



12. Political Advertisers

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12

Political Advertisers

Vincent Raynauld and Dany Renauld

The Canadian mass media environment has expanded and diversified significantly, particularly with the proliferation of digital technologies. In this chapter, we look at how political advertisers are leveraging the characteristics, properties, and reach of electronic mass media channels (e.g., radio, television, digital media) to develop, roll out, and deliver political ads. We also examine how political advertisers are isolating and reaching out to specific targets within the public, sometimes even individuals, in order to craft messages appealing to their narrow interests, preferences, and objectives.

L'environnement canadien des médias de masse a pris de l'expansion et s'est considérablement diversifié, particulièrement avec la prolifération des technologies numériques. Ce chapitre examine de quelle façon les publicitaires politiques tirent parti des caractéristiques, des propriétés et de la portée des médias électroniques de masse (radio, télévision, médias numériques) pour élaborer, déployer et diffuser des publicités politiques. Il examine également de quelle façon ces publicitaires isolent ou rejoignent un public cible, parfois même des individus, afin de rédiger des messages qui répondent à leurs aspirations, leurs intérêts et leurs préférences.

WORLDWIDE, POLITICAL advertising is a mainstay in voter outreach by political parties and candidates during elections. In Canada, federal political parties' advertising activities during general elections have intensified and diversified greatly over the past decade. For example, the previous four federal electoral campaigns were generally marked by a rise of major political parties' advertising expenditures.¹ The expansion of the mass media landscape and the fragmentation of audiences have led to changes in how political ads are conceived and delivered to the public.² In this chapter, we shed light on these dynamics by exploring the role of political advertisers and the implications of their work on election campaigns.

Political advertisers are marketing specialists who participate in packaging and selling political parties, candidates, and their ideas to the electorate through wide-ranging media platforms.³ In other words, their role is to amplify political parties' and candidates' messages so that they can resonate with different audiences. In Canada, political advertisers usually work for advertising firms that have long-standing relationships with specific political parties. Leaders of these firms – who have expertise in the advertising of political products – tend to be aligned ideologically with the political parties that they work for during campaigns. Furthermore, these firms have extensive resources enabling them to provide committed services to political parties and candidates throughout the campaign cycle.

Political advertisers contribute to campaigns in three key areas. First, they can help to pinpoint and cluster voters with shared preferences, interests, and goals. In doing so, they can isolate slices of the electorate – or “target universes” – and, in some cases, individual voters deemed likely to be receptive to and persuaded by specific genres of political appeal. Market research insights from pollsters and other public opinion specialists are instrumental for advertisers when doing this type of work. Targeting has become especially important as media consumption has grown and members of the public are exposed to increasingly diverse content often

tailored to their interests. In sum, targeting can help political messaging to cut through the noise and reach its intended audience for maximum impact.⁴

Second, political advertisers can contribute to the development and shaping of the content, format, and tone of political parties' and candidates' ads based on their targets and objectives. The two main categories of political ads are issue-based and image-based. Issue-based advertising generally provides voters with insights into political parties' and candidates' positions, including political and policy matters, legislative priorities, and views on issues of public interest. Image-based advertising is used to introduce, define, and humanize candidates. It highlights personality traits, values, and personal and professional qualifications. It also helps to foster a more personal – and often emotional – connection between voters and candidates.⁵ This type of political advertising has gained traction with the increasing personalization of political communication. This phenomenon is characterized by individual politicians – in many cases party leaders – who become the main gateway through which voters are exposed to, make sense of, evaluate, and take part in politics.⁶ Political parties and candidates can also turn to the two aforementioned categories of political ads to shape the public's perceptions of their opponents and their ideas, generally in negative ways.

Advertising professionals play key roles in the development of political ads. They can provide guidance on the format of the ad (e.g., textual, visual, audio) and through which media platform it will be shared with the public for effective reach and persuasion. Advertising personnel can also help to set the tone (e.g., positive, negative, mixed, neutral) of a political ad. Tone is especially important. Alongside factors such as political sophistication, tone can stimulate various forms of behaviour among the public, including information seeking and other types of political engagement.

