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Advertising Trends in 2010

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Erika Franklin Fowler and Travis N. Ridout

Abstract

Political advertising offers an important window on American campaigns and elections. We analyze a comprehensive database of political ads aired during the 2010 midterms to shed light on campaign strategies in this history-making election. We find that with the increase in competitive races in 2010, the volume of advertising rose too, as did its negativity. Moreover, we track the issues mentioned by each party, finding that while the parties agreed that employment was the top issue, there was also much divergence in issue priorities, with Republicans taking up some unlikely themes such as health care and “change.” The high volume of advertising in 2010 suggests a greater potential for voter learning, but the high levels of ad negativity could have had both positive and negative consequences on the electorate.

KEYWORDS: midterm elections, campaign advertising

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The 2010 midterm elections were no ordinary midterm. Despite a string of legislative accomplishments, Democrats were running from their records and from President Obama, and Nancy Pelosi became a central target of Republican attacks. The poor economy and relatively high rates of unemployment undoubtedly helped Republican recruitment of challengers. There were at least twice the number of truly competitive races as in a typical midterm, and as a result, both the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate were up for grabs. In the end, Republicans picked up more seats in the House (63) than any party since the Great Depression. Republicans also gained 6 seats in the U.S. Senate and, importantly, several governorships that will be assets in the redistricting battles to come.

Certainly, the fundamental factors that influence election outcomes were not in Democrats' favor in 2010, but that does not mean that the activities of the campaigns should be ignored. Indeed, the Republicans outperformed most of the election forecasting models built on factors external to campaigns (McGhee, Nyhan and Sides 2010). As such, the choices made by campaigns likely contributed to victory or defeat in some instances. In this piece, we take a look at one important element of any campaign for federal or gubernatorial office, which also happens to be the largest expense in most campaigns (West 1994): political advertising. Drawing on an extensive database of ads aired during the 2010 election, we illuminate some of the central strategies employed during the campaign. Our goals in this paper are to 1) examine the volume and placement of political advertising during the 2010 campaigns, 2) gain some insight into what the candidates and interested parties were talking about by examining the content of their ads, and 3) take advantage of our extensive database of coded ads to be able speak to the design of contemporary political messages.

Tracking Political Advertising

Our data from the 2010 campaigns come from the Wesleyan Media Project, which was established in 2010 to track advertising in federal and state elections. It is a successor to the Wisconsin Advertising Project, which tracked political advertising between 1998 and 2008. The Project is collaboration between researchers at Wesleyan University, Bowdoin College, and Washington State University.

The source for the ad data is Kantar Media/Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG), and the data provide two types of information. Frequency information tells when and where ads aired, including detailed information on the date, time, market, station, and television show of each airing. In addition to the frequency data, Kantar Media/CMAG provides the ads themselves, and in contrast to previous years when only storyboards (screen captures of every few

seconds of video along with the transcript of the ad) were available, in 2010 the Wesleyan Media Project received full video files, opening new possibilities for content coding on voiceovers, images, and music.

After receiving the data from Kantar Media/CMAG, Wesleyan Media Project staff first researched the entity responsible for airing each political spot, distinguishing between those paid for by candidates, parties, hard-money interest groups, and soft-money interest groups. Project coders at Wesleyan, Bowdoin, and Washington State University then watched a video of each ad and answered an extensive battery of questions about each.¹

The analyses presented here are based on a sample of 4,576 ads aired on broadcast television stations in gubernatorial, Senate, and House races during the 2010 campaign. Coding is ongoing, but the sample represents 72 percent of the total of 6,341 unique ads tracked in these races in 2010. While we would like to be able to speak to the entire universe of ads aired during the campaign, we do not believe the sample is systematically biased, given the large size of the sample of ads coded and our efforts to ensure that newly-released ads were being coded at the same time as older ads.

One potential source of bias is that we do not track ads aired on local cable stations, a venue that has increased in importance over the past couple of election cycles (Hagen and Kolodny 2008). That said, the best evidence suggests that local cable does not represent a large proportion of the ads aired during congressional campaigns (Ridout 2009), and its generally limited reach means that the typical ad aired on local cable does not reach as large an audience as the typical ad aired on a broadcast television station.

