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Spending Fast and Furious: Political Advertising in 2020

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Abstract: This article is a “first look” at political advertising in 2020. Spending on political advertising in the United States in 2020 obliterated records, and Democrats held huge advantages in the presidential race and in most congressional and senatorial races. In addition, all indicators suggest that spending on digital advertising continued to rise. Political advertising was largely similar in tone to past years and, in the presidential race, was substantially more positive than 2016. In addition, interest groups remained heavily involved in federal races in 2020, airing more ads than ever before, though their spending as a percentage of total ad spending was slightly less than in 2016. Political ad spending in 2020 may have been historically high because of the impact of COVID-19 on how campaigns could reach voters, suggesting that paid advertising may decline in 2022 and 2024, at least as a percentage of total election spending.

Keywords: political advertising, digital ads, dark money, negative campaigns, outside groups

Spending on political advertising in the United States in 2020 obliterated records, and Democrats held huge advantages in the presidential race and in most congressional and senatorial races. One might question the efficacy of those ads given that many Democrats performed worse than the polls anticipated and Democrats had hoped, but the very fact that Biden’s victory in the presidential race depended on narrow wins in states like Wisconsin and Pennsylvania suggests that political advertising may have made a difference in the presidential race. While we cannot provide a definitive answer to the question of political advertising’s impact

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in 2020 in this piece, we can describe the contours of that advertising across the country, up and down the ballot and over time.

Our analysis of the volume and spending on political advertising—both on television and online—suggests a few initial conclusions. First, ad volumes in 2020 were off the charts, with Phoenix seeing more television ads than any other media market in any other cycle over the past decade. Second, Democrats' dominance of advertising on television was clear, with pro-Biden ads outnumbering pro-Trump ads two to one or even three to one in most media markets in battleground states. The ad advantages were evident in U.S. Senate and U.S. House races as well. Third, it was a big year for digital, with digital ad spending's share up considerably from 2016 to 2018. Fourth, ads in 2020 were slightly less negative than in previous years. Finally, interest group ads accounted for 1 in every 4 ads aired in federal races, with a significant share of those ads coming from groups that only partially disclose their donor lists to the public. Dark money ad sponsors have declined in recent years as a proportion of overall activity, but they remain significant donors to super PACs and other groups, such as so-called "Carey Committees."

Our data on political advertising come from a few different sources. For television advertising, we rely upon data from the Wesleyan Media Project (WMP), which takes commercial tracking data from the firm Kantar/CMAG and compiles and analyzes it. The Kantar/CMAG data report on the location, timing and estimated cost of each instance of a political ad airing on broadcast television in each of the 210 media markets in the United States, on national broadcast and national cable television. Kantar/CMAG also supplies spending totals on local cable television, satellite television and radio.¹ Coders at the WMP then categorized each unique television ad ("creative") on a series of variables, including sponsorship, tone and issue mentions.² Data on digital ads come from the two main digital ad libraries, those provided by Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/>) and Google (<https://transparencyreport.google.com/political-ads/>).³

1 Kantar/CMAG ad spending estimates are based on several sources of information, including data from ad representative firms, radio and television station groups, national networks, specific television stations and, in some instances, reports that stations must file with the Federal Communication Commission.

2 All coding information presented in this manuscript has an intercoder reliability alpha statistic of 0.7 or greater. In addition, all general election presidential candidate-sponsored content was double coded, and WMP Project Coordinator Colleen Bogucki adjudicated discrepancies for all key variables including the personal/policy question, which is increasingly difficult for coders to assess, and high frequency issues.

3 Facebook spending information comes from the unique page name and disclaimer combinations ('entities') available in the aggregate ad library reports, but our figures are more

1 Record Ad Volumes

One might predict that increasing spending on digital ads would be offset by declining spending on television ads. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, ad volumes on broadcast television in 2020 were higher than ever before—and dramatically so in the case of the Senate, shattering the record-setting 2018 totals. It is impossible to say just how much of an impact the pandemic may have had on the banner year for political advertising, but especially because campaign events and rallies were largely shuttered, it undoubtedly steered more money into advertising.

Presidential ad airings on broadcast television in the 2019–2020 cycle numbered 2.35 million, more than double the 1.03 million ad airings in 2015–2016 (Figure 1, Panel A). In the 2011–2012 election cycle, there were 1.43 million ad airings. Of course, looking at the whole election cycle includes massive ad spending by Michael Bloomberg, and to a lesser extent, Tom Steyer, in the Democratic nomination race. If one only looks at ads since September 1 in each year (shown in Panel B on the right of Figure 1), then ad airings in 2020 (804,000) are more than double airings in 2016 (386,000) and are considerably greater than airings in 2012 (634,000). Still, pre-September ad airings—including those in the nomination season—account for the bulk of the ad increase in 2020.

As Figure 2 shows, there were 1.36 million television ad airings in House races in the 2019–2020 election cycle, just above the 1.32 million television ad airings in House races in the 2017–2018 election cycle. Both numbers are well above the 622,000 ad airings in the 2015–2016 election cycle and the 722,000 ad airings in the

comprehensive than what Facebook reports on their campaign page because we include spending on ads that are funded by the campaigns even when they run on different pages (e.g., Trump-funded ads on Mike Pence's page, for example, are included in the Trump totals), such as leadership PACs and joint-fund-raising committees. Cycle-to-date totals present more challenges because Facebook unique identifiers were not available in the early-2019 reports, and therefore, we had to take our best guess to associate each entity with a page identifier. Because aggregate daily reports often change over time, we calculate total spending by taking the lifelong spending report for each entity for the post-election period and subtracting the reported entity spending on January 5, 2019, to obtain the cycle-to-date information (and for the April or September periods, we subtract totals from April 8, 2020, and August 31, 2020, respectively). Google spending information comes from the platform's Transparency Report. Similar to the Facebook data, we search the list of advertisers for federal candidates, affiliated leadership or single-candidate super PACs and joint fundraising committees. Google spending is reported weekly, so the information in this piece comes from calculations made from the following reports: January 5, 2019, and November 7, 2020 (full cycle), April 12, 2020, and November 7, 2020 (presidential general election period), and August 30, 2020, and November 7, 2020 (fall period). We especially thank Laura Baum and Pavel Oleinikov for all of their work gathering and compiling our digital spending information.

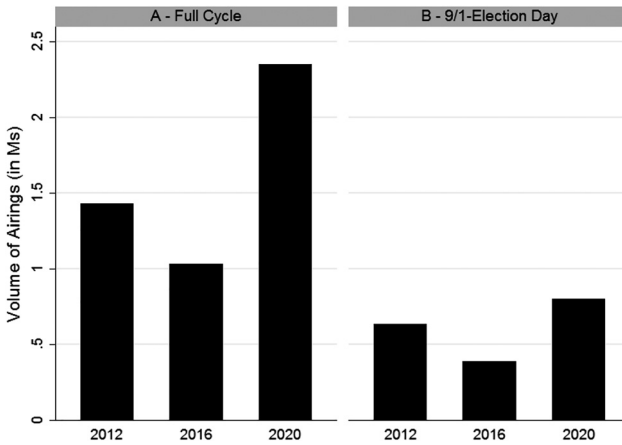


Figure 1: Volume of television airings in presidential race, 2012, 2016 and 2020.

Source: Kantar/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

Full-cycle totals include January 1 of the off year through Election Day.

2011–2012 election cycle. The biggest increase in ad volumes was in Senate races, which saw 2.33 million ad airings in the 2019–2020 election cycle, up from 1.33 million ad airings in the 2017–2018 election cycle and around 1 million airings in the previous three election cycles.

Why were there so many ads in 2020? As noted, one factor in the presidential race was the presence of billionaires Michael Bloomberg and Tom Steyer in the Democratic nomination race. Indeed, Bloomberg spent \$434 million on 512,000 television ad airings, while Steyer spent \$154 million on 284,000 ad airings. Another part of the story is that with control of both chambers at stake, candidates had no problem raising money in 2020, with Donald Trump proving to be a money raiser for both parties. Senate races were nationalized, and donors across the country were pitching in money to Senate candidates in South Carolina, Maine, Iowa and Kansas, among other states. Third, running a race during a pandemic may have led to more television advertising. Some traditional campaign expenses, such as get-out-the-vote efforts and rallies, were transitioned to cheaper, online platforms. Thus, campaigns had more money to spend on advertising.

