H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Travis N. Ridout, Michael Franz. *The Persuasive Power of Campaign Advertising.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011. x + 186 pp. $68.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4399-0332-2; $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4399-0333-9.

Reviewed by Erik Lakomaa (MAST Stockholm School of Economics)
Published on Jhistory (October, 2012)
Commissioned by Heidi Tworek

The effectiveness of techniques used in political campaigns is notoriously hard to assess. Randomized experiments, and even quasi experiments, are generally not possible. Campaign managers are rarely willing to refrain from using a campaign technique on a specific group of voters if they believe that the technique is efficient. Campaigns also rarely drop previously used techniques even if they assume that they were inefficient, since they just might work, and campaign managers will avoid being blamed for making decisions that may cause the candidate to lose. Being second is much worse in a political campaign than in the marketplace. In the latter, a 49 percent market share is pretty good. In politics it makes you a loser.

Travis N. Ridout, professor at American University, and Michael Franz, associate professor at Bowdoin College, both with a background in political science, make a welcome attempt to evaluate the impact of campaign advertising on election results through quantitative methods. Given the lack of research in this area, Ridout and Franz's contribution is very valuable. The book has eight chapters covering such topics as the context of campaigns; negativity and emotional appeals in ads; the effect of receivers' (i.e., prospective voters') characteristics and ad coverage in news media; and previous research and suggestions for future research. The campaigns that they examine are the 2000 and 2004 campaigns for the U.S. Senate and White House. The collection of statistical data is especially useful, as is the chapter on the interaction between paid and free media in campaigns.

Their book has, however, some serious weaknesses. Some of them may result from the authors' background in political science. There are several schools of research in this area and to be really useful, insights from political science must be complemented with marketing research. First, the authors implicitly treat campaign advertising as something different from commercial advertising. There *is* a fundamental difference between political and commercial advertising; in political campaigns, you have no chance to make corrections if you do not achieve the expected results. An advertising campaign that proves to be inefficient can be changed and re-aired, but a political ad campaign cannot be changed if it is proved to be inefficient after the votes have been counted (polling during the election campaign can give some feedback but this is not always sufficient). However, it is a rather strong assumption that "how, when and whether ads matter" also differs between political and commercial advertising (p. 5). It is therefore unfortunate that the authors disregard previous research on the impact of (commercial) advertising.[1]

From a methodological perspective, there is some room for improvement. When they analyze effects of campaigns, they focus on the "complete ad environment" in a campaign (p. 5). However, few voters are exposed to the "complete ad environment." They are exposed to a subset of all advertising and not a representative one (since campaigns try to target ads). Ridout and Franz also treat advertising as generic. Although they evaluate individual ads, they disregard the hypothesis that there might be good and bad individual ads (or rather, that since the campaign managers are experienced, ineffective ads–e.g., ads followed by declining poll numbers–would be pulled rapidly and the ads that voters are exposed to therefore on average have their "intended effect" [p. 99]).

Another weakness is that the authors do not discuss different potential explanations for their empirical findings. Ridout and Franz describe how the amount of campaign spending on advertising has increased significantly since the last American election cycles, and try to attribute the increase to changes in campaign finance laws (p. 7). While these very well might have had an impact, they might not be the only explanation. One reason that should have been discussed is a campaign's increasing need for paid media to compensate for unfavorable treatment in free media. Media often play favorites and a can-

didate that once was the media's darling may not be that forever. John McCain was (as the authors note on page 64) the media favorite in the 2000 Republican primaries. As a candidate in the 2008 presidential election, however, he got very unfavorable coverage. The month before the election, the difference between positive and negative articles was -41 for McCain, compared to +7 for Obama.[2] Regardless of the explanation, campaign managers must take this into consideration. Paid media give candidates the ability to control the message. Ridout and Franz also sometimes refrain from trying to explain results that are counterintuitive, such as that positive ads for John Kerry in the 2004 campaign seemed to make voters *less* inclined to vote for him (p. 91). This might be a result of coding errors, the lack of appeal of the ads' messages to voters, or simply a coincidence. Here, the reader is left in the dark.

Further, the examples used are not always beneficial for the analysis. When Ridout and Franz describe how voters of different persuasions might react to different stories, they use two "controversies" from the 2004 campaign: the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (SBVfT) claim that war veteran Kerry protested against the war and accused the United States of committing war crimes when he returned to the United States, and the claim from MoveOn.org and CBS *60 Minutes* ("the Killian files" or "filegate") that George H. W. Bush had pulled strings to get his son into the National Guard and that the latter had failed a physical during National Guard service. Ridout and Franz use the much broader coverage (the SBVfT story was noted four hundred times on CNN, Fox News, and MNSBC, while the National Guard story only two hundred times) for the former as an indication for the necessity of a clear and ad friendly narrative (pp. 104-105). This explanation omits one significant difference. The accusations against George W. Bush were based on documents proved to be blatant forgeries (in the wording of the authors "not genuine" [p. 103]), while the accusations against Kerry were not. The SBVfT ad is also the only ad in the book called an "attack ad"; the MoveOn.org ad (falsely) accusing H. W. Bush for pulling strings for his son on the next page is called an "ad." This kind of example might lead the reader to suspect partisan bias among the authors.

The strongest part of the book is the chapter (chapter 7) on how campaigns use paid media to get coverage in free media, how campaigns design limited run ad campaigns that are specifically targeted at news media, and how ads might push news media to cover certain stories. The previously mentioned SBVfT ads could be seen in this light. Even though Kerry himself used his Vietnam War experience as a central theme of his campaign, the details of his service were not put under journalistic scrutiny before the SBVfT ads were aired. Another telling example is how Howard Dean in 2003 aired ads against George W. Bush in Texas seven months before the democratic primary, in order to send media the message that he was the "anti-Bush candidate" (p. 131). This, and the compilation of numbers on campaign ads targeted at media, is both novel and interesting. The weaknesses however make the overall impression, despite this chapter, somewhat disappointing.

Notes

[1]. Some Journals, like the *Journal of Marketing Research*, are devoted to these kinds of studies. Effects on advertising on sales, and the effectiveness of advertising, is also covered in marketing communications textbooks, such as Chris Fill, *Marketing Communications: Engagements, Strategies and Practice*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2006), esp. chap. 17; and Larry Percy, John R. Rossiter, and Richard Elliott, *Strategic Advertising Management* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). The book under review would have benefited significantly if the authors had analyzed the findings in relation to previous research in marketing communication.

[2]. Pew Research Center, "Winning the Media Campaign: How the Press Reported the 2008 Presidential General Election," The Project for Excellence in Journalism, a project of the Pew Research Center, Washington DC (October 22, 2008), http://www.journalism.org/node/13307.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Erik Lakomaa. Review of Ridout, Travis N.; Franz, Michael, *The Persuasive Power of Campaign Advertising*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35968

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.