Ad Volume and Placement

There is little doubt that 2010 was a record-breaking year for campaign advertising. Based on Wesleyan Media Project analysis of Kantar Media/CMAG data, the battle for control of Congress racked up a total of nearly 1.6 million airings (Table 1), which is a 36 percent increase over 2008. The estimated cost of these airings is \$735 million, a 61 percent increase over 2008. Gubernatorial advertising was particularly intense, with over 1.3 million ads airing from January 1 to Election Day in the 37 states holding elections for governor. The cost of these airings was estimated at \$697 million.

¹ Analysis was facilitated by the use of Academicclip, an online content analysis tool from CommIT Technology.

Table 1. Volume of Advertising in 2010 by Race

	Total Ads	2010 spending
Governor	1,306,599	\$697,003,852
US House	774,613	\$330,825,512
US Senate	788,321	\$404,170,193
Total	2,869,533	\$1,431,999,557

Numbers include ads aired from January 1 to Election Day

More than seven out of 10 of those airings—and more than three out of every four dollars spent in 2010—occurred after September 1, which is traditionally thought of as the beginning of the general election fall campaign. Table 2 displays the volume and cost of advertising by sponsor in House, Senate, and gubernatorial campaigns for the fall campaign period, beginning on September 1. Comparisons with 2008 are also shown for House and Senate races. Comparisons across years for gubernatorial races are not shown so as not to provide an apples-to-oranges comparison, as there were many more gubernatorial races in 2010 than in 2008.²

Looking first at House races makes a couple of things clear. First, the total volume and cost of advertising increased considerably in 2010—about a 50 percent jump for both. Second, the increase occurred regardless of sponsor, though independent groups saw the biggest jump in both the volume of ads paid for and the estimated cost of such advertising. As a consequence, independent groups increased their share of total advertising in House races from around 5 percent in 2008 to over 13 percent in 2010, while the share of ads sponsored by candidates declined by almost 7 percentage points.

The story is similar for Senate races, with large increases in both the volume and cost of advertising, with one exception. Party ad spending went down between 2008 and 2010, though this decline was almost compensated by the increase in spending coordinated between candidates and parties. Although there was an increase in both the volume and cost of ads sponsored by independent groups, the jump was not as dramatic as that for House races. Interestingly, then, the share of all senatorial ads paid for by candidates actually increased in Senate races between 2008 and 2010. One might wonder why the cost of advertising increased more dramatically than the volume of advertising. Part of the answer is

² Although the year 2006 might seem a logical comparison with 2010 for gubernatorial races, CMAG tracked advertising only in the country's top 100 media markets in that year.

Table 2. Volume and Cost of House Advertising by Sponsor (2008 and 2010)