To quantify how this ad barrage may have felt to the average voter, we calculated the number of federal (presidential, Senate and House) ad airings in each media market in the country in 2020, 2016 and 2012. Eight of the most heavily advertised media markets in the past election cycles were from 2020, including the top five (Table 1). In the 2019–2020 election cycle, Phoenix saw over 170,000 ad airings, while Charlotte (North Carolina), Des Moines (Iowa), Tucson (Arizona) and

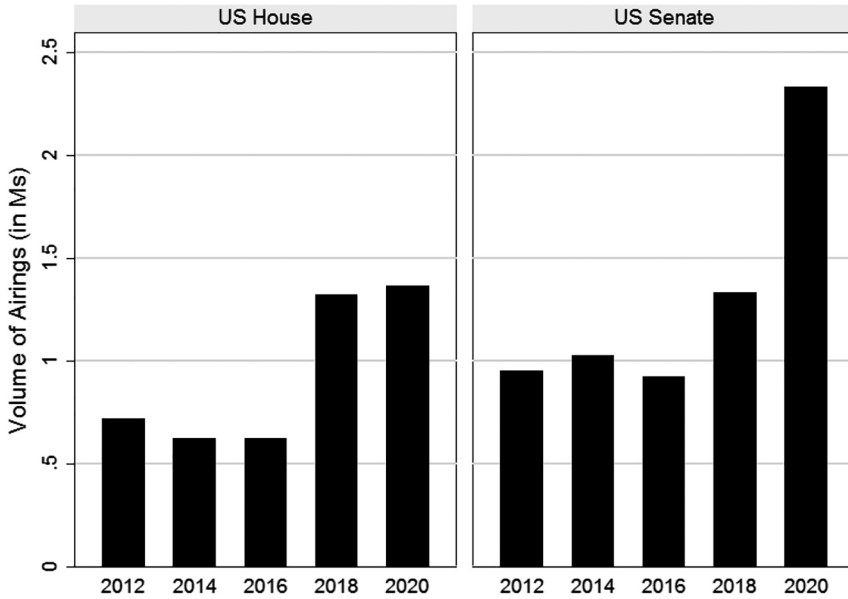


Figure 2: Volume of television airings in U.S. House and U.S. Senate races, 2012–2020. Source: Kantar/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project. Totals are for the full cycle, from January 1 of the off year through Election Day.

Cedar Rapids (Iowa) round out the top five. Iowa had several competitive House races, a competitive Senate race and substantial advertising in the lead up to the Iowa caucuses in February. Las Vegas, Nevada, was the only market to break the top 10 from a year other than 2020. It was the market with the most ad airings in both 2012 and 2016.

2 Huge Democratic Television Ad Advantages

Benefitting from healthy fundraising, Democrats led in advertising in almost every important congressional race—and for the presidency. Figure 3 speaks to advertising in the presidential campaign, showing the volume of ad airings during each week of the campaign (in black) and by ads supporting Biden (in blue dashed) and ads supporting Trump (in red, short and long dashed). Both candidate and group-sponsored ads are included in this figure. One notices that pro-Trump ads were more common until mid-July, but after that point, pro-Biden ads were more numerous in every single week of the campaign. By the end of race, ads supporting Biden were twice as common as ads supporting Trump.

Table 1: Top 10 media markets by federal ad airings and year, 2012, 2016 and 2020.

Media Market	Airings	Cycle
Phoenix	170,752	2020
Charlotte	119,408	2020
Des Moines	112,938	2020
Tucson	106,694	2020
Cedar Rapids	106,280	2020
Las Vegas	103,598	2012
Atlanta	103,102	2020
Las Vegas	99,500	2016
Portland, Maine	94,839	2020
Grand Rapids	88,165	2020

Source: Kantar/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.
 Totals are for the full cycle, from January 1 of the off year through Election Day.

Of course, the impact of the pro-Biden ad advantage depends, in part, on where those ads aired. To provide an extreme example, if Biden and supportive groups had directed most of their ads to deep blue California, then it would be hard to make the case that advertising mattered. So did Biden’s advantage extend across the battleground states, those that were most competitive in the presidential campaign? It did, as Figure 4 shows. This map shows each media market in the United States. Those

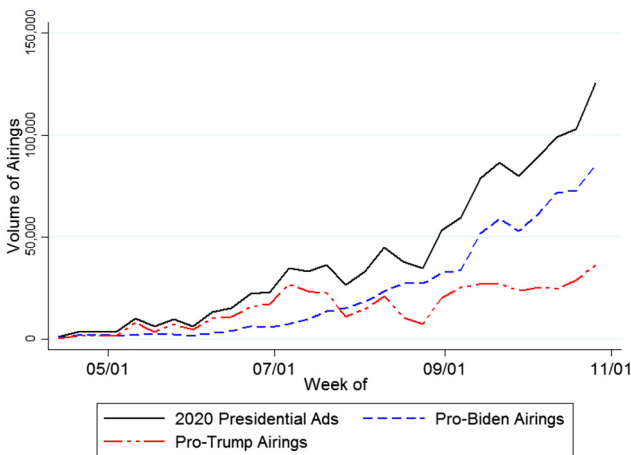


Figure 3: Pro-Biden and pro-Trump ads by week, 2020.
 Source: Kantar/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

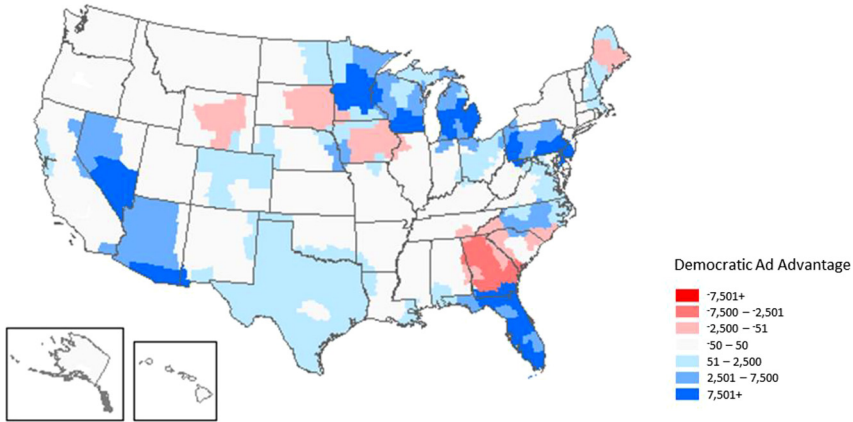


Figure 4: Ad advantage by media market in the 2020 presidential race, September 1 – Election Day. Source: Kantar/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project. Includes only local broadcast airings; national network and national cable ad airings are excluded.

colored in red are markets in which the Trump campaign and pro-Trump groups had ad advantages between September 1 and Election Day; the darker the red, the greater the ad advantage. Those markets colored in blue are those in which the Biden campaign and pro-Biden groups had ad advantages during that same time period; the darker the blue, the greater the Biden ad advantage.

In almost every single media market in battleground states, pro-Biden ads were more numerous, though there were a few exceptions. The most prominent are Georgia’s media markets where pro-Trump ads were somewhat more common. In spite of that, Biden narrowly won the state. Trump also led in parts of North Carolina, much of Iowa and in northern Maine—which coincides with the second congressional district from which Trump won one electoral college vote—but in the “Blue Wall” states that Clinton narrowly lost in 2016 (Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania) pro-Biden ads predominated.

Television advertising is not the only part of the story, however. Figure 5 depicts candidate spending on both Facebook and Google. For much of the summer, the Trump campaign (shown in red short and long dashed) spent more than the Biden campaign (shown in blue dashed) on both platforms, though by August, Biden’s Facebook spending was comparable to Trump’s. By the end of the campaign, Biden’s spending on Facebook exceeded Trump’s. The story is slightly different on Google, where Biden led in spending in September while Trump led in October.

Perhaps more important than overall spending on digital advertising is spending in the most competitive states. Figure 6 shows spending on Facebook advertising in each of six battleground states from September 5 to Election Day.

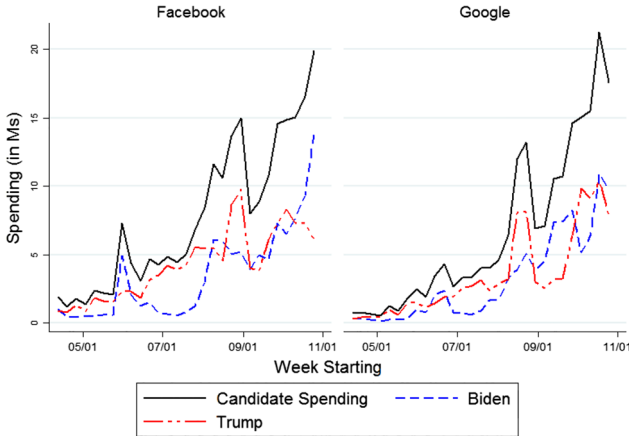


Figure 5: Biden and Trump ad spending on Facebook and Google over time, 2020. Source: Facebook Ad Library and Google Transparency Report with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project.

Spending was close in each state during September, though Biden's spending eclipsed Trump's later that month in Michigan and Pennsylvania and in October exceeded Trump's spending in Arizona and Wisconsin. Biden also spent more than Trump on Facebook ads in Florida during the final three weeks of the campaign. In sum, Trump's deficit on television in the battleground states was not made up for on Facebook. Indeed, Biden spent more than Trump did in every key state but Georgia during the waning weeks of the campaign.