Third, the work of political advertisers can have varied effects on the public. In fact, altering attitudes and behaviours can be viewed as one of political advertising's core functions. Political ads can help

to generate, modify, or reinforce specific political attitudes (attitudinal). They can trigger emotional responses leading to shifts in feelings and moods (affective), shape voters' thoughts and decision-making processes (cognitive), as well as foster changes in political behaviour (behavioural).⁷ From a broader perspective, political advertisers' ability to generate wide-ranging responses among voters can help to support different facets of their employers' activities, such as mobilizing existing supporters, gaining new supporters, and fundraising. Advertisers' efforts can also lead to a higher share of the vote on election day.

Duties in an Election Campaign

In a context of non-stop campaigning in and out of elections, political advertisers' work begins before the writ is drawn. In the weeks preceding the launch of the campaign – a period defined here as pre-campaign – political advertisers deploy significant efforts to shape the public political narrative and set expectations ahead of the election. Of particular interest is their use of more generic political ads intended for the public at large. Political parties and candidates often rely on issue-based advertising to put forth elements that will be at the core of their messaging during the campaign. Specifically, incumbent parties tend to release ads that have generally positive tones and tout specific political and policy successes. These ads can show how these accomplishments demonstrate their governing effectiveness, have fostered progress and the betterment of society, and can be built on with re-election. Challenger parties adopt a different approach. They frequently turn to issue-based advertising to introduce key elements of their electoral platforms, which can be unknown or not well understood among some groups of voters. They can also lay out and explain their key legislative priorities. As well, they can critique, undermine, and attack the achievements and priorities of the sitting government. In other words, challenger parties can use these types of ads to

highlight the weaknesses of members of the government and to portray themselves as viable alternatives.

Political advertisers can turn to image-based ads to establish, strengthen, or sharpen the public images of candidates – typically leaders of political parties – throughout the pre-campaign phase. This is particularly important since politicians’ personality traits and personal lives are elements that influence how some voters make up their minds come election day.⁸ Specifically, party leaders with less name recognition can use these types of ads to introduce themselves to the public and highlight specific aspects of their identities. This is often done in ways that complement the priorities of their electoral programs and address the preferences, interests, and objectives of target political markets. Candidates with greater name recognition tend to use these ads to fine-tune or sharpen some facets of their public images. In some cases, image-based ads can help them to shore up deficiencies in how they are perceived by the public and position themselves strategically in anticipation of the electoral contest.

Political parties and candidates can also turn to image-based ads to define – or brand – their opponents, often in ways that will be beneficial to them during their campaigns. For example, incumbent parties can release ads raising concerns, doubts, and, in some cases, fears about their challengers’ readiness or qualifications to assume the responsibilities of elected office. Conversely, challengers can focus on controversies plaguing an incumbent party to degrade specific aspects of its public image (e.g., honesty, reliability, credibility) and instill doubts in the minds of voters. More broadly, political advertising’s main role during the pre-campaign phase is to set the stage for the political marketing efforts that will be rolled out during the campaign.

As the writ is drawn and the electoral campaign gets under way, political advertisers modify their approaches to complement and support political parties’ and candidates’ voter outreach and engagement operations. The pre-campaign period is dedicated to

setting general political impressions among the public. During the campaign, advertisers' activities become surgical. Advertising consultants leverage public opinion data and other forms of political market intelligence to develop and push out messages that consider the wants, needs, and aspirations of specific segments of the voting public. Their tactics need to be constantly rethought and recalibrated to address developments on the campaign trail, shifts in public opinion, and in some cases opponents' policy announcements and communication efforts. Political advertisers' efforts are also informed by the budgets provided by political parties. The budget covers two main types of expenses: the consulting fees of political advertisers and operational costs (e.g., production and circulation of ads, organization of events). The budget can be adjusted during the campaign based on different factors. Among them are the evolution of political parties' and candidates' priorities and objectives, shifts in campaign dynamics, and fundraising yields.

Two key facets of political advertisers' duties during the electoral campaign warrant particular attention. The first aspect is their involvement in selecting which mass media platforms are to be used for sending messages addressing political or policy matters of importance to specific groups of voters. Given that the Canadian political market tends to be more homogeneous than the markets in other countries, particularly the United States, political advertisers use diverse mass media targeting strategies. For example, television – which tends to reach a large and geographically dispersed audience – can be used to broadcast ads with broad political appeal. These ads, which can cut across different political and policy issues and interests, are typically aired during television shows with a large viewership or at peak viewing times. Despite the growing availability of special media channels allowing finer targeting, and the increasing emphasis on social media advertising, political ads intended for larger audiences remain an integral component of the political advertiser's tool box during elections in Canada.