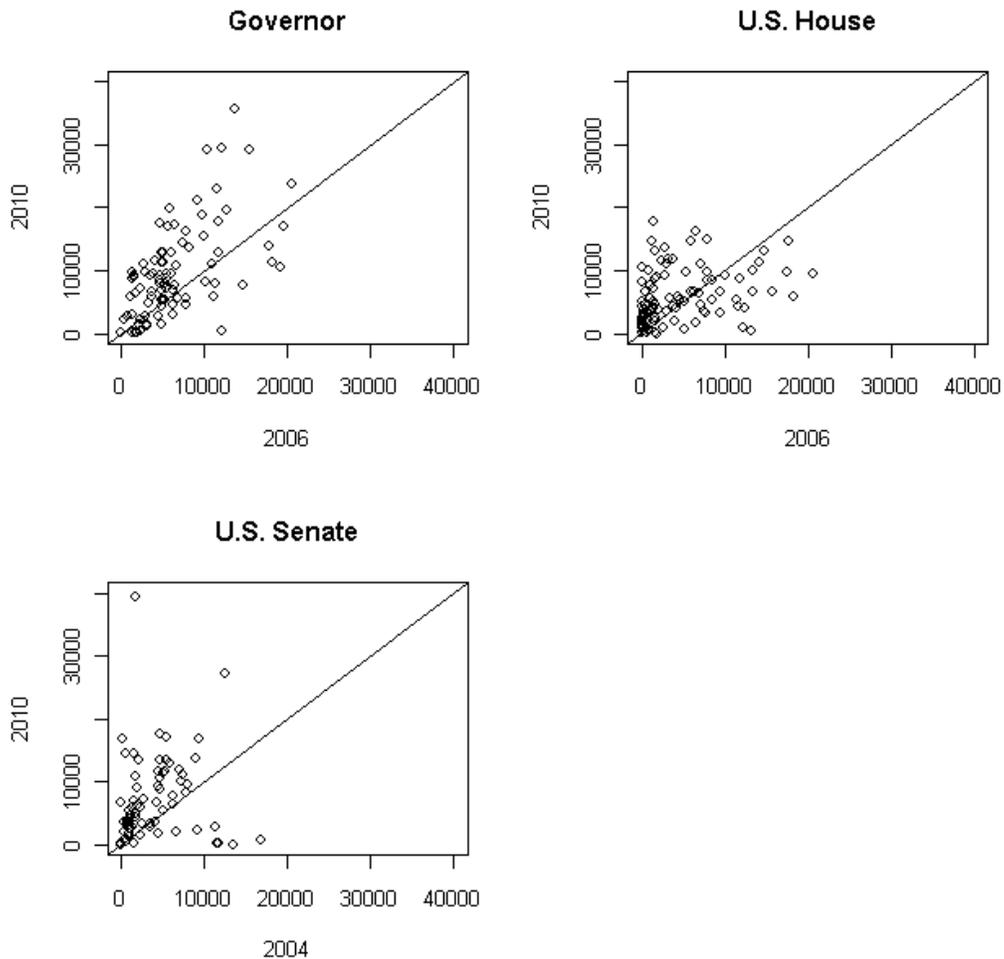
House		Candidate	Party	Ind. Group	Coordinated	Total
2008	Ads Aired	301,456	95,731	22,232	9,175	428,594
	Row %	70.34%	22.34%	5.19%	2.14%	
	Cost (\$ millions)	\$121.6	\$51.1	\$12.0	\$3.0	\$187.7
2010	Ads Aired	390,535	127,472	83,978	23,169	625,154
	Row %	62.47%	20.39%	13.43%	3.71%	
	Cost (\$ millions)	\$170.3	\$55.1	\$54.1	\$9.1	\$288.5
	% volume increase	29.55%	33.16%	277.73%	152.52%	45.86%
	% cost increase	40.01%	7.84%	350.82%	199.69%	53.72%
Senate						
		Candidate	Party	Ind. Group	Coordinated	Total
2008	Ads Aired	246,381	125,441	58,589	8,409	438,820
	Row %	56.15%	28.59%	13.35%	1.92%	
	Cost (\$ millions)	\$82.8	\$52.0	\$24.7	\$2.6	\$162.0
2010	Ads Aired	334,120	57,608	71,538	29,953	493,219
	Row %	67.74%	11.68%	14.50%	6.07%	
	Cost (\$ millions)	\$171.4	\$27.4	\$57.4	\$21.5	\$277.7
	% volume increase	35.61%	-54.08%	22.10%	256.20%	12.40%
	% cost increase	107.05%	-47.22%	132.72%	736.37%	71.48%
Governor						
		Candidate	Party	Ind. Group	Coordinated	Total
2010	Ads Aired	482,757	89,928	86,078	2,250	661,013
	Row %	73.03%	13.60%	13.02%	0.34%	
	Cost (\$ millions)	\$275.7	\$43.0	\$70.2	\$2.5	\$391.3

Numbers include ads aired between September 1 and Election Day

that Senate races were being waged in more expensive markets in 2010 compared to 2008. Another factor is that when the volume of advertising increases, ad costs may rise as campaigns compete for precious air-time.

In gubernatorial races, candidates sponsored the bulk of ads, just over 73 percent, with parties and independent groups each paying for 13 percent of the ads. Although the impact of the *Citizens United* Supreme Court ruling is discussed elsewhere in this issue by Michael M. Franz (“The Citizens United Election? Or Same As It Ever Was?”), these numbers make clear that 2010 did not live up to the flood of interest group activity many predicted.

