

Making a Difference?

Exposure to Political Ads and Perceptions of Parties

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July 26, 2006

Abstract

How effective are candidate, party, and interest group ads at conveying noticeable differences between the Democratic and Republican Parties? Or at boosting preferences for the parties? There are two conflicting expectations; first, that ads from these three sponsors will have the same effect on citizen perceptions, under the assumption that viewers do not notice sponsorship. The second expectation is that party ads have a stronger effect on perceived party differences (that is, at “building the party image”) than candidate and group ads. There have been very few empirical investigations into these common claims, however. I leverage a comprehensive dataset that tracks political ads in the nation’s top media markets on surveys of U.S. voters in 2000 and 2004. The results demonstrate that sponsorship *does* matter, but not in ways that confirm the second expectation. When ads convey party distinctions, the effect comes from candidate ads (and to a lesser extent, from interest group ads); to that effect, party-sponsored ads almost never matter.

1 Introduction

There is a growing body of research interested in the effects of advertising on political attitudes and behavior. The balance of scholarship examines the role of negative ads in either mobilizing or de-mobilizing turnout on Election Day (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1995, Wattenberg & Briens 1999). In that debate, the evidence is mixed (Lau, Sigelman, Heldman & Babbitt 1999), with more recent work suggesting a mobilizing effect (Goldstein & Freedman 1999, Kahn & Kenney 1999, Lau & Pomper 2004, Martin 2004). Others have broadened the search, looking for advertising effects in the realm of political knowledge and information, interest in the campaign, and efficacy and trust (Patterson & McClure 1976, Just, Crigler & Wallach 1990, Zhao & Chafee 1995, Schenck-Hamlin & Procter 2000, Freedman, Franz & Goldstein 2004, Valentino, Hutchings & Williams 2004). There is more convincing and consistent evidence in this body of work that suggests that when ads matter (and they often do not), they boost interest and information.

There has been less research investigating the effects of ads by sponsor, however (Magleby 2004, Pfau, Holbert, Szabo & Kaminski 2002, Pfau, Park, Holbert & Cho 2001); that is, to what level candidate, party, and interest group ads have different effects on a variety of attitudes and behaviors. For all of the political, policy, and academic debates about the utility (or danger) of party soft money, the role of parties in campaigns (in building a party image, for example), and the influence of interest group ads (in potentially reducing citizen efficacy, among other effects), the question seems an important one to consider. Foremost in this area is the role of ads—by sponsor—in influencing assessments of parties.¹

For example, how effective are candidate, party, and interest group-sponsored television ads at conveying noticeable differences between the Democratic and Republican Parties? Or at boosting party positives and lowering negatives? There are two conflicting expectations; first, that ads from these three sponsors will have the same effect on citizen perceptions, under the assumption that viewers do not notice sponsorship. The second expectation (offered during the debate over recent campaign finance reform) is that party ads should have a stronger effect on perceived party differences than candidate and group ads.

I leverage advertising tracking data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project for the 2000 and 2004 elections on the 2000 National Election Study and a 3-wave panel study of national voters

in 2004 (sponsored by The Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy, and the Wisconsin Advertising Project). The results demonstrate that sponsorship *does* matter, but not in ways that confirm the second expectation. When ads convey party distinctions, the effect comes from candidate ads (and to a lesser extent, and in the other direction, from interest group ads); to that end, party-sponsored ads almost never matter.

The paper is organized as follows. I begin with review of recent debates over the state of parties in American politics. Much of the debate over campaign finance reform focused explicitly on the effect of reform for the party-in-organization, but with implicit concern for the party-in-the-electorate. I argue that, to date, there is no evidence that the soft money era had any effect on reinforcing the party image, the original intention of the soft money allowance. I follow with a review of the data used in this paper. Then, I show the results of two sets of analyses: first, the effect of ad exposure on general perception of the parties. And second, the effect of partisan imbalances in exposure on party-specific perceptions. I conclude with a discussion of the results.

2 Expectations

Whether in the arena of governing (Bond & Fleisher 2000, Rohde 1991, Aldrich & Rohde 2000), or through organizational structure (Bibby 1998), scholars have noted the resurgence of political parties in recent years; indeed, talk of red states and blue states is almost cliché now. The threat of campaign finance reform in the late 1990s mobilized many to object to changes in the system, on the grounds that strengthened parties would suffer in a post-reform world. For example, many bemoaned the proposed ban on party soft money, those unregulated funds raised by federal and state parties to ostensibly aid non-federal candidates, boost turnout, and build a party image. Opponents of reform argued that soft money was part of the party-in-organization, used in ways to influence and infuse a stronger party-in-the electorate. Indeed, this was one of the original intentions of the soft money allowance, carved out by the Federal Election Commission in the late 1970s at the urging of party entrepreneurs (Corrado 2004).