Political advertisers turn to local and regional radio stations to reach out to groups of voters likely to be receptive to messages

with a narrower appeal. For instance, radio is used to circulate ads focusing on matters relevant to people sharing specific socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., language, income, ethnicity, education, religion), caring about specific policy matters (e.g., environment, immigration, culture), or located in a particular geographical area (e.g., region, postal code). Regionalism and linguistic and cultural identity remain core elements shaping political life in Canada.⁹ Radio-based political ads require less time and technical expertise, and fewer financial resources, to produce and be ready for dissemination than television ads. This is particularly relevant during electoral campaigns. Political parties and candidates are often required to alter their messaging tactics rapidly because of shifts in public opinion or changes in their opponents' policy positions or voter outreach strategies. Radio enables them to roll out new advertising campaigns quickly. Radio-based political ads also offer political parties with less money on hand the ability to engage in low-cost and high-impact forms of political advertising. As noted by some studies, political ads aired on radio during elections can have greater influence on the public's voting decisions than those aired on television.¹⁰

Finally, social media channels are an integral component of the political media environment in Canada. Political advertisers leverage these digital communication platforms to push out political ads tailored to appeal to slices of the political market with distinct profiles (e.g., mothers, students, young professionals, immigrants). In many cases, these ads are revised versions of existing political ads that are more generic and have been circulated previously through other channels, including newspapers, campaign flyers, and television. They can emphasize specific elements likely to generate a strong response among target audiences. Although this form of hypertargeting can be useful, it is less applicable in Canada than in other national contexts in which the political market might be more heterogeneous.

The second aspect is political advertisers' role in developing the content and setting the tone of political appeals pushed out to

voters throughout the electoral race. Of particular interest for this chapter is the notion of change in political ads. Although such ads can touch on a wide range of issues and matters, change is frequently an underlying element driving the overall narrative.

On the one hand, challenger parties devote significant energy and resources to show how change in leadership and in how political and policy issues are dealt with can be beneficial to members of the public. This can be done in many ways. They can release positive ads to offer an uplifting vision of politics. They can also reinforce the concept of change with negative ads that establish clear contrasts between their positions and those of their opponents. On the other hand, as the incumbent party seeks to retain power, it is likely to portray change as potentially detrimental to the public, whether this portrayal is in generic or more targeted political messages. Incumbent parties can promote the status quo by emphasizing their accomplishments and downplaying or attacking challengers' political and policy offerings.

In sum, then, a key aspect of political advertisers' role during elections is to manage how a message of change is presented, perceived, and understood. This can have repercussions on voters' attitudes toward and participation in different facets of the electoral process.

The content and tone of political ads evolve during an electoral campaign. Changes in voters' interests in issues as well as the evolution of journalistic coverage can lead political advertisers to modify the structure and content of political ads. They do so to ensure that the messaging remains relevant and appealing to the public. Adjusting the advertising can strengthen other aspects of the political communications deployed by political parties and candidates. Shifts in public support for political parties and candidates as measured by public opinion polls and fundraising data can cause political advertisers to consider adjustments to messaging and targeting. Parties leading in the polls are likely to release positive ads to protect their positions and to showcase their readiness

to occupy elected office. Conversely, candidates trailing in the polls are likely to adopt a more negative approach in order to question and, in some instances, delegitimize their opponents and their electoral platforms. Doing so can help to mobilize their own supporters while also potentially demobilizing members of the public backing their opponents.

Overcoming Obstacles

Quebec is an important electoral battleground visited frequently by party leaders. The Conservatives and their leader, Andrew Scheer, were forced to rethink and retool their advertising approach during the later stages of the 2019 election. Pivoting by the party in response to two developments on the campaign trail reveals the responsive nature of political advertising at work.

