THE EFFECTS OF ISSUE ADVOCACY ADVERTISING ON VOTERS’ CANDIDATE ISSUE KNOWLEDGE AND TURNOUT

By Soontae An, Hyun Seung Jin, and Michael Pfau

This study examined the effects of issue advocacy ads on voters’ candidate issue knowledge and turnout, using the 2000 National Election Study survey combined with ad tracking data by Campaign Media Analysis Group. The results showed that those who lived in an area where more issue ads were aired had higher candidate issue knowledge than those in an area with fewer issue ads. Those in an area with more issue ads were more likely to vote than those with fewer issue ads.

Issue advocacy advertising has been a prevalent feature of political campaigns in American politics. These ads present a candidate in a favorable or unfavorable light and urge voters to support the sponsoring organization’s issue position. The amount of money spent on these ads has grown rapidly. During the 2000 presidential election, more than $500 million was spent on issue advocacy television and radio advertising\(^1\) and the 2004 election recorded another big surge in issue ads.\(^2\)

Issue advocacy ads are defined as ads sponsored by those other than the candidate that do not use any of the words designated by the Supreme Court to constitute express advocacy. The Supreme Court in its *Buckley v. Valeo*\(^3\) decision differentiated between express advocacy and issue advocacy, elaborating on what it meant by express advocacy: “communications containing …words…such as: ‘vote for,’ ‘elect,’ ‘cast your ballot for,’ ‘Smith for Congress,’ ‘vote against,’ ‘defeat,’ ‘reject’.\(^4\)” The Court stated that the scope of the Federal Election Campaign Act could only apply to such express advocacy communication.\(^5\) Communications without explicit exhortations are considered issue advocacy, which is not subject to federal election laws due to the protections afforded political expression under the First Amendment.

While public debate continues on the role of issue advocacy advertising in American politics, little is known about the effects of such ads. Amid the heated debates, two important and enduring questions need to be answered: as a staple of contemporary political campaigns, do issue advocacy ads increase voters’ knowledge on candidate issue...
positions and do they stimulate voters to participate in the electoral system?

The use of issue advocacy ads traces back to 1936, but it was not until 1996 that they played a major role. In 1996, parties and interest groups dramatically expanded their use of issue advocacy ads. In the 1997-1998 election cycle, congressional campaign committees and interest groups spent more soft money on issue advocacy than they had in any previous year. The expansion of issue advocacy ads continued in 2000: Citizens for Better Medicare spent an estimated $65 million; the Coalition to Protect America’s Health Care committed $30 million; and the AFL-CIO spent $21 million on issue ads. Considering the amount of money spent by the Republican and Democratic parties, $85.5 million and $78.4 million, respectively, the interest group spending was sizable. In the 2004 presidential election, as much as $1 billion was spent on issue ads by a variety of organizations.

Given the Supreme Court’s definition of issue advocacy ads as those that do not contain magic words such as “defeat” or “elect,” it is ironic to note the role of issue ads in today’s election system. Many interest groups employ issue advocacy ads to target candidates “with clear and unambiguous intention of affecting the outcome of an election.” For example, early in the Montana senate primary, Citizens for Better Medicare attacked Brian Schweitzer for his stand on prescription drugs. Schweitzer was forced to spend $65,000 of the $100,000 in his coffers to counter their attacks.

The increase in money spent on issue advocacy communications since 1996 has substantially affected both the electorate and campaigns. It is important to understand how voters perceive issue advocacy ads, what impact such ads exert on voters’ candidate issue knowledge, and whether they stimulate turnout or not.

There have been a few experimental studies on the effects of issue advocacy ads on candidate issue knowledge and turnout, but the results are conflicting. Pfau, Holbert, Szabo, and Kaminski found that issue advocacy ads did not enhance viewers’ perceptions of knowledge about candidates. In fact, candidate-sponsored ads contributed more to perceptions of knowledge of candidates than issue-advocacy ads. However, Groenendyk and Valentino’s experiment showed that subjects retained more information from issue advocacy ads than candidate-sponsored ads.