Figure 1. Volume of Ads by Market Across Comparable Campaigns (Governor, House and Senate)



To illustrate how levels of advertising in 2010 compare with previous election years, we plotted (in Figure 1) the number of governor, House, and Senate ads that aired in 2010 in each media market against the number of such ads in the previous comparable election (which is 2006 for governors' races, given that most states have 4-year terms; 2006 for House races, because it was the most recent midterm; and 2004 for the Senate, because Senators have 6-year terms). Due to the different number of markets tracked in each year (2004, 2006 and 2010), only markets that were tracked in both years of the comparison are plotted.

Points plotted above the line indicate a race in which the volume of advertising in the media market in question increased, while points below the line indicate a media market in which the volume of advertising decreased. The increase in advertising is especially clear in the gubernatorial and senatorial races. Whereas not a single media market saw more than 20,000 gubernatorial ads in 2006, there were 7 in that category in 2010. As for senate races, nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of the markets tracked experienced increases in the total number of senatorial ads in 2010 compared to the same races in 2004.

Table 3. Most Expensive House Races, 9/1-Election Day*

State	District	Cost	Pro-Dem	Pro-GOP	Total Spots	% Spots from IGs
VA	5	\$6,739,830	11,610	7,327	18,937	26.9%
MI	7	\$6,661,530	9,614	6,599	16,213	28.9%
VA	11	\$6,227,340	1,836	1,632	3,468	26.9%
NV	3	\$5,736,550	4,656	3,587	8,243	20.3%
FL	22	\$5,352,540	4,106	3,352	7,458	7.9%
MD	1	\$5,329,230	6,532	3,831	10,363	10.4%
SC	5	\$5,291,800	6,075	6,965	13,040	22.8%
AZ	5	\$4,781,530	3,835	3,055	6,890	17.6%
TX	23	\$4,243,480	2,341	1,653	3,994	22.9%
PA	8	\$4,140,720	2,977	653	3,630	9.1%

*Amounts may include primary advertising
Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project

Which races were those with heavy volumes of advertising in 2010? Table 3 shows the nation's ten most expensive U.S. House races, seven of which featured more than \$5 million in ad spending. The four most expensive were Virginia's fifth district (held by Democrat Tom Perriello), Michigan's 7th district (held by Democrat Mark Schauer), Virginia's eleventh district (held by Democrat Gerald Connolly), and Nevada's 3rd district (held by Democrat Dina Titus). In all

four, ads sponsored by outside groups exceeded 20 percent of total ads in the post-September 1 period. The race in Michigan's seventh congressional district was the most saturated with outside group advertising, with almost 29 percent of ads being sponsored by independent groups.

The nation's most expensive Senate races are shown in Table 4. Topping the list is California, with over \$36 million spent on advertising. Ad spending topped \$20 million in Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Florida, and went over \$15 million in Colorado, Nevada, and Connecticut. Interest group involvement in these races ranged considerably, from under 3 percent in Connecticut and New York to over 30 percent in Colorado's tight contest between incumbent Democrat Michael Bennet and Republican Ken Buck.

Table 4. Most Expensive Senate Races, 9/1-Election Day*

State	Cost	Pro-Dem	Pro-GOP	Total Spots	% Spots from IGs
CA	\$36,781,900	16,809	12,648	29,457	17.5%
IL	\$27,958,280	13,372	15,780	29,165	19.2%
PA	\$25,738,350	11,706	21,493	34,025	23.5%
FL	\$20,189,360	4,886	13,497	33,447	8.5%
CO	\$18,361,780	15,325	17,675	33,063	32.0%
NV	\$17,504,260	22,376	18,467	40,871	27.1%
CT	\$15,645,700	4,639	6,390	11,157	2.8%
WI	\$15,609,860	16,964	20,272	37,236	7.0%
WA	\$14,760,030	16,315	15,471	31,786	10.2%
NY	\$13,365,880	16,240	2,334	18,574	0.0%

*Amounts may include primary advertising
Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project

Table 5 displays the most expensive gubernatorial races. California outpaced all others, weighing in at \$81 million since September 1. The heavy spending is thanks, in part, to the \$140 million³ of her own money that gubernatorial candidate Meg Whitman put into the race. The three-way Florida