With reform on the horizon by 2000, many argued that a ban on soft money would simply shift it from parties to interest groups, who would act as shadow organizations outside the influence of party leaders (McConnell 2001); this would undermine the vitality of the two-party system, so

the argument went. Senator Mitch McConnell, for example, warned that reform would transform interest groups into the Home Depot of American politics, and parties into the local ACE hardware (McConnell 2004). Party scholar Ray LaRaja bemoaned the organizational decline of party coordination under a new system that prevented soft money from acting as a glue (Corrado & LaRaja 2005). And legal scholars Gora & Wallison (2001) opined that soft money “helps [parties] maintain their organizations, motivate their followers and publicize their principles. Banning soft money denies parties the rights that we would not think of denying to other organizations.”

It was clear, however, that by the late 1990s, parties were spending hundreds of millions of dollars of soft money, not exclusively on party-building and GOTV, but on ads that mentioned or pictured federal candidates, avoiding federal regulations by simply avoiding explicit candidate advocacy (Herrnson 1998, Magleby 2002, Magleby 2003). For reform advocates, this clearly violated the original intention of soft money (Foskett 2000). Such developments overwhelmed the arguments in favor of soft money and prompted reform in 2002 that banned it (BCRA, the Bi-Partisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002).

The problem (and for both sides of the debate) is that evidence is lacking that soft money was doing *anything*, beyond inflating party accounts. For proponents of reform, there is no systematic evidence that money (hard or soft) buys votes, or results in corruption (beyond the occasional Duke Cunningham) (Smith 1995, Baumgartner & Leech 1998). For opponents of reform, there is no systematic evidence that the soft money ban hurt fund-raising, especially with the 2004 elections as a natural experiment. Moreover, despite evidence that soft money did funnel from parties to some interest groups (Weissman & Hassan 2005), it did not transform the Democratic or Republican party into the local ACE hardware.

But following the money is easier than tracking changes in the party-in-the-electorate. And in that realm we need better evidence. Although there is some reason to believe that citizens use party cues more now than in years past to determine vote choice (Bartels 2000), as well as see party differences in greater amounts (Pomper & Weiner 2000), we know less about how citizens respond to campaign expenditures by political parties. For example, were the soft money ad expenditures by parties in the late 1990s doing the job they were originally intended to do; for one, were they infusing a stronger affiliation with either party? Indeed, we might expect them to.

Coleman (1996, p.821) finds evidence for the more general claim that “strong, competitive party organizations contribute to generalized support for parties.” If soft money is one sign of strong party organizations, evidence that soft money ads stimulate partisan attachments might imply that the party soft money ban will (in the long-term) weaken a party-in-the-electorate.

There is very little existing evidence into sponsor-based effects of campaign ads. Magleby (2004) finds no sponsor-based ad effects on vote intention, but Pfau et al. (2001) and Pfau et al. (2002) find that candidate ads have the greater impact on citizen interest in the campaign and knowledge of the candidates.² But vote choice, interest, and candidate knowledge are weak indicators of a strong party-in-the-electorate. Certainly consistent vote for a Democrat or Republican is a necessary condition for a vibrant partisan electorate (as is interest in and knowledge of those candidates), but it is by no means sufficient. And in the realm of soft money, at least according to proponents of soft money’s role in building the party, vote choice is only an unintentional by-product. So party ads, especially in the firmly rooted soft money election of 2000, should have had some effect on measures of party support, if we are to believe that unregulated party funds work to build a party image. But what of candidate and interest group ads? Should *they* have an effect on measures of party support?

Such questions inspire conflicting hypotheses. The first—*the uniform effect hypothesis*—presumes that sponsorship does not matter, and that effects, when present, will be seen equally across sponsor. The assertion here is that voters make no distinctions in sponsorship, and react the same to any negative, contrast, or positive stimuli. This certainly makes sense, as party ads often look like candidate ads (enough to inspire anger by many about the presumption that party soft money ads are truly unique); and interest groups ads, despite often being quite nasty, are not obviously more nasty than some candidate ads (Franz, Rivlin & Goldstein 2005).

