchanan had the greatest rating differential for visibility, whereas in 1996, Steve Forbes had the highest difference (fifteen percentage points) in recognition between those seeing and those not seeing his ads.

Ads also had effects on citizens' perceptions of favorability; the strongest effects were for Senate and nominating races.⁹ In both the 1974 and the 1990 Senate campaigns, ad viewing produced favorability gains for Democratic and Republican candidates. These effects were not consistent in the nominating process, but this changed for Gore and Bush in 1988. Both ran aggressive advertising campaigns, and their strategies appear to have paid off. Gore, for example, emphasized a populist image designed to win the support of white southerners. Bush ran a hard-hitting campaign designed to persuade voters that he was the logical heir to the Reagan legacy. It is interesting to note that Dukakis's ads were not associated with changes in favorability ratings. The Massachusetts governor had difficulties during the fall in overcoming public impressions that he was cool and aloof.

In 1992, Buchanan displayed the largest improvement in favorability (twelve percentage points) between the low and high ends of his ad exposure scale. He ran the spring's most prominent ad, "Read Our Lips," which painted a negative picture of Bush and questioned the president's character for breaking his promise of no new taxes. Eventually, according to Bush adviser Robert Teeter, the president was able to beat back the Buchanan challenge through attack ads that told voters, "[Our] guy's the goddam president, and the other guy's a goddam typewriter pusher, and the toughest thing he's had to do in his whole life is change the ribbon on his goddam Olivetti."¹⁰

In terms of electability, ads were associated with significant effects for Nixon in fall 1972, Carter in spring and fall 1976, Dukakis and Bush in spring 1988, Buchanan and Clinton in spring and fall 1992, Clinton in 1996, and George W. Bush and Gore in 2000.¹¹ Seeing

ads for these candidates was related to believing that the candidate was politically strong. Dukakis's ads created the impression of electoral strength. Although his commercials did not make voters feel any more favorable toward him, they helped generate a sense of inevitability about his campaign. Of the races examined in this study, Bush in 1992 was the only one whose ad exposure actually hurt the perception of his electability. Frequent ad viewers were less likely to see him as electable than were infrequent viewers.

If one looks at ad impact on prominent issues and personal traits, most elections conform to the findings of Patterson and McClure that the effects of advertising on citizens' perceptions of issues were substantially larger than the influence on assessments of personal traits.¹² However, in 1976, Carter ran an image-based campaign that produced stronger advertising effects for evaluations of personal traits than of issue positions.¹³ In the 1988 nominating process, Dukakis, Gore, and George Bush had ads that produced strong effects on assessments of both issues and traits.¹⁴

Clinton was able to use his 1992 and 1996 campaign commercials to help viewers see him as caring and as capable of handling the economy. He used ads in 1992 to tell the story of families having problems affording quality health care. His fall ads helped project an image of hopefulness and of being able to improve the economy, which was important to voters discouraged by the country's dismal economic performance.¹⁵ Bush was the only major candidate in 1992 unable to boost impressions of himself on his positions on either issues or character.¹⁶

The Impact of the Campaign

When looking at how ads and the campaign affected voter perceptions of the candidates, it is clear there were important effects. Those who saw Nixon ads in 1972 were more likely to see him as wishing to uphold commitments made to other nations. The same phenomenon emerged in the 1988 nominating process. During that year, exposure to ads influenced people's perceptions of the issue positions of Dukakis (on the military), Gore (on unfair competition from Japan), and George Bush (on deficit reduction). The 1992 race helped viewers understand Buchanan and Clinton on the economy and Paul Tsongas on competition from Japan. Each candidate ran ads that made these subjects a central part of his campaign.¹⁷ During the general election, Clinton worked hard to stake out claims to

particular issues, in order to prevent Republicans from trespassing on traditionally Democratic ground, as Bush had done in 1988 when he campaigned on promises to become the environmental and education president. But Clinton's strategy also created problems for himself. One of the criticisms directed against him in spring focus groups was that he was difficult to pin down: "If you asked his favorite color he'd say 'Plaid,'" stated one focus group participant.¹⁸

Ads had an impact on viewers' assessments of candidates' images, likability, and electability that was at least as strong as the effect on viewers' assessments of issue positions. In terms of perceptions of likability, commercials had a significant impact in many elections. For Gore and Bush in 2000, ad exposure was related to favorability ratings; the same was true for Buchanan and Perot in 1992 and for Senate candidates in 1974 and 1990. There was no ad impact on candidate likability in 2000, although those who saw television news felt Bush was more likable.