Although there are few studies on issue advocacy ad effects, considerable attention has been paid to the informational value of political advertising as a whole. Patterson and McClure’s analysis of the 1972 presidential election showed that political advertising had a great deal of issue content and served an informative function. Other studies found that political ads contained substantial issue content and voters learned candidate issue positions from the ads. However, many recent surveys have failed to show a positive relationship between ad exposure and issue
learning. A series of election studies revealed little association\textsuperscript{20} or a significant negative relationship.\textsuperscript{21}

The mixed research findings might result from different measures of issue knowledge, different geographic locations, and different campaign situations. More noticeably, most survey studies did not differentiate issue advocacy ads from candidate-sponsored ones. In survey studies, respondents were asked to recall or report their level of exposure to election ads. For example, typical measurements are “Do you recall seeing any presidential campaign advertisements on television?” or “During the past several weeks, when you saw political ads on TV, how much attention did you pay to them?” Since the questions did not specify the types of ad, voters’ self-report on their exposure level might have been confounded by the level of issue ads in each media market. Some markets are heavily targeted by interest groups, while others are not.

For instance, in the 2000 presidential election, the top 10 media markets for airing most issue advocacy ads were Detroit, Kansas City, Seattle, Louisville, Lexington, St. Louis, Orlando, Spokane, Wilkes-Barre, and Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{22} However, the ranking for candidate-sponsored ads was somewhat different. The top 10 media markets for candidate-sponsored ads were Albuquerque/Santa Fe, Portland (Oregon), Philadelphia, Seattle, Detroit, Green Bay/Appleton, Grand Rapids, Kansas City, Milwaukee, and St. Louis.\textsuperscript{23} Not only did ad buying vary from market to market, but buying for issue ads was different from buying for candidate-sponsored ads.

Scholars need to consider the effects of issue advocacy ads separately from candidate-sponsored ads. Furthermore, the investigation should be focused at the media market level rather than at the national level. Issue advocacy ads have been important players in the air war that has taken place mainly on local television.\textsuperscript{24} Studies assuming the same levels of issue ads across the nation are not only incorrect, but also lack considerable information.

As documented by social cognition literature, the structure of stimulus information is a key in determining how incoming information is organized and processed.\textsuperscript{25} The issue-centered informational structure of issue advocacy ads encourages an issue-based organization, which facilitates issue-related thoughts and learning. Compared to the person-centered structure of candidate-sponsored ads, issue advocacy ads are dimension-centered like debates or general news reports where candidates are often compared along specific issue dimensions.\textsuperscript{26} Issue-focused organization makes intradimensional comparisons of candidates less effortful and facilitates learning.

Another key characteristic of issue advocacy ads is the contrasting of candidate positions. By discerning clear differences between candidates, the contrasting feature of issue advocacy ads is conducive to voter learning. People tend to remember contrasting information better than non-comparative information.\textsuperscript{27} Literature on comparative advertising supports the claim that irrespective of whether people like comparative

\begin{center}
\textbf{Theoretical Framework: Informing and Mobilizing Voters}
\end{center}
ads, they recall comparative information better than non-comparative information.

In addition to the learning-conducive informational structures of issue advocacy ads, voters’ cognitive status is believed to be receptive to the persuasion attempts of such ads. Literature on the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) predicts that voters will perceive issue advocacy ads to be relatively credible and sincere, and will be less suspicious of the ads, thus increasing the persuasion effect. PKM posits that a message recipient uses his or her persuasion knowledge to identify when a speaker is attempting to influence in order to achieve his or her own goals. One of the key factors determining whether the recipient uses his or her persuasion knowledge is accessibility of ulterior motives. When circumstances of communication make ulterior motives highly accessible, recipients tend to make attributions about the motives of a speaker, in turn discounting sincerity. These attributions tend to result in less favorable evaluations of the target and lessen the persuasion effect. We are, for example, unwilling to accept the sincerity of a student praising a lecture if the compliment coincides with a request for an extension of a paper deadline. With suspicion of ulterior motives, message recipients tend not to take the message at face value.