Indeed, one of the justifications for the inclusion of the stand-by-your-ad provision in BCRA (the provision that forced federal candidates to mention in the ad that they endorse the message) was to help voters better determine sponsorship (Gale, Hawkins, Hawkins, Magelby, Monson & Patterson 2006). Moreover, many interest group entrepreneurs are former party leaders (Skinner 2005), who might bring their skill at crafting campaign ads for the Democrats or Republicans to their new employer. All told, the uniform effect hypothesis posits that voters see an ad as an ad,

responding only to the message, and not the messenger.

Furthermore, there is some evidence that campaign ad messages can disseminate party differences. Spiliotes & Vavreck (2002) note that Democratic and Republican candidate ads often talk about divergent sets of issues, which they say might create conditions under which voters can more easily see differences between the parties. We do not have a comparable investigation into the issue convergence or divergence in party and interest group messages (both with their preferred candidates and across party lines), but if one presumes the same empirical trend, than as voters see more ads (regardless of sponsor), they will also be more likely to see important differences between the parties.

The second hypothesis—*the sponsor effect hypothesis*—is in line with the party-building argument for soft money. This presumes that exposure to party ads will have a consistent positive effect on measures of party support, and that that effect will not be present (or will be negative) in candidate and interest group ads. Especially for interest group ads, whose sponsors are acting explicitly outside the party apparatus—sometimes in spite of party leaders' wishes—we might expect their messages to weaken existing voter sentiment toward the two-party system. In this sense, Mitch McConnell's fears might have some foundation. If voters see interest groups performing adequate candidate advocacy, might this not convince them that the Democratic and Republican Parties are less relevant?

As noted, there is some evidence that sponsor effects are present for citizen knowledge of and attitudes toward candidates (Pfau et al. 2001, Pfau et al. 2001). And some interest group leaders (most famously, Terry Dolan of the National Conservative Political Action Committee) have asserted that their negative advertising allowed candidates to deny involvement in attack campaigns (Magleby & Monson 2004), on the presumption that voters do not attribute interest group messages to candidates. Implicit to this expectation—if we are to believe that BCRA damaged parties-in-the-electorate—is that any present effects in 2000 could disappear (with the end of soft money).

In addition, I also offer a *differential effects hypothesis* that explores differences in sponsor-effects across partisans and independents. There is some evidence that independents respond differently (and more strongly) to ad stimuli than Republicans or Democrats (Pfau et al. 2001, Pfau et al.

2001, Kaid 1997); this is consistent with what we know about media effects more generally (Zaller 1992). Some experimental work has found the opposite, however—namely that partisans are more sensitive to ad messages than independents (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1995, Chang 2003). In the realm of party building, it is unclear whether we should expect stronger effects for partisans, who might take cues from partisan messages more easily, or for independents, who might be starved for reasons to feel better about parties.

Finally, we might also expect *null or inconsistent effects*. The balance of scholarship on media effects posits that campaign messages are contingent and small (Leighley 2004). It might not be the case that ad messages have any impact on measures of a partisan electorate. Existing research has found more consistent effects in the realm of turnout, interest, and information, but measures of party support might be too obtuse to be sensitive to ad appeals. Furthermore, most ads do not mention the party of the favored candidate (Holman & McLoughlin 2002), and direct partisan appeals are not common components of television ads (Spiliotes & Vavreck 2002). If this is the case, however, we might reach the same normative conclusion as we would with evidence for the uniform effects hypothesis—since party appeals are not unique, we need not worry about the damage of campaign finance reform to the vibrancy of a partisan electorate.

3 Data and Measurement

I examine the impact of advertising exposure on five measures of party support. **First**, I investigate respondent perception of important party differences from both the 2000 NES and the 2004 BYU/UW panel study. The question is: “Do you think there are any important differences in what the Republicans and Democrats stand for?”³ I code it dichotomously, where 1 is the perception of differences. In the 2000 NES, the question is asked in the post-election interview, but in the BYU study, it is asked in both the pre-election and post-election. As such, I estimate the effect of advertising exposure over the course of the campaign for the 2000 question, but I include exposure between the respondent’s pre and post-election interview for the 2004 question (where the dependent variable is perception in the post-election, and the pre-election response is an independent variable).

