

Chapter 4

Political Campaigning by Super PACs in the Computer Age

Robert John Klotz

University of Southern Maine, USA

ABSTRACT

Video communication during political campaigns is undertaken on television and on the internet. The landscape of videos on television is familiar to all – a sprawling field of brief ads. The differences between television and the Internet mean that different sources of video communication might be favored depending on the medium. In this chapter, the sources of the most popular videos in contemporary political campaigns on the internet will be examined. Specifically, the study examines the sources of the most visible campaign videos on YouTube during the 2018 Senate elections in the United States. Special attention is paid to the relative prominence of Super PACs as a source of campaign videos.

BACKGROUND

How does the Internet change the competitive landscape of video communication in political campaigns? This research question captures a fundamental dimension of the potential impact of technology to change the realm of politics in countries across the globe. Campaigns are fundamental to democracy. In contemporary life, video is a central form of communication. The power of the image is well-established. Moving images can be even more compelling and have a great impact on viewers (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986).

Given the ubiquity and power of video, participants in election campaigns will want to convey their message through video. To get a video message seen, would-be communicators must be successful in a competitive market for video communication. The two most important markets for video communication in modern politics are television and the Internet. While the market for video on the Internet is relatively new, the market for campaign-related videos on television has a long history. In exploring these video markets, this research will emphasize the experience in the United States.

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During political campaigns, the broadcasting world of television has well-established winners and losers. The broadcast world of political campaigns is probably most favorable to the traditional news media. Journalists control the frames of campaign stories. Scholarly studies consistently show that strategic and horse race frames are common in news stories about political campaigns (Flowers, Haynes, & Crespin, 2003). Over time, broadcast journalists have done an increasing amount of the talking during campaign news stories (Patterson, 1993). Journalists are mostly taking time that had previously gone to candidates whose communication has been relegated to brief sound bites (Iyengar, 2011). In a study of four presidential elections in the United States, Grabe and Bucy (2009) found that candidate sound bites on the national news have shrunk to eight seconds while journalists talk over candidate images for about 23 seconds per story about the campaign.

Television stations are also big winners in the broadcast world by selling campaign related advertisements. Broadcast stations offer scarce airtime to campaign participants who want to convey their message through advertisements. Campaigns are profitable events for broadcast stations, which find many eager buyers of their advertising time. These advertising spots are especially valuable since television news coverage of campaigns other than presidential contests is scarce. A study of all local television stations in Minnesota showed that campaign coverage filled only about 8% of the overall news hole during the general election campaign. Despite three close contests that could affect the balance of power in the House, congressional campaigns received less than 10% of the coverage of the presidential campaign and local races were all but ignored (Stevens, Alger, Allen, & Sullivan, 2006). Given the lack of campaign news coverage, advertising is the predominant form of video communication about the campaign on television.

Candidates also enjoy significant advantages in the broadcast world. As the subject of news stories, candidates build the name recognition that is key to election. Although they cannot impose frames, candidates can influence what the media talks about by priming the importance of their preferred issues (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Since news coverage is limited, candidates who want to convey a video message on television are forced to buy advertising. The advertising landscape is favorable to candidates. Under broadcasting regulations, candidates are guaranteed the lowest unit charge for the time class and can often afford that advertising rate.

Special interests, especially well-funded ones, are also big winners in the broadcasting world. There are a range of interest groups active in campaigns. A traditional PAC (Political Action Committee) is a legal entity set up by an interest group to contribute money to candidates and political parties. Other types of interest groups emphasize independent spending. Many of these groups are often referred to as 501c groups in recognition of the section of the tax code under which they are organized, such as 501(c)(4) nonprofit social welfare organizations that do not have to disclose donors even though they can participate in politics as long as it does not constitute the majority of their spending. The other major category of groups that emphasize independent spending is the Super PAC. While traditional PACs give money to candidates who subsequently control the message, Super PACs spend their money on their own message. These organizations can spend unlimited amounts on campaigns as long as it is done independently. Most of the independent spending is dedicated to buying expensive advertising time on television.

Super PACs are doing especially well in the market for video communication on television. These groups are responsible for an increasing percentage of television advertising. By the middle of 2016, spending by outside groups accounted for 49% of all campaign advertisements in races for the US Senate. Super PACs accounted for a plurality of group ads across all types of races (Wesleyan Project, 2016). In 2018, independent spending in the midterm congressional elections by outside groups including Super PACs exceeded \$1 billion. This represents an approximately 50% increase since the previous midterm

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