People’s persuasion knowledge is an important determinant of how they cope with persuasion attempts. For instance, a message claiming that personal income taxes are too high would be judged as more sincere and credible if it were communicated by a citizen activist group than by a politician in the midst of a campaign. People tend to think that “She or he (the candidate) is merely expressing a viewpoint the voters would like to hear in order to win the election.” The person-centered structure of candidate-sponsored ads makes the ulterior motive highly accessible, leading to an inference that politicians typically do or say things to make us vote for him or her. Use of persuasion knowledge would likely lead to unfavorable evaluations of the speaker’s sincerity and claims. However, issue advocacy ads, without the phrases like “vote for me,” or “vote against them,” make ulterior motives less apparent and accessible. Thus, when an ulterior motive is not highly accessible, persuasion knowledge is less likely to be used. PKM’s prediction is consistent with the previous studies in which independently sponsored ads circumvented backlash effects.

Self-reports confirm that voters perceive issue ads differently from candidate-sponsored ads. A national survey revealed that when asked about the primary objective or purpose of ads, more than two-thirds of respondents considered the issue ads to be primarily about an issue, a similar percentage saw the primary objective of candidate-sponsored ads as urging them to vote for a candidate, and only about 6% identified the primary objective of issue ads as persuading voters to vote for a candidate.

Classic theories of persuasion also suggest that issue advocacy ads not sponsored by candidates are less likely to be interpreted as partisan mudslinging but rather as sincere attempts to raise concerns about a particular issue. Since self-interestedness or persuasive intent of the source
strongly moderates message effects, issue advocacy ads without explicit self-interested requests (i.e., “vote for me” or “vote against her”) will increase the persuasiveness of the message. The source will be viewed as more credible when the person is perceived as not self-involved or interested in the outcome.

Issue advocacy ads provide a significant amount of issue information. The preponderance of issue information not only highlights candidate positions, but also enhances voters’ learning of candidate issue positions. Without using words such as “vote for” or “vote against,” the issue-centered feature of issue advocacy ads makes ulterior motives less accessible, encouraging voters to be more receptive to issue messages. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**H1**: Those who live in an area with heavy issue advocacy ads are more likely to have high candidate issue knowledge than those residing in an area with fewer issue ads.

In addition, most issue advocacy ads are negative, eliciting greater attention and emotional reactions. Issue advocacy advertisements often resemble candidate-sponsored attack ads that attack a candidate’s position on a specific issue. However, empirical evidence on the relationship between message negativity and voter turnout is conflicting. Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, and Valentino described a demobilizing effect of negative ads, wherein subjects who viewed a negative ad were significantly less likely to say they would vote. However, a number of scholars have posed both theoretical and empirical challenges to the demobilization hypothesis. Wattenberg and Brians, using NES data from 1992, found that recall of negative campaign ads was associated with significantly higher voter turnout. Goldstein and Freedman found that negative attack ads stimulated voters to think about important issues and made them more engaged in the democratic process, eventually leading to high turnout.

Although the evidence on negative attack ads and turnout is ambivalent, studies indicate that issue ads with a negative tone will boost citizen participation, unlike candidate-sponsored negative ads. Garramone found that compared to candidate-sponsored ads, independently sponsored negative ads had less backlash effects against sponsors, resulting in a greater intended effect against the targeted candidate. Issue advocacy ads deliver issue information neutrally, circumventing potential backlash effects. They do not depress participatory intentions as much as the candidate-sponsored negative ads.

In fact, Lau and Pomper found that issue-based criticism of the opponent stimulated turnout, compared to the person-based nativism. Issue-based criticism of the opponent tends to be viewed as legitimate campaign discourse and consequently spurs turnout, whereas personal attacks are much more likely to be viewed as inappropriate mudslinging. Shapiro and Rieger added experimental evidence showing that negative issue ads were perceived as relatively fair and resulted in a competitive advantage for the sponsor of the ad over the target.
of the ad. However, negative image ads were seen as relatively unfair and resulted in a backlash against the sponsor.\textsuperscript{48} Kahn and Kenney distinguished between legitimate criticism and mudslinging and found that the former increased turnout, while the latter reduced it.\textsuperscript{49}