³ Lopez, Steve. 2010. "Meg Whitman spent \$50 for each vote she got. Is that an outrageous extravagance?" Los Angeles Times. November 4. <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2010/11/steve-lopez-meg-whitman-spent-50-for-each-vote-she-got-is-that-an-outrageous-extravagance.html>. Accessed on December 17, 2010.

contest followed with nearly \$53 million in ad spending. Texas clocked in at almost \$38 million, with Ohio, New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Illinois all over \$17 million. Notably, in the Wisconsin race, interest groups sponsored nearly 43 percent of the 35,518 airings, more ads than either candidate paid to air.

Table 5: Most Expensive Gubernatorial Races, 9/1-Election Day*

State	Cost	Pro-Dem	Pro-GOP	Total Spots	% Spots from IGs
CA	\$81,553,430	44,909	59,725	104,634	4.1%
FL	\$52,712,370	36,836	59,393	96,451	0.5%
TX	\$37,633,640	21,555	25,242	46,805	4.9%
OH	\$19,340,180	23,459	18,768	42,227	25.2%
NY	\$19,118,090	23,935	6,351	30,321	0.0%
MA	\$19,021,190	5,592	7,256	16,610	32.6%
PA	\$17,547,880	7,597	16,387	23,984	2.1%
IL	\$17,064,150	8,652	10,072	18,868	13.3%
MD	\$15,725,810	7,009	5,575	12,584	29.9%
WI	\$14,828,520	16,502	19,016	35,518	42.5%

*Amounts may include primary advertising
Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project

Campaign Issues and Themes

Democrats and Republicans may not agree on much, but they did agree on some of the top issues and themes on which to campaign. Popular wisdom that 2010 was all about jobs was confirmed by the data in Table 6, which displays the top mentions by party in the post-September 1 period. About 35 percent of ads sponsored by Democrats (and pro-Democratic allies among the independent groups) mentioned the issue of employment, while Republicans mentioned jobs in 48 percent of their ads. Taxes were also a top issue for candidates of both parties, with about 34 percent of Democratic ads and 39 percent of Republican ads mentioning this issue.

After the top economic references of jobs and taxes, the two parties diverged on other major issue mentions. Democrats talked about trade in about 17 percent of their ads—the third most-mentioned issue on the Democratic side—but trade did not make the top 10 for Republicans. Similarly, Democrats mentioned Social Security along with Wall Street and China in considerable numbers. All of these issues, too, failed to make the top 10 for Republicans. Both Wall Street and

China, though seemingly disparate topics, were primarily used to tap into economic concerns and voter anger over Wall Street bailouts and outsourcing of American jobs overseas. Perhaps most noticeable is that Democratic appeals to hope and change from 2008 were gone this cycle. Instead, Republicans were the ones owning the campaign theme of change this year, mentioning it in almost 10 percent of their ads.

Table 6. Top Issue/Theme Mentions by Party in U.S. House and Senate Races

Democrat		Republican	
Employment/Jobs	34.6	Employment/Jobs	47.9
Taxes	33.6	Gov't Spending	40.4
Trade	16.7	Taxes	38.9
Fighter	15.4	Deficit/Budget	35.7
Social security	14.8	Health care	32.4
Wall Street	14.3	Recession/ Stimulus	30.0
Health care	10.2	Medicare	13.6
China	9.1	Energy	11.7
Economy (generic)	8.6	Economy (generic)	10.5
Business	8.3	Change	9.5

Numbers include ads aired between September 1 and Election Day

One other interesting finding is that health care—even though it was the centerpiece of landmark legislation passed by Democrats in early 2010 and is an issue considered to be “owned” by Democrats—was mentioned in three times as many Republican as Democratic ads. Over 32 percent of Republican ads discussed health care compared to only 10 percent of Democratic ads. Perhaps more telling is that nearly 7 out of 10 (69.5 percent) of Republican mentions of health care came in pure attack ads whereas only slightly more than half (51.8 percent) of Democratic mentions of the major reform came in positive ads.