In terms of electability, the strongest ad impact came with Dukakis in the 1988 nominating process, but effects were present for Nixon in 1972, Carter in 1976, Buchanan and Clinton in 1992, and Clinton in 1996. Conversely, people who saw Bush's ads in 1992 had a negative sense of the president's electability.

Some campaigners during this period were able to mold public perceptions of personal traits. Those who watched Carter ads saw him as an able leader, and those who saw Gore ads in 1988 felt he was likely to care about people. Those who watched Clinton ads in spring of 1992 believed that he was a caring individual. The ads helped create a positive view of his character, which counterbalanced the negative coverage received after Gennifer Flowers came forward to claim he had an affair with her.¹⁹

In the 2000 presidential general election, I looked at the connection between a viewer thinking Gore and Bush, respectively, were electable and that person seeing news and ads for the candidates. Those individuals who saw Gore's ads were more likely to report that he was electable. The same was true for Bush to an even greater extent. In 1996, those who said they saw Clinton's ads were much more likely to cite him as electable, whereas those who saw Dole's ads were significantly more likely to say he was not electable. Seeing Perot's ads or the TV news had no impact on his electability.

The weak results for Perot's ads in 1996 contrast clearly with the situation in 1992. In that year, Perot's ads were the most memorable

and provided a dramatic boost for the Texan in the closing weeks of the campaign. In contrast, people in 1996 who said they saw Perot's ads were not more likely to recognize him, like him, or feel that he was electable.²⁰ Part of the problem related to Perot's ad-buy strategy. Unlike in 1992, when he dumped \$60 million in ads during the last month of the election and dramatically outspent both Clinton and Bush, he did not choose to do this in 1996.

There also were interesting relationships between viewers seeing TV news and candidates' ads and how those viewers saw candidates' personal qualities and political views. In 2000, those who saw Gore's commercials were more likely to see him as providing fiscal discipline and less likely to believe that Bush would do so. However, those who reported seeing national television news concluded the opposite: that Bush would be fiscally responsible and caring and that Gore would not likely be either.²¹

In 2004, ads were linked to changing perceptions of the candidates. As shown in Table 5-1, voter impressions shifted during the course of the campaign. Using national surveys undertaken by CBS News/*New York Times*, it is apparent that Kerry was far less known (57 percent recognition level in March 2004) than Bush (82 percent recognition), but became about as well known as the president by the end of October. Throughout most of the campaign, Bush held a higher favorability rating than did Kerry.

From the beginning of the general election in spring 2004, Bush attacked Kerry as a wishy-washy politician who told voters what they wanted to hear. This perception stuck with voters as the polling data reveal that Bush consistently had a huge advantage over Kerry in people's views that he says what he believes. For example, in mid-October, 59 percent portrayed Bush as saying what he believed, compared to 37 percent who felt that way about Kerry.

Bush also neutralized a traditional Democratic strength, that of being seen as caring and compassionate and understanding the needs of ordinary people. Ever since Herbert Hoover's inaction in the face of the Great Depression in the 1930s, voters have seen Democrats as caring more about ordinary folks than Republicans. However, on this key dimension, Bush was able to narrow the perception gap. Whereas 51 percent in mid-October thought Kerry understood the needs of people like you, 44 percent felt that way about Bush. For a president whose tax cut policies had benefited wealthy Americans and who had passed billions in tax breaks for corporations, this represented a major victory.

In addition, Bush tarred Kerry with the code word "liberal," similar to what his father had done to Michael Dukakis in 1988. At the beginning of the general election, 39 percent of registered voters saw Kerry as a liberal. By mid-October, though, this number had risen to 56 percent.

In short, Bush used attack ads during the campaign to portray Kerry in unfavorable terms. He characterized the Massachusetts Democrat as a doctrinaire liberal who was also wishy-washy and unprincipled. These two critiques are noteworthy because in some respects, they are inconsistent with one another. It is difficult to be both wishy-washy and a doctrinaire liberal simultaneously. However, by repeating these messages over and over, Bush was able to reinforce these perceptions about Kerry.