This study tests a mobilization effect of issue advocacy ads. Research on persuasive messages suggests that one key factor shaping the effects of politically mobilizing contact is the accessibility of the message.\textsuperscript{50} That is, the ease with which the election message comes to voters’ minds determines the campaign’s capability for voter stimulation.\textsuperscript{51} The issue-centered, contrasting feature of issue advocacy ads will make issue information more attainable and important. Voter susceptibility to the perception of issue advocacy ads as credible and sincere will fuel a feeling of urgency and participation. Although negative in tone, the issue-based criticism will be considered as legitimate campaign discourse, increasing the intended effect of stimulating voter turnout. Negative features of issue advocacy ads will be given more weight in political information processing, which will produce strong emotional and affective responses.\textsuperscript{52} These reactions will increase turnout by arousing voters’ enthusiasm for their preferred candidates or by increasing the degree to which the voter cares about the outcome of the election.\textsuperscript{53} Accordingly, the following hypothesis is presented:

\textbf{H2}: Those who live in an area with heavy issue advocacy ads are more likely to vote in the election than those residing in an area with fewer issue ads.

\textit{Method}

When examining the effects of issue advocacy ads, a variety of individual level factors known to influence voters’ issue learning and turnout should be controlled for. There will be great variations among individuals’ levels of exposure to political advertising, even within the same media market.\textsuperscript{54} For instance, one out of every ten issue ads that aired in the last months of the 2000 campaign aired in three markets—Detroit, Kansas City, and Seattle.\textsuperscript{55} By comparison, those living in Wichita, Greensboro, and Baltimore received very few issue ads. Although a voter resided in Detroit during the 2000 election, if he or she did not watch television at all, the level of exposure could be lower than the one in Wichita with very few issue ads, but with high television viewing habits.

Cross-locale variations in level of issue ads, along with demographics and motivational factors, are critical when untangling the association between exposure to issue ads and voters’ learning and participation. It might be possible that locales heavily targeted with issue advocacy ads are where political strategists have predetermined that there is a high level of issue-oriented, politically involved individuals. Thus, these people will demonstrate greater issue knowledge and voting likelihood regardless of issue ads. Without controls of key factors, i.e., general political knowledge and campaign interest, it may be these differences—not the volume of issue advocacy ads—that are causing variations in issue knowledge and turnout.
This study combined the 2000 National Election Study (NES) survey with ad tracking data by Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG) which monitored the transmission of all political advertising during the 2000 presidential election. By combining information about the viewing habits of individuals and the actual distribution of issue ads in each media market, we can estimate the effects of issue ads more precisely. Other recent election studies have used this approach.56

**Content Data.** CMAG monitors the top 75 media markets and the tracking data were content analyzed by the Brennan Center at New York University and the University of Wisconsin.57 To be considered issue advocacy ads, ad sponsorship was identified (sponsored by a candidate, party, or interest group). Then, if paid for by a party or group, determination of whether the ad expressly advocated a particular candidate was based on the definition of issue advocacy ads in *Buckley v. Valeo*. According to *Buckley*, issue advocacy ads are ones not using words such as “elect,” “defeat,” or “support.” Based on this working definition, of the 970,410 political spots aired, 94% had an electoral objective and only 62,835, or less than 6%, were considered issue advocacy ads. Because coding criteria were relatively objective and straightforward, very high inter-coder reliability was obtained.59

CMAG data track local variations depending on media markets by monitoring the transmissions of the national networks as well as 25 national cable networks. In this study, the total issue advocacy ads aired from 1 January 2000 to 6 November 2000 were used as a cumulative estimate for each media market. This estimate has a great advantage over using archives alone to check the quantities of spots aired. As Freedman and Goldstein argued,50 archives often fail to have a complete collection of all the spots aired. Even if a given archive has a complete collection of all the spots that were produced, it does not provide information on whether or not the spots were aired and how frequently a given spot was aired. Furthermore, without media market-level data, all voters in a given year are assumed to receive the same volume and mix of advertisements.

**Survey Data.** The 2000 NES data contains 1,006 face-to-face interviews and 801 telephone interviews as a pre-election survey. Pre-election response rate was 61.2% and, with a retention rate of 86%, 694 face-to-face post-interviews and 862 telephone post-interviews were completed. For this study, each NES survey respondent was assigned into a media market according to his or her residence, determined according to the 2000 Designated Market Areas (DMA) by Nielsen Media Research. The final data set contains each respondent’s potential exposure level to issue advocacy ads according to the media market as well as demographics, political predispositions, and turnout.