Second, I estimate exposure effects on respondents’ preference for divided government, from

the 2000 NES pre-election survey. The question is: “Do you think it is better when one party controls both the presidency and Congress, better when control is split between the Democrats and Republicans, or doesn’t it matter?” I code it dichotomously, where 0 is the indication that divided government doesn’t matter, and 1 is any stated preference.⁴

Third, I investigate feeling thermometer scores of political parties, from the 2000 NES pre-election. The variable ranges from 0-100 (with 0 being cold to the party and 100 being highly favorable), and there are three specific questions: feeling toward political parties in general, the Republican Party, and the Democratic Party.

Fourth, I estimate exposure effects on the number of party likes and dislikes, from the 2000 NES pre-election. The question is: “Is there anything in particular that you like about the Democratic [or Republican] Party?” Respondents can list up to five for each party. I combine both parties’ likes (and dislikes) to measure an additive party likes (and dislikes) scale (ranging from 0-10). I also look at specific Democratic and Republican party likes and dislikes (all four scales range from 0-5).

Finally, I investigate exposure effects on respondent partisanship, from the 2004 BYU/UW study. Because the question was asked in both pre and post election interviews, I estimate the model with the pre-election response as an independent variable and for exposure between the pre and post-interview (as with the panel analysis for 2004 party differences). Partisan identification is measured on the standard 7-point scale.

In principle, perceptions of party differences, preference for divided government, high feeling thermometer scores and party likes (and low dislikes), and a strong partisan affiliation are certain signs of a vibrant party-in-the-electorate. They each tap unique and nuanced orientations to political parties, however, and while we certainly should expect respondents who feel strongly on one scale to feel strongly on another, it is not determined that respondents who see party differences, for example, also have strong feeling thermometer scores. Thus, any consistent effect across measures is a strong indication of advertising influence.

I measure exposure to political advertisements in ways consistent with existing scholarship (Goldstein & Freedman 1999, Freedman, Franz & Goldstein 2004, Martin 2004). That is, the Wisconsin Advertising Project contains frequency data on the date and sponsor of each airing, along

with the show during which it aired; these data can then be aggregated to the media market, telling us, for example, the number of Democratic and Republican party, candidate, and interest group ads (of all types—by tone or issues) during different shows.⁵ By connecting respondents' county of residence to media market, we can measure the upper limit of ads the respondent was potentially exposed to.⁶ Each survey also contains detailed media consumption questions, including the number of days each respondent watched game shows, morning national news, afternoon talk shows, and early and late local evening news. By multiplying media consumption with total ads aired (during those shows), and summing across the ad volume by television viewing interactions, we can estimate with considerable precision and accuracy a relative measure of advertising exposure. Ridout, Shah, Goldstein & Franz (2004) performed a rigorous investigation of this measurement strategy, finding evidence that it out-performed alternative measures.⁷

I measure exposure for candidate, party, and interest group negative and contrast ads, excluding positive ads. Because parties and interest groups “go negative” in most of their ads, this specification principally excludes the set of positive ads candidates air early in the campaign. For example, in 2000, 100 percent of interest group ads that advocated for presidential candidates were negative or contrasting; 52.5 percent of interest group Senate ads were negative or contrasting, as were 71.1 percent of interest group House ads. As for party ads, 62.8 percent of ads mentioning a presidential candidate in 2000 were negative or contrasting, as were 89.8 percent of Senate ads and 84.2 percent of pro-House candidate ads. In addition, it seems reasonable to expect that negative and contrast ads have the dominant effect; after all, these are the ads that critique the opposing side, priming the opportunity for viewers to make evaluative judgements.⁸ Finally, I include all advertisements over the course of the campaign, unless otherwise noted (such as in the 2004 panel models).

I take two additional approaches to measurement. When investigating exposure on general attitudes of the parties (i.e., perceptions of differences and preference for divided government), I combine Democratic and Republican ads, estimating total exposure by sponsor. I then take the natural log of that exposure, to account for diminishing marginal returns. This is referred to “wearout” in the marketing literature (Scott & Solomon 1998). On the other hand, when looking for relationships with party-specific attitudes (i.e., Democratic Party Feeling Thermometer),

I operationalize exposure as the partisan advantage in candidate, party, and interest group ads (measured as Democratic exposure minus Republican exposure). This looks for imbalances in the flow of advertising exposure. This is consistent with Zaller (1996)'s concern that in order to find media-based effects, we need good measurement of the imbalance in information flows (most importantly, because as one side balances out the other, null effects may underestimate real media influence). See Table 5 in the Appendix for summary statistics of the exposure measures.