One narrative about the presidential campaign is that all of this ad spending did not buy much given that Biden's win was much tighter than polls had predicted in states such as Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania. But we would suggest that Biden's ad advantages may have contributed to his victory given that he won Wisconsin, Georgia and Arizona by less than a percentage point, won Pennsylvania by less than 2 percentage points and won Michigan by less than 3 percentage points.

No one asserts that advertising in a high-intensity presidential campaign given two well-known candidates will have a huge impact, but that advertising might buy a candidate a percentage point or two is supported by ample research. A recent study (Sides, Vavreck, and Warshaw 2020) estimated that the impact of a 1000-ad advantage for a candidate in the presidential race was about 0.2–0.4 percentage points, depending on the model used. The effects of the same ad advantage in a Senate race are estimated to be 0.5–0.6 percentage points and about 0.8 percentage points in a House race. Thus, based on these estimates, the very

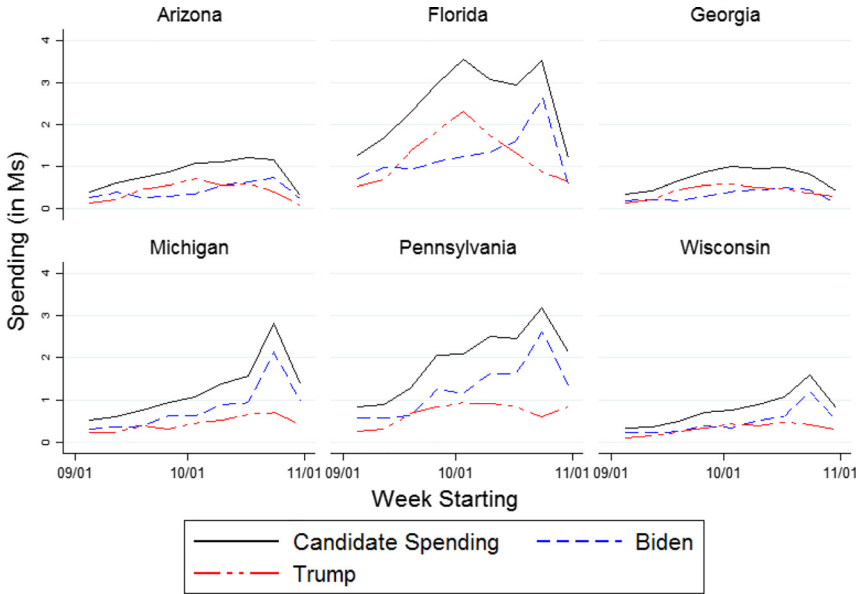


Figure 6: Biden and Trump spending on Facebook by week in battlegrounds, 2020. Source: Facebook Ad Library with analysis from the Wesleyan Media Project.

substantial pro-Biden advantage of 15,500 airings in the Philadelphia media market between September 1 and Election Day could imply a 3.1–6.2% point increase in Biden’s vote, though we believe those estimates may be on the high side given the diminishing returns of advertising and the public’s strong partisanship in 2020. Franz and Ridout (2010) also find discernible effects of advertising, with a 1000-ad advantage in 2004 leading to a 0.12 increase in a party’s share of a county’s vote over the previous election and that same ad advantage in 2008 leading to a 0.55 increase in the share of a county’s vote over 2004.

Democratic ad advantages extended to House and Senate races as well, as depicted by Figure 7. The two panels of the figure show the number of pro-Republican ads in each race on the x-axis and pro-Democratic ads in each race on the y-axis for the period of September 1 to Election Day. Thus, those races above the line are those in which there were more pro-Democratic ads. First, note that in the House panel, the vast majority of points are above the line. Indeed, in every House race with more than 10,000 pro-Republican ads, Democratic advertisers held the advantage. Democrats’ ad advantage is even more striking in Senate races; pro-Democratic ads outnumbered pro-Republican ads in every competitive race—and even in some that turned out not to be all that close, such as in Kentucky.

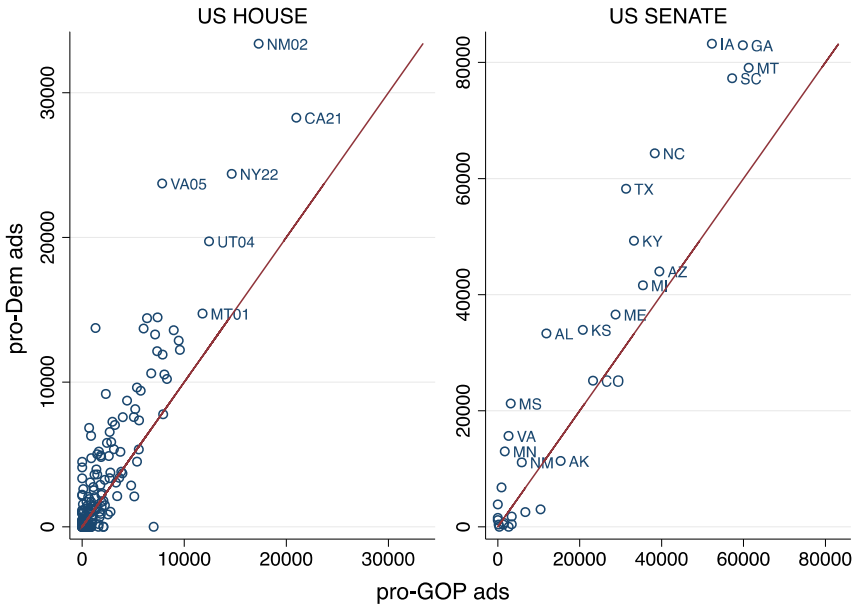


Figure 7: 2020 Democratic ad advantages in U.S. Congress, September 1 – election day. Source: Kantar/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project. Includes ads from parties and outside groups. Totals for both Georgia races are combined.

These large Democratic ad advantages did not turn into a “blue wave” in the House or the Senate. Democrats lost seats in the House and picked up three in the Senate after winning two Georgia runoffs. Why didn’t Democrats perform better given all the money they poured into advertising? One answer is that many of the battleground races were being fought in pink territory—states or districts with a Republican lean. There were very few Republican-held Senate seats in states won by Hillary Clinton in 2016 (Colorado and Maine), and many of the competitive House seats were occupied by Democratic freshmen who had won in the party’s 2018 wave. Moreover, given that it was a presidential election year, it may have been even harder to convince people to vote contrary to their partisanship. Arguably, given what we know about the small but real impact of ads in congressional races, Democrats may have lost the House but for their consistent leads in advertising.

3 A Big Year for Digital Advertising

All evidence suggests that digital advertising continued to grow in importance in 2020. Kantar/CMAG estimates \$435 million was spent on digital ads in the general

Table 2: Spending in the 2020 presidential general election, April 9 – Election Day.

Media	Totals	Percent of total
Broadcast TV	\$987,320,661	55.2%
Digital	\$434,992,986	24.3%
Local cable	\$214,408,849	12.0%
National cable	\$100,940,593	5.6%
Radio	\$40,295,691	2.3%
Satellite TV	\$10,011,912	0.6%
Total	\$1,787,970,692	

Source: Kantar/CMAG with analysis from Wesleyan Media Project.
Combines across all sponsors in the presidential race.

election presidential race between April 9 and Election Day (Table 2).⁴ That is 24.3% of total ad spending. Broadcast television accounted for almost \$1 billion in ad spending during the general election—55.2% of the total. Local cable ads accounted for another \$214 million in spending (12% of the total), while national cable buys accounted for \$100 million in ad spending in the presidential election, 5.6% of the total. Radio and satellite television round out the spending totals.

It is difficult to know how digital spending in 2020 compares to past presidential elections because the social media platforms' ad libraries, which provide valuable data that speak to this question, only began in summer 2018. Still, Williams, and Gulati's (2018) investigation of Federal Election Commission reports identified \$102 million in spending by the Trump and Clinton campaigns during the 2016 general election and \$77 million in digital media spending by the Obama and Romney campaigns in the 2012 general election. Even though these numbers do not include spending by outside groups, they still suggest considerable growth in digital advertising in 2020.

Our own analysis of the Facebook (including Instagram) and Google (including YouTube) ad libraries identifies \$743 million in presidential ad spending (by candidates, their affiliated super PACs and leadership PACs) on these two platforms during the entire 2019–2020 election cycle (Table 3). The biggest spender was the

⁴ The digital estimate is based on Kantar/CMAG's own work with the Facebook and Google ad archives and includes digital spending by outside groups. We collected the data independently as described in footnote 3. For a direct comparison of both data sources, we looked at Kantar/CMAG's sponsor-level digital totals for Biden and Trump, along with joint-fundraising committees and allied super PACs. That totals \$384 million. Our estimate for the comparable set of sponsors is \$423 million. Notably, Kantar/CMAG does not record sponsors in the same way we do, which relies on the page name and disclaimer combinations. Kantar/CMAG records \$25 million in additional spending from the Democratic and Republican party committees, which may move their totals closer to ours depending on how those party sponsors appear in the digital archives.