Ads and the Vote

Recent campaigns offer interesting opportunities to investigate how ads affect the vote.²² The 1988 Democratic nominating process was a wide-open, seven-candidate affair with no well-known front-runner until Dukakis began to forge ahead at the time of the March Super Tuesday primaries. At the time of Super Tuesday in 1988, a number of candidates were running hard-hitting ads challenging the substantive positions and personal qualifications of opponents. For example, Richard Gephardt's ads in Iowa and South Dakota criticized Dukakis for claiming naively that farmers could reverse their financial problems by planting Belgian endive. Dukakis's ads later accused Gephardt of flip-flops on policy matters.²³ Gore and Jesse Jackson also ran strong campaigns in key southern states.

The victories by Dukakis on Super Tuesday were vital to the inevitability that began to surround his candidacy. Until then, Dukakis had put together a strong organization and had been successful in terms of fund-raising. But it was the support expressed at the time of Super Tuesday that began to propel him toward the nomination.²⁴ How did this sense of momentum develop? An analysis of the Dukakis vote during the critical period of the 1988 Super Tuesday primaries shows how decisive electability was for the Dukakis vote. The more he was seen as being electable, the more likely voters were to support him.²⁵

Race, gender, and party identification were also directly linked to support for Dukakis. Race was important, owing to the presence of an African-American candidate (Jackson) in the contest. Voters were

clearly polarized, with Jackson receiving the vast majority of the black vote and Dukakis and Gore dividing the white vote. Gender and party identification had a strong effect on support for Dukakis, with women and strong Democrats being most likely to vote for him.²⁶

Dukakis's advertising had indirect consequences for the vote by affecting perceptions regarding electability. The strongest predictor of voters' views on electability was exposure to spot commercials. Ads shown prior to Super Tuesday, more than race, gender, or partisanship, influenced voters to see the Massachusetts governor as the most electable Democrat.²⁷ The same was true when the ads of competing candidates such as Gore were included in the analysis. Seeing ads for the Massachusetts governor was associated with feeling Dukakis was the most electable Democrat. These views about electability had a clear impact on the vote.²⁸

In the 1992 Republican primaries, advertising played a different role. At the start of the race, President George Bush was on the defensive over his handling of the economy and his inattention to domestic politics in general. Buchanan ran a series of ads castigating Bush for breaking his famous "no new taxes" pledge. In part because of saturation coverage of the New Hampshire and Massachusetts markets, these commercials achieved a remarkably high level of visibility.²⁹

A March survey asked viewers which ad run by a Republican presidential candidate had made the biggest impression. Of the 590 people interviewed, 92 (about 16 percent of the entire sample) were able to name a specific ad. The most frequently named commercial was Buchanan's "Read Our Lips" spot, which was cited by sixty-four people, followed by Buchanan's "Freedom Abused" spot against the National Endowment for the Arts, which was named by eleven people. Overall, eighty-five viewers cited specific ads for Buchanan, compared with six for Bush and one for David Duke.

The situation for Democrats was different: Eighty-six people (14 percent) named specific ads, but the ads mentioned were spread among the candidates: Bob Kerrey ($N = 29$), Tsongas ($N = 25$), Tom Harkin ($N = 23$), Clinton ($N = 6$), and Jerry Brown ($N = 2$). The most frequently cited ads were Kerrey's hockey rink ad about foreign imports ($N = 20$), Tsongas's bio spot showing him swimming ($N = 17$), and Harkin's empty mill ad complaining about high unemployment ($N = 10$).

Not only were Bush's commercials unmemorable, but they also had a negative impact on views about the president. A reporter who covered the race said the president's ads about the need for change "weren't connected to reality. People smelled that. They knew he wasn't the candidate of drastic change." In contrast, Buchanan's advertisements "weren't bull. They were real. Bush had broken campaign promises." When people were exposed to ads from both candidates, they were less likely to see the president as electable and also were less likely to vote for Bush.³⁰ These results are surprising not only because they are negative but also because they contrast so clearly with Bush's ad performance in 1988, when his commercials dominated those of Dukakis.