Finally, in all models, I include a number of other factors that might drive perceptions of the parties. I control for respondent age, race, gender, income, education, marital status, residence (a South binary variable), local news consumption, newspaper readership, strength of partisanship (or party identification in the party-specific models), and level of general political knowledge (measured as the number of correct answers on a series of basic political facts—party in power, president's home state, etc).⁹ I also include variables for whether the respondent was contacted directly by a political party and for residence in a competitive presidential or Senate state, or competitive House district.

One initial issue might be the level of correlation between measures of candidate, party, and interest group ad exposure. This is certainly a valid concern, but ultimately not a major one.¹⁰ It is true that advertisements of all sorts air most in competitive races (Goldstein & Freedman 2000), but there are important distinctions across sponsors. Interest groups focused mostly on House races in 2000 and the presidential races in 2000 and 2004; to that extent, their participation in Senate races was lower in 2000 (than in other contests) and 2004, and almost non-existent in 2004 House races. Parties aired comparable numbers of ads in 2000 and 2004 House races and presidential contest, but less in 2004 Senate races. As such, it is not determined that high ad volume from interest groups means high volume from parties. And high volume from candidates does not always imply comparable mobilization from groups and parties. This is a positive for the analysis that follows, as it means there is considerable variation across geography in the level and type of ads citizens were exposed to.

Finally, it is important to note that this empirical investigation is part of a growing body of scholarship that uses surveys to assess campaign ad effects (Goldstein & Freedman 1999, Goldstein & Freedman 1999, Freedman, Franz & Goldstein 2004, Martin 2004). The strength of survey-

based analysis is high external validity, in that we can connect the stated political attitudes and preferences of hundreds of survey respondents to real-world ad campaigns. In contrast, much of the existing (and growing) literature of ad effects uses lab experiments, the definitive being Ansolabehere & Iyengar (1995). The strength of the experimental work is high internal validity, in that scholars can more easily control exposure. Both research strategies are important and insightful. The strength of the analysis in this paper is that it is the first using surveys to assess sponsor effects (lending external validity to the existing experimental studies). In addition, because the empirical analysis spans two election cycles, separated by major campaign finance reform, any comparison across years represents a natural experiment about the effect of such reform—specifically for party exposure effects (the soft money era in 2000 vs. the BCRA era in 2004).

4 Results

I split the results of 25 regression models into two subsections: general and specific perceptions of parties. In the first section, I show total logged exposure to candidate, party, and interest group ads on perceptions of party differences, preference for divided government, feeling thermometer of the party system, and the total number of party likes and dislikes. In the second section, I show the effects of unbalanced flows of candidate, party, and interest group exposure on Democratic and Republican Party Feeling Thermometers and total number of Democratic and Republican likes and dislikes. In the interest of space, I do not report the coefficient estimates of the control variables.¹¹ In addition, in all of the Tables, I only show exposure coefficients that were significant (under a two-tailed test, with at least $p < .10$). In the discussion of each set of results, I make note of the intensity of effects with reference to predicted probabilities.

4.1 General Perceptions of Parties

I begin with the results from the party difference and divided government models, which are listed in Table 1.¹² For the main effects of exposure, we see results only in the post-election 2000 party differences model, where exposure to candidate ads boosts the probability of perceiving party differences, but where exposure to interest groups ads reduces the probability. For a “typical” respondent—defined here as a 30-year old white woman with mean education, income, political

knowledge, and media consumption, and who neither lived in a competitive race nor was mobilized by a political party—seeing an “average” level of party, candidate, and interest group ads results in a .71 probability of perceiving party differences (which is high, and driven up by estimating probabilities for a weak partisan). When candidate exposure is low (one standard deviation below the mean, holding the other measures constant), that probability drops to .63; when exposure is high (plus one standard deviation), the probability rises to .77.¹³ For interest group ads, low exposure (with mean candidate exposure) results in a .75 probability; high exposure lowers the probability to .65. These effects are not present in either the 2004 model or in the 2000 divided government model.

[Table 1 here]

This first set of results is not convincing evidence for either the uniform effects or sponsor effects hypotheses. The 2000 party differences model does suggest a sponsor effect, but not one what we might expect—party ads hold no persuasive force in the conveyance of party differences.