Table 3: Top presidential ad spenders on Facebook and Google, 2019–2020.

Sponsor	Spending
Trump	\$276,000,000
Biden	\$212,600,000
Bloomberg	\$128,700,000
Steyer	\$31,527,100
Sanders	\$22,134,000
Buttigieg	\$16,360,893
Warren	\$13,482,717
Klobuchar	\$5,373,003
Need to Impeach (pro-Steyer)	\$4,213,194
Harris	\$4,008,901

Source: Facebook Ad Library and Google Transparency Report, with analysis from the Wesleyan Media Project.

Trump campaign, with \$276 million in digital ad expenditures on these two platforms. The Biden campaign was in second, with \$213 million in digital ad spending, followed by Michael Bloomberg’s campaign, with \$129 million in digital ad spending.

Although Biden outspent Trump on television advertising—and by a large amount—Trump outspent Biden on digital (at least on the major platforms for which we have data). Trump’s spending advantage stems from his campaign’s heavy spending in 2019 and early 2020 when Biden’s digital spending was minimal. Trump also devoted a much greater proportion of his ad spending to digital. Kantar/CMAG estimates that 39% of Trump’s ad spending was on digital, compared to 25% for Biden (Passwaiter 2020). It is unclear which candidate had the smarter strategy. On the one hand, digital messages are tailored and delivered to specific types of individuals; when the message matches the characteristics of the target, that can be a powerful combination. On the other hand, one critique of the Trump campaign’s digital spending was that it did little to persuade and rather served as a vehicle for fundraising and played to the base.

To examine this possibility, we looked for fund-raising appeals in Google and Facebook ads sponsored by the Biden and Trump campaigns. We looked first at Google text-based ads.⁵ We looked for links to known donation URLs in the ad and also searched the text of these ads for common fund-raising appeals, such as donate, raise, match, contribute, and give. In collaboration with Markus Neumann, we estimate that about 8.5% of the estimated \$24 million in Biden’s Google search ad spending asked for donations. In contrast, 49% of Trump’s \$34

⁵ We looked only at Google text-based ads, which are likely to be search-based ads. Google does not distinguish how the ads in its Transparency Report were delivered; they simply list whether the ad was text, image or video.

million in text-based ads likely contained a fund-raising appeal. For Facebook ads, we worked with Markus Neumann and Pavel Oleinikov (both of Wesleyan University) along with Wesleyan undergraduate Natchanok ‘Pim’ Wandee, replicating the approach we took with Google ads. Of the over \$100 million in Biden spending, we estimate about 33% of ads starting on or after April 9, 2020, contained a fund-raising appeal. For Trump, such appeals featured in about 46% of his \$118 million in Facebook ads.

Figure 8 shows the percentage of digital ads spending in Senate and House races in 2020. Specifically, it plots candidate ad spending on Facebook and Google as a percentage of ad spending on both platforms plus broadcast television. The Senate graph shows all Democratic and Republican candidates, and the House graph looks only at “too-close-to-call” races as determined by Roll Call. Because spending on digital platforms beyond Facebook and Google is not included, these percentages may underestimate the extent to which digital spending dominates campaigns. Recognizing that, we estimated that the average Senate campaign spent 18.7% of its ad budget on digital ads (weighted by total expenditures)—this is up from the 11.4% that we reported in 2018 Senate races (Fowler, Franz, and Ridout 2019). (In the 2018 calculations, we used the May 1 to Election Day period.) We also estimated that the average House campaign (from too-close-to-call races as measured by Roll Call) spent 10.6% of its ad budget on digital ads—up from 8% in 2018 (Fowler, Franz, and Ridout 2019).

4 Fewer Attacks in 2020

The presidential campaign in 2020 was relatively “nice” compared to the past two campaigns (Figure 9). In 2012, 61% of the ads between April 9 and Election Day in the presidential race were negative; that is, they were focused solely on the targeted candidate, compared to 52% in 2016 and 34% in 2020. Likewise, the percentage of positive ads—those focused solely on the favored candidate—rose from 18% in 2012, to 25% in 2016 and 27% in 2020. Contrast ads—those that mention both the favored and targeted candidates—also rose as a percentage of total ads, from 21% in the two earlier elections to 38% in 2020. If one looks at the final two months of the campaign, shown in the right panel, then the decline in negative advertising is even more striking: the share of attacks fell from 64% in 2012 to 22% in 2020. Positive ads rose from 14 to 29%, while contrast ads also increased—from 22 to 47%. Advertising in 2020, then, was much more about drawing contrasts between candidates than solely attacking an opponent.

The tone of advertising in 2020 varied considerably depending on party source. The top panels in Figure 10 depict the total number of ad airings that were

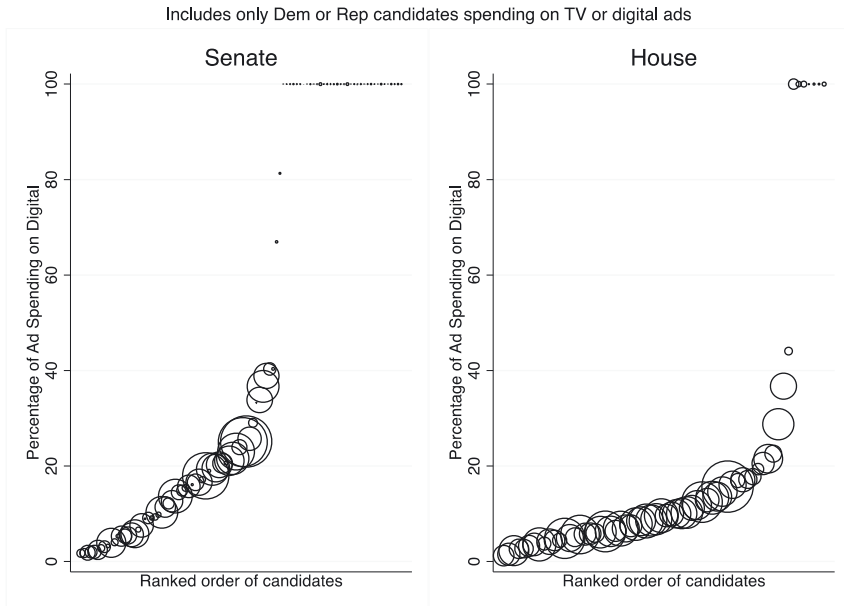


Figure 8: Digital spending as a share of 2020 ad spending, September 1 – election day. Sources: Kantar/CMAG (TV), Facebook, and Google with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project. The size of the bubble is scaled by total spending on TV/Facebook/Google for the period from September 1 through November 3, 2020. Coordinated TV ad spending with parties is excluded.

attack (negative), contrast, and promotional (positive) by week and by candidate, while the bottom panels show the percentage of ad airings falling into each category by week. It is clear that pro-Biden ads (whether from the Biden campaign or groups supporting Biden) were rarely purely negative ads, though contrast ads were common. In the final week of the campaign, the majority of pro-Biden ads were positive, with a smattering of negative ads. By contrast, pro-Trump advertising was much more negative—and became more negative each week from mid-September to Election Day. The extent to which pro-Biden ads outnumbered pro-Trump ads is also clear in the top panels of these figures. In the final week of the campaign, for instance, the number of pro-Trump and pro-Biden ads that were contrast or negative was similar, but the big difference is the approximately 50,000 positive pro-Biden spots.