More generally, Republicans mentioned more policy issues than Democrats in their advertising. On average, Republican ads mentioned 3.1 issue topics while Democratic ads featured only 2.4 mentions, a statistically significant difference ($t=174$, $p<0.001$). One big reason for this is that the policy environment was not favorable to Democrats in 2010. Thus, Democrats were more likely to focus on the personal failings of their opponents, whereas it made sense for Republicans to focus on criticizing Democratic incumbents for failures on issues such as unemployment, government spending, taxation, and the budget deficit.

In Table 7, we examine the prominence of party leader mentions. Over one in four Republican ad airings (28 percent) mentioned President Obama—almost all of them negatively. Democrats were much more hesitant to mention the president. Fewer than 5 percent of Democratic-sponsored ad airings mentioned Obama, and of those that did, 45 percent of them mentioned him in a disapproving fashion. Sarah Palin was more commonly mentioned in Republican—than in Democratic-sponsored ads (7.3 percent versus 4.8 percent), but in contrast to Obama, the majority of mentions of the former Alaska governor were positive. Even the majority of Palin mentions in Democratic-sponsored ads were positive. Finally, it seems that Democrats were trying to remind voters of what they disliked about George W. Bush, as 4.3 percent of Democratic ad airings mentioned the former president, and almost all of them were negative. Republican sponsors barely mentioned Bush; just .3 of 1 percent of Republican ad airings mentioned him.

Table 7. Percentage of Ads Mentioning Obama, Palin, and Bush by Party

	Obama	Palin	Bush
Democrats	4.3	4.8	4.3
Republicans	28.0	7.3	0.3

Numbers include ads aired between January 1 and Election Day

Advertising Tone

During every election season, claims are made that the current campaign is unprecedented in its negativity. This year, the claim was empirically correct, as the 2010 campaign was the most negative in recent history. As Table 8 shows, fully 53.5 percent of the ads that aired in 2010 after September 1 (typically considered the beginning of the general election campaign) were purely negative. Another 20.5 percent were contrast ads, those that both mentioned a favored candidate and his or her opponent. Only 26 percent were pure positive ads.

Table 8. Tone of Ad Airings

Promote	26.0%
Contrast	20.5%
Attack	53.5%

Numbers include ads aired between September 1 and Election Day in federal races

Democrats were slightly more positive than Republicans in their advertising, though not by much, as Table 9 reveals. Twenty-eight percent of Democratic-sponsored ad airings were positive compared to 24 percent of

Republican-sponsored airings. Republicans also aired about 4 percentage points more pure attack ads than did Democrats. Although party did not affect ad tone much, sponsorship did.

Table 9. Tone of Ad Airings by Party

	Democrats	Republicans
Promote	28.1%	23.6%
Contrast	19.5%	19.6%
Attack	52.5%	56.8%

Numbers include ads aired between September 1 and Election Day in federal races

Table 10 shows a dramatic difference in ad tone depending on sponsor. Party-sponsored ads were particularly negative, with 96 percent of airings being pure attack ads. Independent groups were almost as negative, with 87 percent of airings being pure attacks and only 7 percent being promotional. Candidate ads were the most positive; yet even they still aired as many negative as positive spots. Coordinated ads paid for by parties and candidates were more negative than candidate advertising but were much more positive than party-sponsored spots. Allowing candidates to remain above the fray (at least relatively) and letting others do the dirty work is not something new, but it was certainly pronounced in 2010. This is quite a change from the late 1980s and early 1990s, when about three quarters of ads from interest groups were positive (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995).