Quebec's Bill 21 (An Act Respecting the Laicity of the State) bans newly hired public servants in positions of authority from wearing religious symbols (e.g., kippah, turban, hijab) in the contexts of their duties. Justin Trudeau's announcement of his opposition to the politically divisive issue and his intention to challenge it in the courts if re-elected as prime minister arguably changed the course of the campaign in Quebec. Although a large swath of the provincial electorate supports the legislative measure, many voters oppose it, particularly those outside Quebec. Trudeau leveraged a polarizing issue to establish a clear contrast between his political party and his main opponents. Indeed, the Bloc Québécois and Conservative Party leaders stated throughout the campaign that they were unwilling to intervene in the Bill 21 debate out of respect for Quebec's autonomy. Meanwhile, the position of the New Democratic Party on the issue fluctuated throughout the electoral contest, with leader Jagmeet Singh sending mixed messages to voters. Trudeau's announcement drove a wedge between voters in Quebec as well as affected the Conservative policy positioning and the potency of its messaging.

A further factor was Scheer's performance during the first French-language debate held by Quebec's broadcaster TVA prior to the official debates organized by the Leaders' Debate Commission. During that debate, other party leaders pressed Scheer on several occasions about his personal stance on abortion rights. He refused to address the issue during the debate, and public pressure mounted during the twelve-hour window following the broadcast. After consultations with members of his communication team, Scheer held a press conference the next day at which he affirmed that he is personally pro-life. The Conservative leader reiterated that as prime minister he would oppose any effort from his caucus to restrict reproductive rights. Much like Bill 21, abortion was an issue of importance to many Quebec voters. Scheer's disclosure likely affected negatively Conservative support among them.

These developments contributed to the steady rise of the Bloc Québécois in the polls and the softening of Conservative support among Quebecers. The Bloc capitalized by garnering more public attention, raising money, and releasing ads on local radio stations across Quebec. This situation led to deliberations among members of the Conservative communication team about how to respond to and counter this dynamic. Different options were considered in order to reposition the party and adjust its political appeal in the final stretch of the campaign.

Conservative advertisers ultimately developed and rolled out French-language ads emphasizing a clear narrative: people who voted for the Bloc Québécois on election day in effect would be supporting the Liberals. These ads were crafted strategically as they took into account the two aforementioned dynamics and framed the political appeal of the Conservative Party in ways that complemented its overall messaging. However, because of their release late in the campaign, the ads failed to slow down the momentum of the Bloc, and it made significant gains on election day, whereas the Conservatives lost seats in Quebec.¹¹ It is believed among Conservative strategists that, even though many Quebecers who voted for

the Bloc were unimpressed by the performance of the Liberal government led by Trudeau, political advertising was unable to overcome their concerns about the Conservative Party and its leader's positions on certain policy issues.

As we have shown in this chapter, how political advertisers approach their craft has evolved with the growth of political marketing and digital communication. They place a premium on strategic thinking to match messages, audiences, and media. Much of this is familiar to campaigns past, such as using television to reach mass audiences or using image-based ads to frame how opponents are seen. To date, scholars have taken little notice of social media advertising by Canadian political parties. Although many scholars have shown interest in traditional forms of political advertising in Canada, more research is needed to explore all aspects of strategic advertising in a fragmented media landscape.¹²

Notes

- ¹ Rose, "Are Negative Ads Positive?"
- ² Dunaway et al., "Political Advertising."
- ³ Holtz-Bacha, "Political Advertising."
- ⁴ Schneider, *How to Break Through*.
- ⁵ Tedesco and Dunn, "Political Advertising in the 2016 US Presidential Election."
- ⁶ Balmas and Sheafer, "Personalization of Politics."
- ⁷ Holtz-Bacha, "Political Advertising."
- ⁸ Bittner, "Leaders Always Mattered."
- ⁹ Small, "Canadian Cyberparties."
- ¹⁰ Overby and Barth, "Radio Advertising in American Political Campaigns."
- ¹¹ Compared with the 2015 election, the number of Bloc MPs increased from ten to thirty-two, whereas the Conservatives' Quebec contingent decreased from twelve to ten MPs.
- ¹² On traditional forms of political advertising, see Daignault, "Cognitive Effects of Televised Political Advertising in Canada"; and Rose, "Are Negative Ads Positive?"

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