To measure the relationship between the level of issue ads and voters’ issue knowledge and turnout, the following variables were controlled: general political knowledge, interview date, total advertising spending, campaign interest, education, age, partisanship, and gender, which have been found to be closely related to issue knowledge and turnout.61 General political knowledge has been found to be one of the
strongest predictors of one’s ability to be receptive to a message and learn from it. Interview date was controlled, given that a media campaign becomes more intense as the election nears. Total advertising spending accounts for the overall level of advertising in each media market. Since this study attempts to estimate the effects of issue advocacy ads alone, the general volume of advertising poured into each market should be controlled.

Communication variables, as alternative sources of issue information included in the analysis, were television news watching, newspaper reading, debate viewing, and political discussion. Indices for newspaper reading ($\alpha=.61$) and TV news watching ($\alpha=.73$) were created by combining frequency of use with attention paid to political coverage for each medium. For debate viewing, those who watched the entire debate were coded as 2, those who watched a part of it were coded as 1, and those who did not watch at all were coded as 0. Although more than one debate was held, the NES question measured only a debate exposure. Political discussion was measured by the question, “Do you ever discuss politics with your family or friends?” Those who answered affirmatively were then asked “How many days in the past week did you talk about politics with family or friends?” Combining the two questions, political discussion was coded on a scale of 0 (none) to 7 (seven days).

Dependent variables were respondents’ knowledge of candidates’ issue positions and turnout. Knowledge of candidates’ issue positions is an additive scale, based on the number of correct answers given to questions about Al Gore’s and George Bush’s stands on issues presented during the 2000 presidential election; these ranged from defense spending to environmental policy ($\alpha=.70$). A similar issue knowledge-based measure has been employed by other researchers. Turnout was measured in the post-election survey.

**Results**

There were a total of 62,835 issue advocacy ads aired between 1 January and 6 November 2000. The level of issue advocacy ads varied from market to market, ranging from 5,445 for Detroit to 8 for Wichita/Hutchinson. The average level of issue advocacy ads was 885 (s.d.=956) across the markets. Residents in a state were not necessarily targeted by similar levels of issue ads. For instance, residents in Charlotte, North Carolina, were targeted for 1,138 issue ads, while residents in Greensboro, North Carolina, received only 52 issue ads. Those living in Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas, were targeted with 1,101 issue ads; those in San Antonio were targeted with only 257 issue ads. Most of the issue ads were 30-second spots: 89% ran 30 seconds while 9% were 60-second issue ads, 1.4% were 15-second ads, and .6% were 10-second issue ads.

Table 1 regression results show that the first block containing general political knowledge and interview date explained about 24% of the total variance in issue knowledge. Consistent with previous research, general political knowledge was the strongest factor determining one’s level of issue knowledge ($b=.277, p <.001$). The block of demographic variables added about 5% in explaining voters’ candidate issue knowl-
The effects of issue advocacy advertising.

Those who tended to have high issue knowledge were the educated, the younger, and males. The third block’s motivational factor, campaign interest, contributed significantly to the model. As expected, higher campaign interest meant higher issue knowledge (β=.126, p <.001).

Because we wanted to examine the unique contribution of communication variables after controlling for demographic and political disposition, the fourth block contained various communication variables and explained 2% of additional variance in issue knowledge. Newspaper exposure was positively associated with issue knowledge (β=.065, p <.01), while TV news exposure was not (β=.020, p >.42). Debate exposure (β=.102, p <.001) and political discussion (β=.080, p <.01) were significantly associated with high candidate issue knowledge. However, total advertising spending in the media market was not a significant predictor of voters’ issue knowledge (β=.016, p >.43).

Controlling for all other factors, the issue advertising variable significantly increased $R^2$ from .343 to .345. As hypothesized, the level of issue advocacy ads aired was positively associated with level of voters’ knowledge of candidate issue positions (β=.047, p <.05). That is, those who lived in an area with a high level of issue advocacy ads tended to have higher campaign issue knowledge.