The second set of results in Table 1 look for differential effects in the response to ad exposure. The Table reports the significance of the main effect (partisans) and that effect plus the interaction coefficient (independents).¹⁴ As the results demonstrate, we get one consistent finding (for interest group exposure) and one inconsistent result (for candidate exposure). On the former, in both 2000 and 2004, increased exposure to interest group ads lowers the probability of seeing party differences, *for independents*. In the 2000 model, for example, this lowers independents’ probability from .62 for our typical respondent to .45. In 2004, the same change in exposure shifts the predicted probability from .58 to .29.¹⁵

On the other hand, for partisans in 2000, exposure to candidate ads *raises* the probability of seeing party differences, but *lowers* the probability of having any preference for divided government. This is rather interesting. In the 2000 NES, of 895 partisan respondents, 556 (62 percent) both perceived party differences and listed some preference for divided government; 53 (6 percent) did not perceive party differences and did not have a preference for divided government. In contrast, 262 respondents (36 percent) were not consistent on both questions. As a result, varied exposure to candidate ads—for partisans—raises the difference perception from .64 to .78 (for low and high

exposure, respectively), but lowers the divided government preference, from .79 to .69. This suggests that for partisans, already likely to see differences between the parties *and* have an opinion on divided government, exposure to candidate ads reinforces perceptions, but softens the sense that those should or should not be embodied in either unified or divided government. It is worth noting that the divided government question was asked in the pre-election (and so exposure is measured up to the date of interview), and the party differences item was asked after the election (where exposure uses all ads aired over the entire campaign).

This effect becomes more nuanced when we look at party thermometer scores and the total number of party likes and dislikes.¹⁶ Results of those models are reported in Table 2. Although we find no direct effects, there are some significant results when looking at partisans and independents. For example, candidate ads boost both party likes and thermometer scores among independents. On the thermometer scale, low to high exposure raises scores for our typical respondent from 45 to 49. On the party likes scale, low to high exposure moves total responses from 1.36 to about 2. Both shifts are modest, but on the party likes scale, 84 percent of respondents listed only 0-4 items (out of a possible 10); as such, a shift in over half a mention is noteworthy.

At the same time, however, candidate and party ads work at slight cross-purposes for partisans on the scale of party likes. For partisans, candidate ads depress the number of party likes (from 2.2 to 1.8), but party ads inflate them (1.8 to 2.2).

[Table 2 here]

To summarize, interest group ads matter only for perceptions of party differences, but they confuse voters, lowering the probability. Second, party ads matter only in the area of stated party likes, raising them for partisans. Finally, candidate ads have the more consistent effect, but in both directions—lowering stated likes and orientation toward divided government, even as they reinforce perceived real differences.

All told, there is very little evidence here that advertising exposure causes wholesale shifts, good or bad, in perceptions of the parties. This seems certainly true for party ads. At least for those who claim that party ads do much to build the party image, or reinforce the party-in-electorate, there is nothing to support the argument in this analysis. In addition, we can say nothing consistent about the three hypotheses noted earlier. Of the six interactive models in both tables, we

see four significant coefficients for partisans and four for independents; the only consistency is in the way independents respond—exposure to candidate ads seems to boost party measures, while interest group ads (when effects are found) depresses those measures.

But perhaps this investigation of generic party perceptions is too broad. Might the effects be different for Republicans and Democrats? Can (or should) we see those effects in party-specific evaluations of each party? I turn now to these questions.

4.2 Specific Perceptions of Parties

In this section, I report results on both the thermometer and likes/dislikes scales, but for each party separately. I also measure exposure differently. As noted earlier, I examine the partisan advantage in the flow of candidate, party, and interest groups ad exposure. Positive numbers indicate that the respondent was exposed to a Democratic imbalance of information; negative numbers indicate a Republican imbalance.¹⁷ I report the main effects in Table 3.

If exposure to campaign ad messages compel changes in the party-in-the-electorate, we should expect Democratic imbalances to boost Democratic Thermometer scores, Democratic likes, and Republican dislikes, and it should lower GOP Thermometer, as well as Republican likes and Democratic dislikes. GOP imbalances should have the opposite effect. The uniform effects hypothesis predicts that exposure effects will be present in all three sponsorship measures, but the sponsor effects hypothesis predicts the greatest reaction to party ad exposure.

As the results demonstrate, exposure advantages fail to reach statistical significance in every case but one—interest group exposure on the scale of Democratic likes. The coefficient is .076, with exposure scaled to units of 100. This means that for advantages of 500 ads, Democratic likes rise or fall (depending on the direction of the advantage) by .4. As such, interest group ads matter, but on a limited scale.