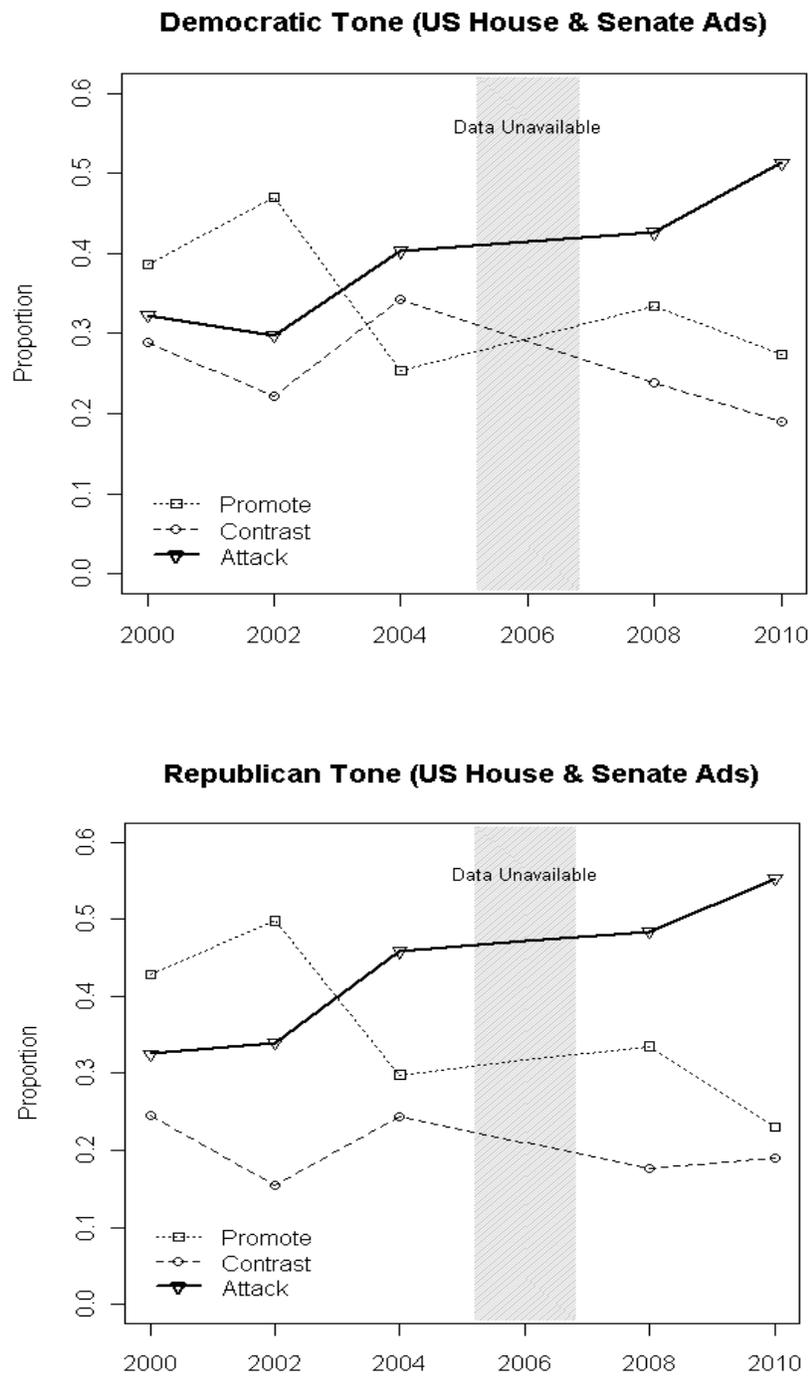
Table 10. Tone of Ad Airings by Sponsor

	Candidate	Party	Coordinated	Ind. Group
Promote	36.0%	1.0%	29.4%	7.2%
Contrast	27.8%	2.8%	24.0%	5.6%
Attack	36.1%	96.2%	46.7%	87.2%

Numbers include ads aired between September 1 and Election Day in federal races

Figure 2 displays the change in tone of U.S. Congressional ads by party over the past decade of tracking, for September 1 through Election Day. As shown in the figure, rates of negativity have been increasing since 2002 (data on 2006 are unavailable). When one considers the rise in pure attack ads coupled with increases in volume of advertising overall, the amount of negativity flooding the airwaves in competitive markets has increased dramatically over the last decade. Although *Citizens United* has not yet led to elections dominated by interest groups, Figure 2 combined with the findings in Table 10 provide some indication of where increasing activity on the part of interest groups is going.