We looked also at the top issue mentions of the Biden and Trump campaigns in the general election period to get a sense of which issues tended to feature in their positive, negative, and contrast ads (Table 4). Biden's top issue was infectious

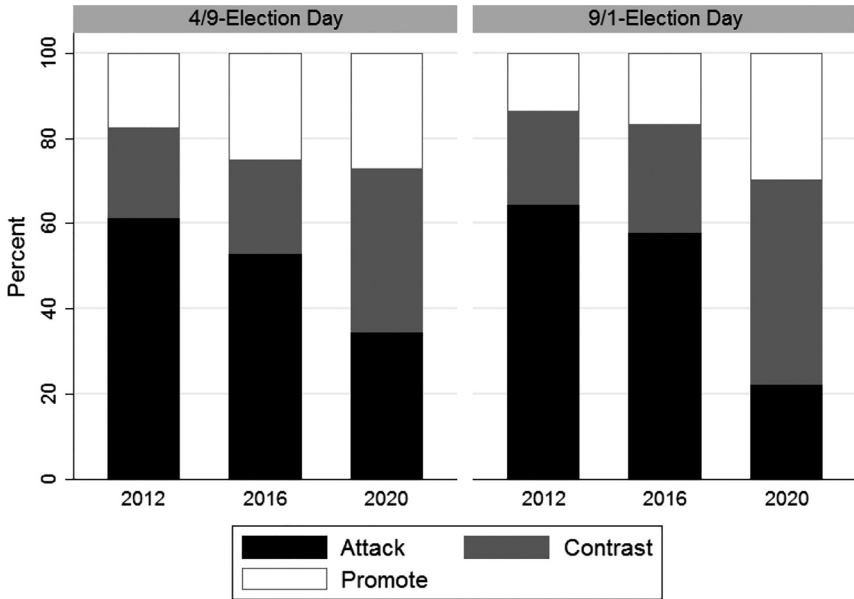


Figure 9: Tone of ads in presidential races over time, 2012, 2016 and 2020
Source: Based on initial Wesleyan Media Project coding of Kantar/CMAG data.
Totals include all sponsors, including outside groups.

diseases, specifically COVID-19, where 60% of those spots featured contrasts with Trump. Only 9% of Biden’s ads on the topic were direct attacks on Trump. This was true also in ads discussing emergency response, which most often focused on Biden’s response to the public health crisis—50% were contrasts with Trump while only 10% were attack ads. On the issue of health care, Biden’s second most-mentioned issue, 52% of mentions were contrasts with President Trump, while 45% were promotional spots about Biden’s policy plans.

For Donald Trump, the top issue was jobs, which featured in 44% of his general election ads. Of these, just under half were contrasts with Biden, while about a quarter were positive and another quarter negative. Trump’s second most-mentioned issue concerned the protests, riots, and demonstrations that swept the country in the aftermath of George Floyd’s death in late May. Eighty-nine percent of Trump’s mentions of the issue were negative messages about Biden and the Democratic Party. This was true also of Trump’s mentions of crime—89% were direct attacks on Biden. When Trump mentioned China, only 20% were attacks on Biden; 42% were contrasts with the former vice president and 38% were promotional spots.

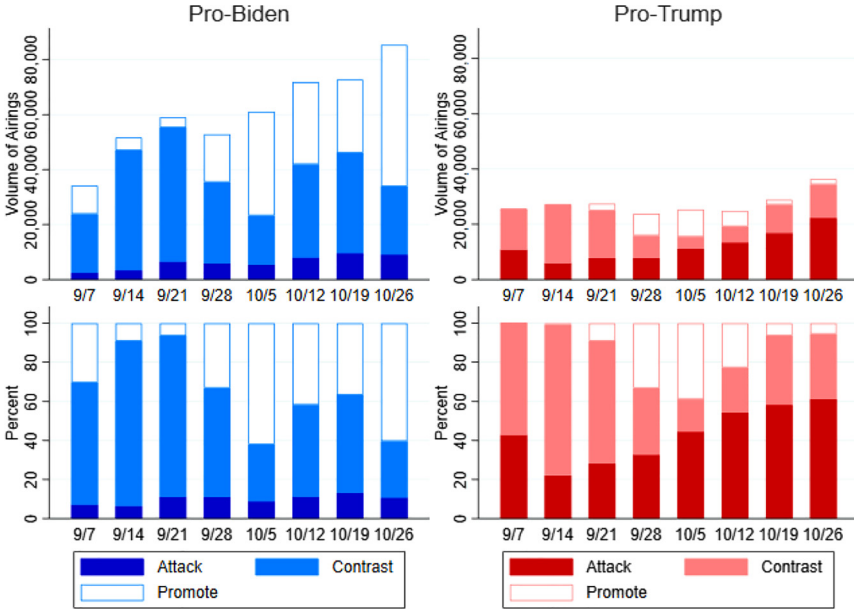


Figure 10: Volume and percentage of presidential ads by tone by week, 2020.

Source: Initial Wesleyan Media Project coding of Kantar/CMAG data.

Totals include all sponsors, including outside groups.

Finally, we looked at the distribution of Biden and Trump ads by whether they focused primarily on policy issues, candidate characteristics, or both. In 2016, Clinton focused a substantial percentage of her ads on attacks on Trump’s character, which was a marked shift away from the overwhelming policy focus of prior presidential candidate advertising (Fowler, Ridout, and Franz 2017). This is evident in the comparison in Figure 11 between 2012 and 2016, where the former contained almost no ads deemed by coders to be primarily about the characteristics of the candidates. In 2020, policy was again the focus of the majority of candidate-sponsored ad airings. The “personal” references by Biden were most predominately from his contrast (61%) and positive ads (35%) rather than attack ads, suggesting that a bulk of Biden’s character appeals were about himself as opposed to Trump. Still, undoubtedly some appeals (for example of “character being on the ballot”) could be perceived in multiple ways. (Biden’s totals do not up to 1 because a small proportion of his ads focused on mobilizing voters in advance of early voting deadlines in some states and where the only reference to a candidate was the “I approve this message” line from Biden). It may be that the Biden team learned a lesson from Clinton’s ad strategy four years earlier, that attacks on Trump’s character were unlikely to move poll numbers (see also Brockman and Kalla 2020).

Table 4: Top issue mentions by Biden and Trump campaigns, 2020.

Biden	Airings	Percent
Infectious diseases (COVID-19)	237,613	47.5%
Health care (not prescription drugs)	182,116	36.4%
Emergency prep/response	151,514	30.3%
Business	139,978	28.0%
Jobs	131,233	26.2%
Economy (generic)	123,951	24.8%
Taxes	118,533	23.7%
Social security	112,150	22.4%
Seniors (not Medicare)	102,042	20.4%
Medicare	73,719	14.7%
Trump	Airings	Percent
Jobs	131,080	43.9%
Protests/riots	92,066	30.9%
Crime	86,348	28.9%
Business	81,491	27.3%
China	76,764	25.7%
Taxes	70,519	23.6%
Immigration	66,259	22.2%
Infectious diseases (COVID-19)	64,837	21.7%
Economy (generic)	62,898	21.1%
Police brutality/racial violence	47,931	16.1%

Source: Kantar/CMAG with coding by the Wesleyan Media Project.
Candidate-sponsored airings from April 9, 2020, through Election Day.

Senate ads in 2020 were also slightly less negative than in previous years, though the distribution of the tone of ads was not dramatically different from past years (Figure 12; the left panel shows the totals for the full cycle). The percentage of pure attack ads in Senate races was down in the 2020 election cycle (41%) compared to the four previous cycles, in which negativity ranged from 42 to 50%. The percentage of positive ads in the 2020 election cycle (34%) was not markedly different from past cycles. Looking from September 1 to Election Day (the right panel of Figure 12), the story is similar: slightly less ad negativity than in past cycles without an increase in the percentage of positive ads.

The percentage of negativity – measured as pure attacks – in U.S. House races (Figure 13) was slightly up in the 2020 election cycle compared to the past few election cycles (41% compared to 32% in 2018), but the percentage of positive ads remained consistent (39% in 2020 versus 38% in 2018). The story is pretty much the same for the September 1 through Election Day time period.

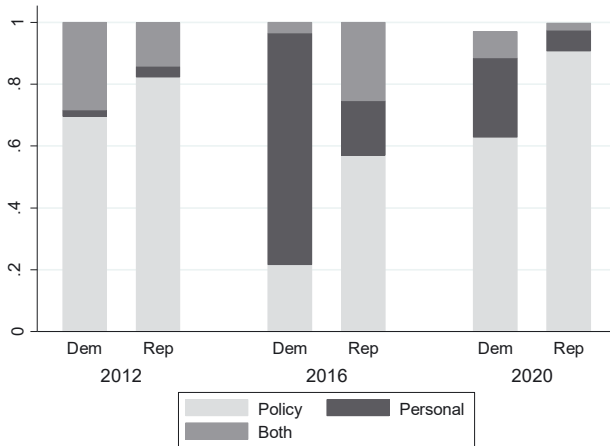


Figure 11: Policy focus of 2020 presidential candidates compared to 2012 and 2016.

Source: Wesleyan Media Project coding of Kantar/CMAG data.

Totals include candidate-sponsored airings from September 1 of the election year through Election Day for each cycle and party nominee. Ads were double coded on this variable, and WMP staff adjudicated any discrepancies.

5 Substantial Group Ad Activity in 2019–2020 Cycle

Outside groups play a significant role in American elections, sponsoring a large number of political ads in many campaigns. In the 2020 cycle, outside groups comprised a slightly lower share of total ads in federal races in comparison to elections after 2010, though they still accounted for slightly more than 1 in every 4 election ads aired on broadcast television stations in 2019 and 2020. Figure 14 shows the percentage of group-sponsored ads in federal races in each cycle since 2000 (for all available data in prior cycles). The figure also shows the efforts of party committees, excluding coordinated expenditures.⁶ The totals for parties in 2000 and 2002 include soft money ads that featured or pictured a federal candidate but did not qualify as independent expenditures. (Soft money was banned for parties in the McCain-Feingold legislation passed in 2002; see Franz [2007].) Between 2012 and 2020, outside groups accounted for at least 25% of all ads aired while formal party organizations saw their total share of ads decline from about 30% in 2000 and 2002 to about 5% in 2020.

