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Probability and Statistics

April 21, 2013

The Statistics of Campaign Ads

People are taught from a young age that it is important to go out and vote when it comes to elections. Our vote matters and nobody knows that more than the candidates and their campaign parties who spend millions upon millions of dollars to advertise the idea that by voting for them, everything will be alright. When reading David Brooks’ “The Philosophy of Statistics”, I came across an interesting point about the statistics behind political campaign advertisements. Brooks stated that these ads are founded with millions of dollars to be made and rehashed in all sorts of media, and yet they actually have a very little influence on the public in choosing which candidate to vote for. With this research, let’s focus on the history, the statistics that go into making them, and the kind of effect these political advertisements truly have on the voting public.

For a candidate to actually get voted, he or she must interact with the public through all Medias. One of the most logical and practical courses of public interaction is in the television. By the 1950s, it was obvious that more and more Americans were bringing in televisions into their homes, and so political officials from all levels of government found the use of a TV as an easier means to get their point across to the citizens. During the election of 1952, Eisenhower used television ads as a tactic for his campaign, becoming something that was totally new and different from how President Truman’s campaign was run. It consisted of twenty-two second spots entitled as “Eisenhower Answers America” which were made from pre-recorded films of him answering questions from “ordinary” citizens in an attempt to appear accessible to “the common man” while clearing up the issues at the time. These ads were very unique and helped him to win the election. Afterwards, many of his successors and other politicians would use the television media, along with other kinds thanks to the development of technology, to help win over the voters in their elections. It also resulted in a new form of political attack ads through commercials. In 1964, aggressive advertising geared Lyndon B. Johnson’s campaign to a victory. His advertisement, which was dubbed as “The Daisy Girl” became the first and controversial political commercial that showed a young girl picking the petals off a daisy, while a voice off screen counted down to a nuclear explosion. As the decades rolled on, America saw the rise of the highly funded televised political attack ads as a means for the parties to persuade the public of the opponents’ bad histories, poor results, and the potential loss the voters will receive if they allow said party to be elected into office.

It seems that political television advertisements, whether negative or positive, are a great technique as a campaign strategy. However, David Brooks’ believes otherwise. In his article, he says, “… every person who runs for political office has an intuitive sense that they can powerfully influence their odds of winning the election if they can just raise and spend more money. But this, too, is largely wrong …” What he is trying to explain is that a politician’s insight of putting in more money for these campaigns (i.e. television ads, internet ads, posters, radio, etc.) to effect the public’s vote is, in fact, wrong. He then goes on to explain that, “The data shows that in state and national elections that are well-financed, television advertisements barely matter. After the 2004 election, political scientists tried to measure the effectiveness of campaign commercials. They found that if one candidate ran 1,000 more commercials than his opponent in a county — a huge disproportion — that translated into a paltry 0.19 percent advantage in the vote.” He adds a bold and interesting point of view, which is what I decided to go into with my research. Many experts find that these ads, which consist of 87% negative ads and 13% positive ads, have some effect on the viewer. However, they diminish very quickly and leave little matter when people go to vote. In a book I read entitled, The Spot: The Rise of Political Advertising on Television by Edwind Diamond, it explains how since the 50s the simple spending has increased to reaching beyond millions of federal and private funds as part of these campaigns. The question now is if the ads aren’t totally effective, then why keep spending billions into them? Rolling Stone magazine also asked this question and came up with a conclusion based on the studies of political consultants like Professor Bob Mann of LSU that, “ … naturally have an incentive to overstate the effects of ads and thus their own contribution to the election’s outcome. Political consultants and candidates are a lot like generals in war; they fight the battles with the weapons they know.”

David Brooks’ point is actually viable with positive results as many political scientists and political experiments have shown. Especially like the ones I discovered from several academic articles like the *Campaign Advertising and Voter Turnout: New Evidence for a Stimulation Effect, and The Impact of Candidate Appearance and Advertising Strategies on Election Results*. In my opinion I think they are annoying because they now consist of negative attacks from several parties. However, I now have a better understanding as to the reasons behind why they are used in campaigns. Though, many experts agree too that they have a little effect on most people. In the end, I believe that all voters want a candidate who is a real person that intends to help the nation as well as go beyond to what we hear and see in these commercials.

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