Figure 2. Advertising Tone Over Time, By Party



Because the project was able to code actual videos of the ads, we were able to delve more in depth into the video and audio features of the political ads. One important feature of an ad is the audio and whether there is someone other than the candidate narrating the ad. Table 11 shows that about 80 percent of ads employed someone to do a voiceover. Men were chosen to do the voiceover much more often than women: about 52 percent of ads featured a male voiceover, 17.5 percent featured a female, and 8 percent featured both. Yet there were also some party differences in the gender composition of the voiceovers, with 25 percent of Republican ads featuring a female voiceover compared to only 10 percent of Democratic-sponsored ads. Just over 45 percent of Republican ads were male-narrated compared to almost 60 percent of Democratic-sponsored ads.

Table 11. Use and Gender of Ad Voiceover

No Voiceover	19.3%
Female Voiceover	17.5%
Male Voiceover	52.4%
Both Male and Female	8.3%

Numbers include ads aired between September 1 and Election Day

Since the passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, candidates for federal office have been required to approve their messages, but there are no mandates as to where that approval should take place. Nevertheless, ad producers seem to have reached a consensus about the best place to put the oral approval: 77 percent of ads feature the oral approval at the end of the ad, 20 percent of oral approvals come at the beginning, and another 3 percent come at the end of the ad. Ads with oral approval at the beginning were more likely to be attack ads (72 percent), indicating that practitioners may believe there is some benefit to be gained from getting out of the way of the attack.

Finally, we examined the musical background of the ads, finding that most ads contained some form of music (Table 12). Just 4 percent of ads contained no musical background, while 49 percent used music that coders characterized as ominous. Another 36 percent used uplifting music, while 14.3 percent of ads used music that could be characterized as sad. Of those that used ominous music, 72 percent were attack ads, and another 17 percent were contrast ads. Of those that used uplifting music, 45 percent were contrast, and 49 percent were purely positive. Ads using sad music were split in their tone: 43 percent were positive, 31 percent were contrast, and 27 percent were attack ads.

Table 12. Musical Background in Ads

No music	4.2%
Ominous music	49.0%
Uplifting music	36.0%
Sad music	14.3%

Numbers include ads aired between September 1 and Election Day

Conclusion

The 2010 midterm elections were historic in many respects. There were an unusual number of competitive races for Congress—and an unusual number of incumbent party losses. Recent Supreme Court decisions opened up new sources of funding for advertising in these contests, which may (or may not) have contributed to the record volume of ads and ad spending in federal races. Moreover, advertising in the 2010 elections was record-setting in its negativity, at least when compared to other federal races in the past decade.

What can we say about the impact of these ad “records” on voters? Although there is still much to be learned about the effects of advertising on citizen attitudes, perceptions, and behavior—and more to be learned from this cycle’s ad war in particular—previous research does give us a good sense of what some of those effects might be. One nontrivial benefit of record spending and record airings this cycle is that many voters, whether they liked it or not, were undoubtedly exposed to more campaign information than in previous election cycles and therefore were more likely to make informed choices at the ballot box (Coleman and Manna 2000, Franz, et al. 2007).

The unprecedented negativity in 2010 may also have some good consequences. For instance, Geer (2006) shows that negative ads are actually more likely to talk about policy issues, and thus negative ads may be informative ads. Negative ads may also raise the stakes, motivating people to get out and vote (Freedman and Goldstein 1999). But negative advertising is a perennial favorite topic of news media (Fowler and Ridout 2009), and with record levels of negativity this cycle, the amplification of negativity through media was also likely at record levels.

Coverage of attacks as a central strategy of campaigns will only have increased the extent to which citizens perceive the election to be negative above and beyond the “objective” levels as measured through ads alone (Ridout and Fowler, forthcoming). We also know that exposure to negativity is likely to increase cynicism, especially among nonpartisans (Valentino, Beckmann and Buhr 2001), precisely those individuals both parties are attempting to court.

Regardless of advertising's impact on voters, our examination of the placement of political ads, their issue content and themes, and their design features all provide important insight into campaign strategies in the 2010 midterm elections. Although our analysis of advertising in this piece is largely confined to one year's campaigns, our inability to generalize too much beyond those campaigns is not necessarily a weakness. Understanding the campaigns' strategies in this history-making 2010 elections – what actors were doing the talking, at what volume and what they were talking about – is worthy of exploration in its own right. And as the 112th Congress convenes early in 2011, knowing what campaign themes brought them to power is an important prerequisite of holding government accountable.

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