**Note:** Source: 2000 NES (N=1499); Values are standardized regression coefficients with t values in parentheses. ***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>β (t)</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Block 1 Political Knowledge</td>
<td>.277 (10.624)**</td>
<td>.237***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Date</td>
<td>-.012 (-.557)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 2 Education</td>
<td>.144 (5.909)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.091 (-3.814)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (Female)</td>
<td>-.114 (-5.235)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship (Republican)</td>
<td>.010 (.448)</td>
<td>.284***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2 Change = .047***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 3 Campaign Interest</td>
<td>.126 (4.628)**</td>
<td>.321***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2 Change = .037***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 4 TV News Watching</td>
<td>.020 (.789)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper Reading</td>
<td>.065 (2.606)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debate Viewing</td>
<td>.102 (4.101)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Discussion</td>
<td>.080 (3.344)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Advertising Spending</td>
<td>.016 (.758)</td>
<td>.343***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2 Change = .022***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 5 Issue Advertising</td>
<td>.047 (2.181)*</td>
<td>.345***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2 Change = .002*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**TABLE 1**

**Hierarchical Regression on Voters’ Candidate Issue Knowledge**
In post-election interviews, 24% of respondents reported that they did not vote, while 76% did. Using turnout as a dependent measure (1: vote, 0: not vote), a binomial logistic regression estimated the probability of voting. As shown in Table 2, the logistic model fits the data well, as indicated by the significant model Chi-square ($\chi^2=391.25$, d.f.=13, $p<.001$). General political knowledge, education, age, campaign interest, debate watching, and the frequency of political discussion were positively associated with turnout.

Table 2 shows a significant issue ad effect ($b=.166$, $p<.05$). As hypothesized, a high level of issue advocacy ads in the media market increased the likelihood of turning out to vote in the election. Total advertising spending on the market, however, was not significant ($b=.001$, $p>.70$).

**Discussion**

The study revealed beneficial effects of issue advocacy advertising. It was likely to increase citizens’ campaign issue knowledge and eventually boost their participation. As emphasized in *Buckley v. Valeo*, the discussion of public issues is fundamental in democracy to assure “the unfettered interchange of ideas for the bringing about of political and social changes desired by the people.” Whether or not those issue ads achieved their implicit goals (vote for/against a candidate) falls outside of this study. What concerns us is whether the public and society as a whole can benefit from this emerging public communication. In fact, the
THE EFFECTS OF ISSUE ADVOCACY ADVERTISING

results of the study resonate well with the Court’s reasoning about the functions of issue advocacy communication: issue advocacy ads in 2000 informed and mobilized the electorate.

An informed electorate leads to a more reasoning electorate. A voter with a high level of information about candidates and issues will presumably have a higher probability of choosing the “correct” candidate. In the 2000 campaign, as in the past, candidates themselves used the majority of ads aired, over 90%. Although the money spent on issue ads dramatically increased over the past decade, the proportion of issue advocacy ads was still relatively small. However, this small share of voice contributed to raising voters’ issue knowledge and turnout. As shown in the analysis, the effect of issue ads is smaller than other demographic and motivational factors. In close elections like those in 2000 and 2004, even small learning effects from issue ads, along with the increased mobilization, could move the undecided toward one candidate and swing an election. Furthermore, given that campaign spending is on the rise, the learning and mobilizing effects from issue ads should be closely monitored in coming elections.

The beneficial aspects of issue advocacy ads stand out, especially considering the insignificant role of total advertising expenditure on voters’ issue knowledge and the likelihood of turning out to vote. Regardless of how heavily or lightly targeted by political advertising, overall ad spending neither made voters more or less informed, nor did it lead to higher turnout. However, the amount of issue advocacy ads made differences. The results indicated that the types of advertising would matter in terms of informing and stimulating voters. Voters would perceive issue ads as a legitimate campaign discourse primarily concerning issues, while viewing candidate-sponsored ads with heightened skepticism.