When looking at total ads (instead of just negative and contrast ads), there are two differences of note. These are shown in the Table with a parenthetical entry next to the non-significance indicator.¹⁸ First, candidate exposure advantages impact the number of positive and negative things respondents have to say about the Republican Party, as well as the number of Democratic dislikes. In general, Democratic advantages reduce GOP likes and Democratic dislikes, but they also

reduce negative GOP evaluations; conversely, GOP advantages boost GOP positives and Democratic negatives, but they also boost GOP negatives. Second, party exposure advantages influence GOP dislikes (where a Democratic edge raises them). In all cases, the substantive effect is quite small.

All told, then, we have further evidence of the ineffectiveness of party ads in changing respondents' evaluations of and reactions to the Democratic and Republican parties. When effects are found, they come from interest group negative/contrast ads, as well as candidate ads. This again is evidence of a sponsor effect, but not the one hypothesized.

[Table 3 here]

How do Republicans, independents, and Democrats respond to exposure advantages, however? Table 4 shows a summary of results from six models. In each, I included three exposure measures, plus an interaction with a three-category party identifier.¹⁹ For party thermometer and Republican dislikes, all six measures fail to reach statistical significance. For Democratic likes and dislikes, and for Republican likes, however, at least one measure reaches significance. Those effects are reported in Figure 1.

[Table 4 here]

[Figure 1 here]

In both the Democratic likes and dislikes models, interest group exposure is the only significant advertising effect. The top two panels in the Figure show the coefficient estimate for each partisan sub-group. As is evident, the effect is strongest for self-identified Republicans, with a coefficient of about .15 for Democratic positives and -.1 for negatives. Thus, for Republicans, seeing more Democratic interest group ads boosts Democratic positives and lowers negatives; seeing more Republican ads lowers Democratic positives and lifts Democratic negatives. For independents, the effect is strongest for Democratic likes, but near 0 for dislikes. And for Democrats, the effect is essentially 0 in both cases.

In the bottom panel, we see a smaller (but still significant) effect for candidate ad exposure on the number of Republican Party positives. Again, for Republicans, Democratic advantages in can-

didate ad exposure lowers positives, but they go up under a Republican imbalance of exposure; independents and Democrats are unaffected.

We can conclude from this that on the likes and dislikes scale, Republicans are most susceptible to imbalances in the flow of information. When the Democrats have the advertising advantage, they are able to appeal to Republican voters, softening opposition. Of course, when Republican voters are exposed to imbalances favoring Republicans, any gains are lost. Interestingly, such findings are consistent with some prior work on sponsor effects; indeed, Pfau et al. (2001) and Pfau et al. (2002) found in their experimental work that when partisans are susceptible to ad messages, it is Republican participants (not Democrats).

As a final test for party-specific effects, I leveraged the BYU/UW 2004 panel study to investigate self-identified shifts in partisanship between the fall pre-election interview and the post-election survey. The dependent variable is the seven-scale party id measure. I include the pre-election measure (along with standard controls) and the three exposure advantage measures as independent variables. The results for party and interest group ads are not significant, but the candidate exposure measure was significant and positive ($p < .06$).

Figure 2 shows two sets of predicted probabilities—one for a slight Republican edge in candidate ad exposure (which is one standard deviation below the mean) and one for a Democratic edge in candidate exposure (one standard deviation above the mean). Conditioning on pre-election party i.d. determines a lot in the post-election interview, but the figure shows the modest effect of candidate ads. With a GOP advantage, the probability of being a strong Republican (conditional on being a strong Republican in the pre-election) is nearly .90; that probability drops slightly to below .80, however, under a Democratic advantage. Those effects are also evident for weak Republicans and strong Democrats, who are nearly .10 more likely to report strong Democratic affiliation with a Democratic advantage in candidate ads.