Part of the problem was that Bush's 1992 spots simply were not as catchy as Buchanan's. The challenger's ads had an air of authenticity surrounding them. Bush's advertising meanwhile did not successfully use visual symbols and narrative to develop his connection with salient issues. In one ad, for example, he referred to the Persian Gulf War and also attacked Congress to show how strong he was. According to Robin Roberts, Bush's ad tracker, this spot was the most frequently run in the nominating process.³¹ But it did not address the main issue of concern to voters—getting the economy going again and helping the unemployed with new jobs.

President Bush suffered because media coverage of his 1992 nominating campaign was quite negative. Reporters in New Hampshire questioned Bush's campaigning ability, his concern about human suffering, and his disjointed speaking style (which also was mimicked by comedian Dana Carvey). This pattern of coverage undermined the president's message and made it difficult for him to impress people who saw his ads. Although he ultimately was able to win his party's nomination, Bush's spring commercials did not lay a strong foundation for the fall campaign.

In the 1996 Republican primaries, Dole's early lead produced a political situation in which other candidates, such as Forbes, went on the attack in an effort to undermine the front-runner's support. A late January and early February 1996 national survey conducted before the Iowa caucuses found that Forbes's ads achieved a high level of visibility. Whereas 51 percent indicated they had seen ads for Dole, 40 percent said they had seen Forbes's ads, 24 percent indicated they had seen ads for Buchanan, 20 percent had viewed Phil Gramm's ads, and 10 percent had seen ads for Lamar Alexander.³²

Of the 927 individuals interviewed in that survey, 24 percent were able to cite a commercial that had made an impression on them (higher than the 16 percent in 1992). Among the top individual ads mentioned were Forbes's flat tax ad (eighteen mentions), Democratic National Committee ads for Clinton against Republican cuts in Congress (ten mentions), Forbes's ad on Dole raising taxes (six mentions), Dole on Forbes's untested leadership (two mentions), Alexander on working for the people (two mentions), Dole on balancing the budget (one mention), Dole's biography ad on his war injuries (one mention), and Buchanan's anti-NAFTA ad (one mention). Overall, seventy-seven individuals cited Forbes's ads, sixty-three cited Dole's, forty cited Democratic National Committee ads for Clinton, eighteen cited Gramm's, nine cited Alexander's, and eight cited Buchanan's. Spots for Buchanan were less memorable than in 1992.

But as the primary process wore on, Buchanan's spots rose in memorability. Buchanan's ads targeted emotionally provocative topics such as his views on the evils of NAFTA and the danger of immigration. Much like he had done in 1992, Buchanan was able to develop vivid ads on graphic issues. Viewers began to cite his ads more frequently and those of Forbes less frequently. For example, a survey of 311 Rhode Island voters after the Iowa caucuses, New Hampshire primary, and the New England Yankee primaries found that thirty-two people mentioned ads for Dole, twenty mentioned ads for Buchanan, fifteen mentioned ads for Forbes, eight mentioned ads for Alexander, and four mentioned ads by the Democratic National Committee for Clinton.³³

Dole's ads achieved a high degree of visibility but were not especially memorable to viewers. People remembered seeing the ads but could recall few of their specific details. When asked which specific ad had made the biggest impression on them, the top ads named were Forbes's ad on flat tax (seven mentions), Buchanan's ad on protecting jobs for American workers (two mentions), Alexander's ad showing him in one of his flannel shirts (two mentions), and Alexander's ad proclaiming him to have fresh ideas (two mentions). No Dole ad got more than a single mention.

But Dole's advertising situation improved in the fall. When voters were asked which ad had made the greatest impression on them, more people named ads for Dole (sixty-four mentions) than Clinton (fifty-six mentions) or Perot (forty-eight mentions). The most frequently cited specific ad in the general election was Dole's MTV

ad (twenty-one mentions), which replayed videotape of Clinton saying he would inhale when smoking marijuana if he were doing it over again. The second most commonly named ad was Perot's "It's Your Country" spot (sixteen mentions), which told viewers they should make up their own minds and not be told how to vote. Clinton's ads on Medicare cuts were the third most frequently cited ads, with ten mentions.