Among the communication variables, TV news watching was not a significant predictor of issue knowledge, compared to the significant contributions of debate exposure, newspaper reading, and political discussion. The results are consistent with previous studies showing significant effects of debate viewing, political discussion, and newspaper reading. In this study, the communication variables altogether added a 2% increment to the total explained variance. We assume that stringent statistical controls, especially controlling for people’s general political knowledge, leave little room for communication variables. The results accord well with previous studies showing that general political knowledge is one of the strongest predictors of one’s ability to learn. We also acknowledge relatively low reliability scores of communication indices as a limitation. Given that similar reliability scores were obtained based on the 1992 and 1996 NES data, revisiting the NES measurement scales for media variables appears to be necessary.

This study presents a cross-sectional snapshot between the level of issue ads and voter learning/turnout. A longitudinal approach can detect a possible causal flow from the level of issue ads, to heightened campaign involvement, to increased candidate issue knowledge, and to increased mobilization. In addition, this study did not consider the tone
or nature of issue advocacy ads. It only quantified the amount of issue advocacy ads aired and effects on voters’ learning and participation. Also, this study tested aggregate media market differences. Future studies can look at individuals’ responses to issue ads with recall or recognition data.

Having established the influence of issue advocacy ads, the study raises concerns over information inequality in the electorate. In the 2000 election, some pivotal markets were inundated by issue ads, while others were virtually ignored. If such a trend continues, a possible or existing knowledge gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” may emerge or widen. Further study should examine this knowledge gap hypothesis resulting from concentrated distribution of issue ads.

With growing regulatory efforts on soft money spending, critics have often pointed to the culpability of issue advocacy ads for distorting political debate. To protect the integrity of our elections, increased regulations, especially aimed at corporations and unions that might overwhelm the voices of interest groups or individual citizens, are inevitable. However, considering the paucity of empirical evidence on the effects of issue ads, the recurrent criticism should be carefully reviewed. Without thorough and systematic research on their benefits and harm, we believe any attempt at curbing issue advocacy ads would not survive constitutional challenges. With the evidence presented here, we should instead consider the beneficial aspects of issue advocacy advertising, which informs the public and eventually mobilizes the electorate.

NOTES


33. Friestad and Wright, “The Persuasion Knowledge Model”; Friestad and Wright, “Persuasion Knowledge.”

34. Campbell and Kirmani, “Consumers’ Use of Persuasion Knowledge.”


43. Wattenberg and Brians, “Negative Campaign Advertising.”

44. Goldstein and Freedman, “Campaign Advertising.”

45. Garramone, “Effects of Negative.”


49. Kahn and Kenney, “Do Negative Campaigns Mobilize and Suppress Turnout?”


52. Finkel and Geer, “A Spot Check.”


54. Kenneth Goldstein and Travis N. Ridout, “Measuring the Effects of
The effects of issue advocacy advertising

57. There are over 200 media markets in the United States, but over 80% of the population lives in the top 75 media markets.
58. Through a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the CMAG data were purchased by the Brennan Center at New York University. The data were processed and coded by teams at the University of Wisconsin.
59. Based on a sample of 135 ads, coders agreed 99% of the time on the objective of the ad and 98% of the time on the tone of the ad. Percentage agreements do not take into account coder agreement that occurs strictly by chance. Reliability methods such as Scott’s $pi$ will take this into account. Although the original study only reports simple percentage agreements, given the extremely high percentage agreements, Scott’s $pi$ score is expected to be at an acceptable level.
60. Freedman and Goldstein, “Measuring Media Exposure.”
63. Similar indices for newspaper reading and TV news watching were used by Brians and Wattenberg’s analysis of 1996 NES data and Holbert et al.’s analysis of 1996 NES data. In the Brians and Wattenberg study, Cronbach’s alpha of newspaper reading was .61 and that of TV news watching was .65. In the Holbert et al. study, Cronbach’s alpha of newspaper reading was .60 and that of TV news was .69; Brians and Wattenberg, “Campaign Issue Knowledge”; Holbert et al., “The Role of Communication.”
68. Brians and Wattenberg’s study, “Campaign Issue Knowledge,” based on 1992 NES data, displays similar effect sizes for communication variables with the introduction of general political knowledge in the regression equation.
69. Price and Zaller, “Who Gets the News?”