⁶ Coordinated expenditures do not constitute a large percentage of ads aired. In 2020, these ads comprised 2.2% of all ads aired in the cycle. In 2018 it was 3.3%, and in 2016 it was 3%.

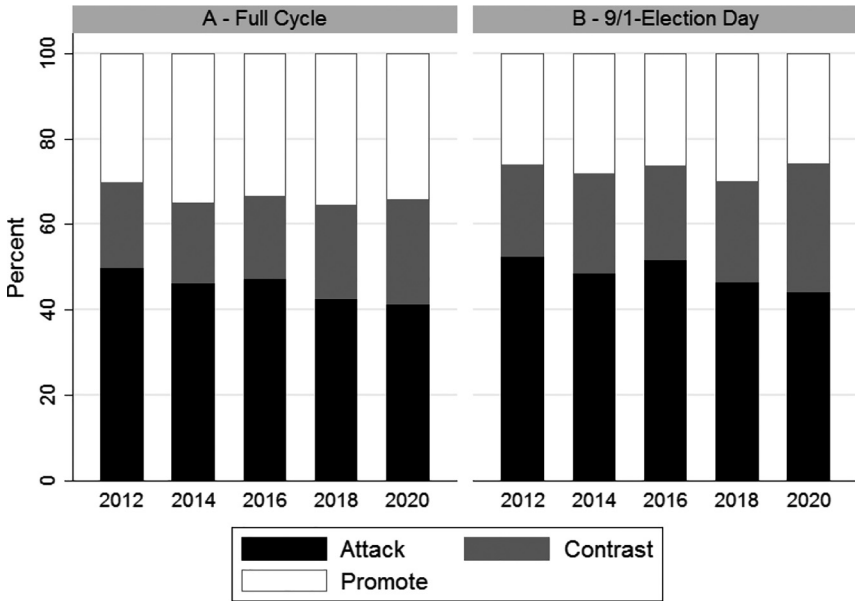


Figure 12: Tone of ads in U.S. Senate races over time, 2012–2020. Source: Initial Wesleyan Media Project coding of Kantar/CMAG data. Totals include all sponsors, including outside groups. The full cycle starts with January of the off year.

Still, that is a bit misleading, as the parties have essentially used the vehicle of super PACs to form parallel party-like committees, if not in name formally. In the Supplementary Appendix, we show in Table A1 the top 25 outside groups and the races in which they aired ads. The top groups include the (pro-Democratic) House and Senate Majority PACs and the (pro-Republican) Congressional and Senate Leadership Funds. These organizations are generally understood to be strongly affiliated with the major national parties and the congressional leaders in each party.⁷

The slight decline in ad share for outside groups in 2020 hides the large jump in the total volume of outside group ads this cycle. All told, outside groups sponsored over 1.5 million spots on broadcast television stations, which is the highest volume of outside group ads in all of the years of available ad airing data. We show these totals in Table 5. In 2018, outside groups sponsored over 770,000 ads in

⁷ See for example, “House Majority PAC,” Ballotpedia, https://ballotpedia.org/House_Majority_PAC (Accessed December 14, 2020); and “Congressional Leadership Fund,” Ballotpedia, https://ballotpedia.org/Congressional_Leadership_Fund (Accessed December 14, 2020).

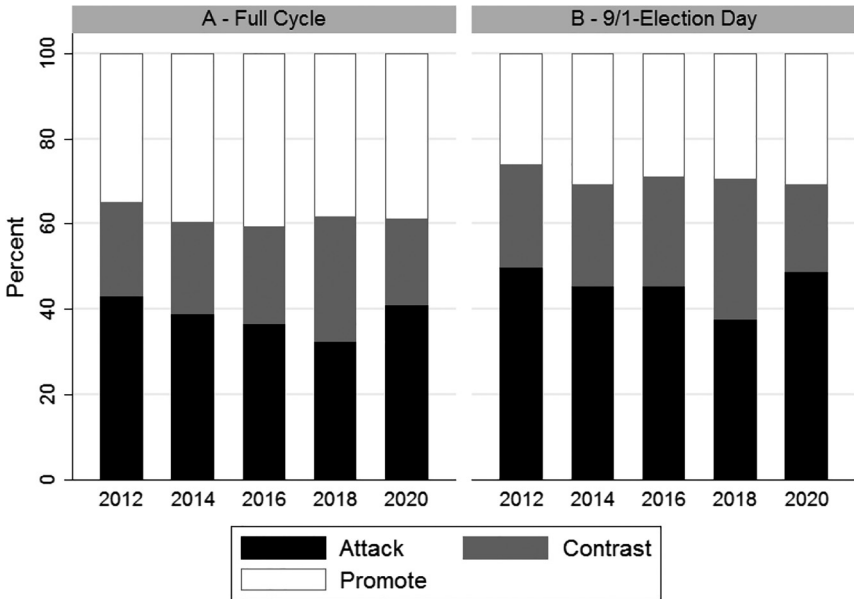


Figure 13: Tone of ads in U.S. House races over time, 2012–2020.

Source: Initial Wesleyan Media Project coding of Kantar/CMAG data.

Totals include all sponsors, including outside groups. The full cycle starts with January of the off year.

congressional races, which was 61% more than the previous high in 2014. In 2020, groups sponsored nearly 1.1 million spots in congressional races. In the presidential election, inclusive of the primary and general election phases, groups sponsored over 424,000 ads, which was below the total in 2012 but significantly higher than in 2016.

Outside groups come in many different types. As noted, some are strongly affiliated with party leaders, while others are more traditional “interest” groups that advocate for a cleaner environment, gun rights, civil rights, and so on. There are many additional ways to differentiate groups, and one common approach is to consider the donor transparency of outside groups. The Center for Responsive Politics classifies groups as full-disclosure groups (meaning they disclose contributor lists to the Federal Election Commission), non-disclosing dark money groups (which are not required to disclose publicly their donors; these are most often 501c4 non-profits), and partial-disclosure groups (those that disclose donors but also accept contributions from dark money sources).

Table 5 looks at the number of ad airings by disclosure category in the previous five elections. The table shows the relative decline of dark money ad

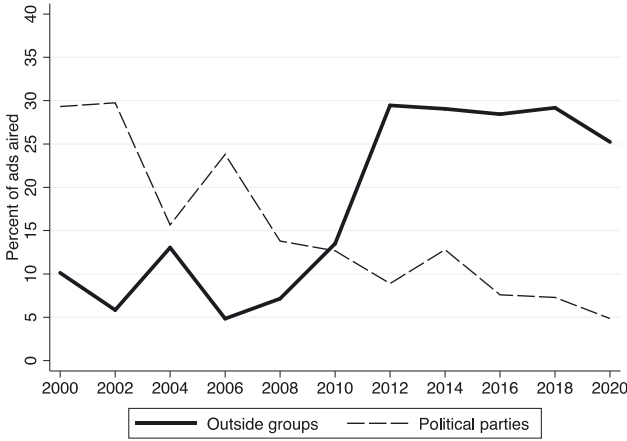


Figure 14: Group and party ads in Federal races, 2000–2020. Full election cycle (including the off-year totals) are included. Party totals exclude coordinated ads with candidates. Totals from 2000 include only the top 75 media markets; 2002–2006 are the top 100 markets; 2008–2020 are all 210 media markets.

Table 5: Outside group ads by disclosure, 2012–2020.

Congress	Ads aired			Total	% Dark	% Partial
	Full	Partial	Dark			
2012	89,172	78,075	237,702	404,949	58.7%	19.3%
2014	240,904	23,656	214,970	479,530	44.8%	4.9%
2016	251,905	92,279	100,625	444,809	22.6%	20.7%
2018	175,743	343,984	254,672	774,399	32.9%	44.4%
2020	211,505	616,689	269,789	1,097,983	24.6%	56.2%
President						
2012	151,851	160,164	188,068	500,083	37.6%	32.0%
2016	256,198	1,635	30,039	287,872	10.4%	0.6%
2020	110,598	295,242	18,488	424,328	4.4%	69.6%

Source: Kantar/CMAG with analysis from the Wesleyan Media Project. Group classifications are from the Center for Responsive Politics.

For ads aired from January 1 of the off year through Election Day. All 210 media markets for broadcast television buys are included, along with any national cable ads.

sponsors since 2012 and the subsequent rise of partial disclosing groups. In 2012, for example, 59% of outside group ads in congressional races were sponsored by dark money groups. In 2020, the share had dropped to nearly 25%, though

notably the volume of dark money ads in 2020 was higher than in any previous election. Partial disclosing groups accounted for over half of all outside group ads in congressional races and nearly 70% of outside group ads in the presidential election.