In 2000, a national survey asked people which television ad run by a presidential campaign during the fall had made the biggest impression on them. Overall, 23 percent mentioned some ad, and 77 percent indicated no ad had made an impression on them (about the same as in previous elections). The top individual ads mentioned were Gore's Social Security ad (twenty-one mentions), Gore's Texas record ad (ten mentions), Bush's improving schools ad (nine mentions), Bush's ad on Gore exaggerations (eight mentions), a National Rifle Association ad supporting Bush (seven mentions), Bush's "RATS" ad (six mentions), and Gore's health care ad (five mentions). Total ad mentions by candidate included Gore (seventy-six mentions), Bush (sixty-four mentions), Ralph Nader (five mentions), and Buchanan (two mentions).³⁴

When looking at the impact of ad exposure on electability and the vote, we find interesting results. George W. Bush was the only candidate for whom there was a negative ad impact on the vote. The more people saw Gore's advertisements, the less likely they were to say they would vote for Bush. In addition, the more liberal, Democratic, and nonwhite respondents were, the less inclined they were to support Bush. These results are consistent with evidence about the memorability of particular commercials. More individuals were likely to cite Gore than Bush advertisements when asked which spot had made the biggest impression on them.

In 2004, voters started the general election showing an eight percentage point lead for President Bush (by a 46 to 38 percent margin) (see Table 5-2). The president's advantage reflected several strengths. At that point, Kerry was not very well known. He had a 57 percent recognition level, compared to 82 percent for Bush. The president was also aided by voter perceptions that he was a strong leader serving in troubled times. His leadership ability and resoluteness created a strong reservoir of support.

By the end of July, right after the Democratic convention, Kerry moved to his first lead in the race. According to the CBS News/*New York Times* national surveys, Kerry was supported by 48 percent of

TABLE 5-2

Changes in Voter Preferences During the 2004 Campaign

| | March 10-14 | April 23-27 | June 23-27 | July 30 -Aug. 1 | Sept. 12-16 | Oct. 1-3 | Oct. 9-11 | Oct. 14-17 | Oct. 28-30 |
|--------|----------------|----------------|---------------|--------------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| Bush | 46% | 43% | 43% | 43% | 50% | 47% | 48% | 47% | 49% |
| Kerry | 38 | 41 | 43 | 48 | 41 | 47 | 45 | 45 | 46 |
| Nader | 7 | 5 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Unsure | 9 | 11 | 9 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 4 |

Source: CBS News/*New York Times* national surveys.

Note: Entries indicate the percentage of voter support for each candidate.

voters, compared to 43 percent for Bush. Kerry's rise reflected a convention acceptance speech that was well received and positive press coverage that accompanied this presentation.

However, August proved to be a very difficult month for Kerry. His campaign was not able to go on the air with commercials during this month because he had exhausted his nomination funds and did not want to use his scarce general election dollars. At the same time, outside groups such as the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (see Chapter 4) were attacking Kerry's Vietnam record and alleging he was not trustworthy. Under these circumstances, he was not able to sustain his advantage. By September, Bush had regained the lead (50 to 41 percent).

Throughout the remainder of the fall, though, the two candidates were locked in a tight race. Kerry's support rose a little during the three presidential debates. His strong performance in these debates boosted voter backing of his candidacy. But Bush maintained his own support by attacking Kerry's liberal record and inconsistent stances on terrorism. One ad entitled "Wolves" started airing October 22. It showed a pack of wolves running through woods, while a female announcer spoke of the dangers confronting the world and how "Kerry and liberals in Congress" had voted to cut spending on intelligence-gathering in the 1990s. The commercial claimed that weakness invited danger and encouraged those who wanted to harm America.

By the end of the campaign, Bush's post-debate margin had stood up. On a 51 to 48 percent popular vote, Bush beat Kerry and won reelection to the presidency.

Conclusion

To summarize, ads are one of the major ways in which citizens learn about the candidates. From advertisements, voters develop perceptions about personal qualities, values, electability, and issue positions. Not only are these perceptions important for the candidates, they affect the vote. Citizens often support those whom they like, with whom they share values, and who they feel are electable.

Ads do not operate autonomously. People bring prior beliefs such as party attachments, ideological stances, and life experiences relating to their age, gender, education, and race. For this reason, candidates undertake detailed research on voter opinions. Campaign commercials must dovetail with a person's background and political orientation for the ad to be effective. If the spot does not resonate with people, it will not inform viewers in the manner desired by candidates.