Partial disclosing groups primarily come in two types: super PACs and Carey Committees.⁸ The latter, in fact, were newly important in the 2020 cycle, as Figure 15 demonstrates; they made up 20% of all group ads in the election cycle. The previously noted House Majority PAC, for example, was formerly a super PAC but has since converted to a Carey Committee, which means that it maintains two separate accounts: a traditional PAC account that makes limited hard money contributions to candidates (and parties and other PACs) and a super PAC account that raises funds for independent expenditures. The super PAC side of the committee can accept dark money contributions, which means that often these committees are labeled as partial disclosing groups. As such, the figures in Table 5 understate the level of dark money in federal races because partial disclosing groups often accept substantial sums from dark money sources. For example, FF PAC (Table A1 shows the group spent over \$113 million on broadcast ads in the presidential race and in three Senate races) received over \$30 million from its non-disclosing 501c4 partner, Future Forward USA Action, which accounted for about 40% of FF PAC's total donations in the 2020 cycle.⁹ The underlying source of that \$30 million is unknown.

As ad sponsors, dark money groups are no longer significantly constrained by campaign finance laws, as they can accept contributions of any size and air ads that expressly advocate for the election or defeat of candidates. Some restrictions still apply, though, and they influence the distribution of ads by funding source over the course of the campaign. For one, ads that feature a candidate and that air within 30-days of a primary or 60-days of a general election must be disclosed to the Federal Election Commission (FEC).¹⁰ Ads outside those windows that do not expressly advocate¹¹ for candidates are not reportable to the FEC if the sponsoring group has not registered with the FEC as a traditional PAC, super PAC, or Carey

8 For definitions of group types, see “Glossary of Terms,” Center for Responsive Politics, <https://www.opensecrets.org/resources/learn/glossary.php> (Accessed December 16, 2020).

9 “Future Forward USA,” Center for Responsive Politics, <https://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/contrib.php?cmte=C00669259&cycle=2020> (Accessed December 16, 2020).

10 These are defined formally as “electioneering communications.” See “Making Electioneering Communications,” Federal Election Commission, <https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/other-filers/making-electioneering-communications/> (Accessed December 16, 2020).

11 Express advocacy is defined by regulatory policy of the Federal Election Commission. See “Making Independent Expenditures,” Federal Election Commission, <https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/making-independent-expenditures/> (Accessed December 16, 2020).

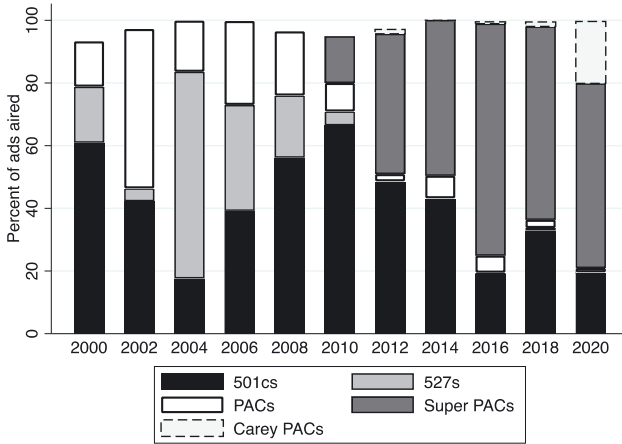


Figure 15: Distribution of group ads by type, 2000–2020.

Source: Kantar/CMAG with analysis from the Wesleyan Media Project. Group classifications are from the Center for Responsive Politics.

Committee. As such, dark money groups have incentives to run ads right up to the disclosure windows to avoid filing such spending reports.

The second restriction concerns the distribution of spending by many dark money groups. Those that register with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as 501c4 non-profit groups cannot have electioneering as their “primary activity.”¹² A group that spends the vast bulk of its budget on election-time express advocacy ads would be at risk of an IRS audit of their expenditures and non-profit classification. Here, too, dark money groups have some incentive to sponsor pro or anti-candidate spots farther out from the election, where they can argue that they are issue-related and educational.

We investigated the distribution of ads by disclosure classification in Senate campaigns, where nearly 30% of the outside group ads were directly sponsored by dark money groups. In Figure A1 in the Supplementary Appendix, we replicate the analysis for House races (where dark money groups sponsored 13% of group ads) and the presidential election (where only 4% group ads were from dark money sponsors). In Figure 16, we count the daily totals of ads aired by full, partial, and non-disclosing groups, and we plot the percentage of all ads aired by those groups on each day. We show the local regression fits to the scatter plots to smooth out the trends as Election Day approaches.

¹² “Social Welfare Organizations,” Internal Revenue Service, <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/other-non-profits/social-welfare-organizations> (Accessed December 16, 2020).

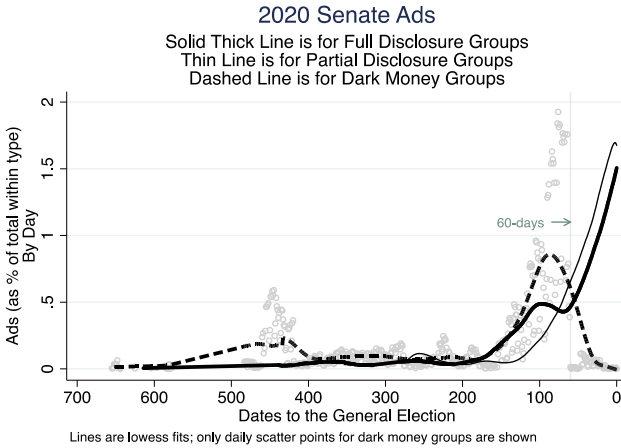


Figure 16: Ads trends by group type in U.S. Senate races, 2020.

Source: Kantar/CMAG with analysis from the Wesleyan Media Project. Group classifications are from the Center for Responsive Politics.

The figure shows that dark-money groups air the most ads in the run-up to the 60-day mark before the election. In the final 60 days before the general election, dark-money groups largely disappear from the air waves. They also air non-trivial levels of ads featuring Senate candidates far earlier in the campaign, back into 2019. In contrast, partial- and full-disclosing groups ramp up their efforts in the final two months of the campaign, especially partial-disclosing groups.

6 Conclusion

Our post-election “first look” at political advertising in 2020 suggests several trends worth noting. Most strikingly, ad volumes in federal elections in 2020 were stratospheric, beating all past spending records. That spending, however, was largely lopsided, benefitting Democratic candidates more than Republican candidates. In addition, all indicators suggest that spending on digital advertising continued to rise, though we only have comprehensive Facebook and Google spending estimates back to 2018. And contrary to what, in the moment, might have seemed like the nastiest campaign ever, political advertising was largely similar in tone to past years and, in the presidential race, was substantially more positive than 2016. Finally, interest groups remained heavily involved in federal races in 2020, airing more ads than ever before, though their spending as a percentage of total ad spending was slightly less than in 2016. Dark-money

group spending was, in many instances, replaced by spending from partial-disclosure groups—much of whose money came from other groups that do not disclose their donors.

Can this record spending in the 2020 cycle continue in 2022 and 2024? The answer to that question will depend, to large extent, on the ability of campaigns to raise money. Absent a Trump on the ballot or in the White House, campaigns may find it more difficult to garner contributions in the future than in the recent past. One also wonders what the lesson of campaigning during a pandemic in 2020 will be. Will campaigns decide based on this experience that many of the campaign activities once done face-to-face, such as fundraising dinners and door knocking, could be done much more efficiently through online advertising?

For sure, campaigns and outside groups will continue to experiment with different methods of reaching voters online, beyond just Google search ads, sponsored Facebook posts, and YouTube ads. We expect campaigns will expand their efforts to reach voters via streaming services, like Hulu and CBS All Access. Scholars do not have comprehensive data for such ad spending, but it will become more important as voters continue to migrate from live television to on-demand streaming content. As always, the political ad landscape will continue to evolve in the next few years as technologies change, audience habits change, and campaigns learn from their experiences in 2020.

Acknowledgements: Tracking political advertising in real-time across multiple platforms is an increasingly complicated and time-consuming task. We are indebted to Laura Baum, Pavel Oleinikov, Colleen Bogucki, Markus Neumann, Jieliu Yao, and the numerous Wesleyan students who make the work possible. They include Natalie Appel, Liz Atalig, Spencer Dean, Sam Feuer, Angela Loyola, Kevin McMorro, Brianna Mebane, Conner Sexton, Roshan Siddiqui, and Natchanok ‘Pim’ Wandee from our Delta Lab computational team, as well as our human coding team, especially our student supervisor Eleanor Raab. The Wesleyan Media Project partners with the Center for Responsive Politics to assess outside group activity and gratefully acknowledges support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Democracy Fund and Wesleyan University. The views presented here are solely those of the authors, as are any errors.

Appendix Graphs and tables

Table A1: Top groups in 2020.

Group	First ad	Last Ad	Airings	Cost	Races	Type	Disclose Donors?	Party Lean
Senate Majority PAC ^a	2/25/20	11/3/20	177,923	\$155,814,150	Sen: AZ, CO, GA, IA, ME, MI, MT, NC, NM, SC, TX	SuperPAC	Partial	D
Senate Leadership Fund	5/29/19	11/3/20	126,865	\$155,838,300	Pres; Sen: AK, AZ, CO, GA, IA, KS, ME, MI, MT, NC, SC, FL26, GA6, GA7, IA1, IA2, IA3, IL13, IL14, IL17, IN5, KS3, ME2, MI3, MN1, MN2, MN7, MO2, NE2, NJ2, NJ7, NM2, NV3, NV4, NY1, NY2, NY11, NY22, NY24, OH1, OK5, OR4, PA1, PA8, PA10, SC1, TX7, TX21, TX22, TX23, TX24, UT4, VA2, VA5, VA7, WI3	SuperPAC	Partial	R
FF PAC	9/29/20	11/3/20	91,556	\$113,104,170	Pres; Sen: ME, NC, TX	Carey	Partial	D
House Majority PAC ^a	8/18/20	11/3/20	86,292	\$98,558,690	Hou: AK1, AR2, AZ6, CA21, CA25, CA39, CA48, CO3, FL26, GA6, GA7, IA1, IA2, IA3, IL13, IL14, IL17, IN5, KS3, ME2, MI3, MN1, MN2, MN7, MO2, NE2, NJ2, NJ7, NM2, NV3, NV4, NY1, NY2, NY11, NY22, NY24, OH1, OK5, OR4, PA1, PA8, PA10, SC1, TX7, TX21, TX22, TX23, TX24, UT4, VA2, VA5, VA7, WI3	Carey	Partial	D
Congressional Leadership Fund	8/6/19	11/3/20	86,280	\$95,517,070	Hou: AK1, AR2, CA21, CA25, CO3, FL26, GA7, IA1, IA2, IA3, IL13, IL17, IN5, ME2, MI3, MI6, MI11, MN1, MN7, MO2, MT1, NC8, NC9, NC11, NE2, NJ2, NM2, NV3, NY1, NY2, NY11, NY22, NY24, OH1, OK5, OR4, PA1, PA10, SC1, TX7, TX12, TX22, TX24, UT4, VA2, VA5, VA7, WA3, WI3	SuperPAC	Partial	R
America First Action	4/17/20	11/3/20	86,206	\$75,660,450	Pres	SuperPAC	Partial	R
One Nation	7/26/19	9/4/20	65,263	\$36,839,650	Sen: AL, AZ, CO, GA, IA, KS, KY, ME, MI, MT, NC	501c4	No	R
Priorities USA Action ^a	2/25/20	11/3/20	54,990	\$43,236,540	Pres	Carey	Partial	D
Club for Growth ^b	3/13/19	11/3/20	44,357	\$27,119,350	Pres; Sen: AL, KS, GA; Hou: AL1, AL2, AZ6, CO3, FL19, GA7, GA9, IN5, KY4, ME2, MI10, MT1, NC3, NC9, OH1, OK5, PA10, SC1, TN1, TX12, TX21, VA7, WI7	SuperPAC	Yes	R
Majority Forward	1/18/19	8/18/20	41,357	\$21,908,730	Sen: AZ, CO, GA, IA, ME, MI, MT, NC	501c4	No	D
Independence USA PAC	9/29/20	11/3/20	38,441	\$45,057,040	Pres; Hou: MI11	SuperPAC	Yes	D

Table A1: (continued)

Group	First ad	Last Ad	Airings	Cost	Races	Type	Disclose Donors?	Party
Preserve America PAC	9/1/20	11/3/20	33,774	\$71,431,980	Pres	SuperPAC	Yes	R
AB PAC ^b	11/13/19	11/3/20	34,523	\$28,981,870	Pres	SuperPAC	Partial	D
Duty and Honor	8/5/20	9/2/20	30,618	\$19,671,470	Sen: AL, AZ, CO, GA, ME, MI, MT, NC	501c4	No	R
Doctor Patient Unity	8/1/19	4/10/20	24,711	\$21,524,640	Hou: CA23; Sen: AL, AZ, CO, GA, IA, KY, LA, ME, MI, MN, NC, NH, TX, VA	501c4	No	D
VoteVets ^b	8/7/19	11/3/20	24,386	\$18,720,620	Pres; Sen: AZ, AK, ME, MI, NC, TX; Hou: KY6, NM3, PA17, TX23, VA2, VA7, NC9, NY24, VA5	Carey	Partial	D
Women Vote	2/25/20	11/3/20	21,023	\$13,483,240	Sen: IA, KS, ME, TX; Hou: AR2, CO3, IA2, IL3, IL13, IN5, MI3, MO2, NM2, NY24, OH1, OK5, TX21, TX23, VA5	SuperPAC	Yes	D
Unite the Country	12/9/19	11/3/20	15,974	\$15,329,890	Pres	SuperPAC	Partial	D
314 Action Fund	9/24/19	11/3/20	15,475	\$5,221,020	Sen: AK; Hou: CA21, NY1, SC1, VA5	Carey	Yes	D
House Majority Forward ^a	8/20/19	10/28/20	14,569	\$8,650,050	Hou: CA21, CA49, IA1, IA3, ME2, MI3, MI8, MI11, MN2, NC9, NH1, NM2, NV3, NY19, NY22, NY24, OK5, PA8, PA10, SC1, TX16, UT4, VA2, VA7	501c4	No	D
American Action Network	10/19/19	8/25/20	14,500	\$7,699,440	Hou: IA1, IA3, IL13, ME2, MI8, MN1, MN7, NC8, NE2, NJ3, NM2, NV3, NY19, NY21, NY22, NY24, OK5, PA8, PA10, PA17, SC1, UT4, VA2, VA7	501c4	No	R
American Crossroads	9/12/20	11/3/20	12,167	\$26,034,660	Sen: IA, KS, ME, NC	SuperPAC	Yes	R
Persist PAC	2/19/20	3/4/20	12,044	\$9,622,250	Pres	SuperPAC	Yes	D
Plains PAC	7/7/20	11/3/20	11,900	\$12,431,150	Sen: IA, KS	SuperPAC	Partial	R
America First Policies, Inc.	3/20/19	10/27/20	11,849	\$3,149,940	Pres; Sen: AL, MI; Hou: IA1, ME2, NC11, NM2, NY19, NY22, OH4, OK5, PA8, SC1, UT4, VA7, WI3	501c4	No	R
% of all group spending		total	985,309	\$964,819,560				
			64.6%	68.9%				

Source: Kantar/CMAG with analysis from Wesleyan Media Project. Group classifications from Center for Responsive Politics.

^aExcludes some ads co-sponsored with another group. ^bAired ads using some different names and disclosure classifications. Primary sponsor type is included here; ad totals sum across the group types.

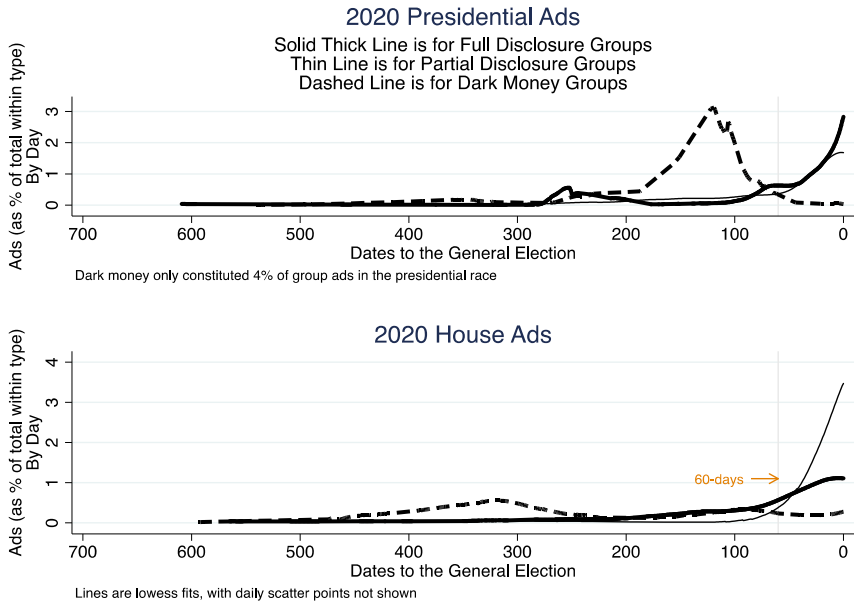


Figure A1: Ads by group type in presidential and house races.

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