[Figure 2 here]

What can we conclude from the party-specific analysis? First and foremost, all reported effects are modest. Because the ad measures are operationalized as advantages in exposure, we should only expect small changes. Someone who has seen 100 more AFL-CIO ads than NRA ads may have seen hundreds of both, and respondents may have been affected by them; but the imbalance

has the final imprint on voters. Here, then, imbalances matter, but not substantially. Second, imbalances in candidate and interest group ads matter most, and Republican respondents seem more susceptible to ads than Democrats. Finally, and perhaps most substantially, party ads matter only once, and only when talking about total exposure; as such imbalances in party negative and contrast ads never matter. I take the balance of results in this section, then, as evidence for some sponsor effects and some differential effects, but ones not in line with standard arguments about the impact of ad expenditures.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Of the 25 models investigating negative and contrast ads, I found at least one significant coefficient in 11. Eight candidate coefficients were significant (of 37 total—this includes interaction effects on candidate exposure); six interest group coefficients were significant (of 37); but in only one instance did a party exposure coefficient reach statistical significance (of 37). At the same time, only one effect of the over 100 total coefficients is truly substantial—independents exposed to higher levels of interest group ads in 2004 are .30 less likely to perceive party differences. The remaining effects are quite modest (i.e., boosting thermometer scores by 5 points; raising and lowering predicted likes by .5; raising perceived differences among partisans from .70 to .80). All told, then, there is only some evidence to suggest that political ads have influences on assessments of political parties. The larger message is that ads move these perceptions, but only slightly.

As a caveat, the investigation in this paper concerns respondent reactions to the *complete advertising environment*, as experienced by over 1,000 respondents in the last two elections. It does look for some differential effects, but it does not explore the very real possibility that some specific party ads (or some interest group or candidate ads) matter. It makes sense to assume that some party messages convey party distinctions (and it is important to research what those messages look like), but the goal of this paper was to assess the effects of exposure to the complete party, candidate, and interest group ad environment. After all, the outcome of political ad wars—that is, the total effect—is important; certainly candidates, interest group and party leaders, and advertising consultants are curious to know if the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on television ads work in different ways.

To that end, we can say more definitively that party ads are not building the party image. Soft money may or may not have been a sign of stronger party organizations. And the post-BCRA new hard money era may or may not force parties to build better grassroots organizations. But in neither period do the television expenditures from party coffers lead to stronger partisans, citizens being more conscious of party differences, or citizens having more nice and less bad things to say about the Democrats and Republicans. The conclusion we can draw from these results are similar to what we would infer with strong evidence for the uniform effects hypothesis—we need not worry about the damage of campaign finance reform to the vibrancy of a partisan electorate.

Is it just that party ads hold no distinction in the minds of voters? It seems that way. Candidate ads may have an impact because of candidate appearances (and direct statements to viewers by candidates), and interest group ads might just have a unique style or convey a particular level of negativity. To that end, it seems party ads are either too stale or too boring to stand out in this realm. Indeed, we might expect (normatively *and* empirically) that party ads are the avenue through which partisanship and party sentiments are best conveyed. It is compelling how consistently untrue this seems to be. To that end, we need more research into understanding the source of sponsor effects.

Overall, to those decrying the end of the soft money era—under the pretense of soft money’s influence on building party images—we can say without reserve that there was almost no influence of party ad exposure on the wide range of variables investigated here. Put simply, party soft money ads did not and do not build party images.

Notes

¹By interest group ad, I mean only those ads that mention or picture a candidate for federal office. This excludes non-candidate issue ads; for example, a telecommunications ad warning against the dangers of new regulations on media.

²See also Garramone (1985) and Kaid & Boydston (1987) for some earlier work on sponsor-based effects.

³Question wording in the BYU/UW study is identical to the NES. The BYU/UW study had waves in June, September and November; it sampled from the U.S. voting age population, with over-sampling in battleground Senate and presidential states. The data are available for download at http://csp.polisci.wisc.edu/BYU_UW

⁴To test for any problem with this dichotomization, I ran a multinomial logit model with “no preference” for divided government as the base category. In both equations (and in every specification), the coefficient estimates for exposure are nearly identical.

⁵Political advertising data are available for download at <http://www.polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising>.

⁶Because some dependent variables are from the pre-election, I use only the ads aired up to the respondent’s date of interview. For all post-election questions, I use all ads aired in the media market.

⁷For example, one concern is the reliance on self-reported television watching. We might be worried about the endogeneity between political-related dependent variables and self-reports of political ad watching. The exposure measure in this article, however, only relies on self-reports that are likely unrelated to the dependent variables. For example, only if we believe that reported Jeopardy watching is correlated with perceptions of party differences should we be concerned about the measure.

⁸I tested for total exposure effects, and when appropriate, I reference those results in the next section.

⁹See Wattenberg (2002) for a discussion of the utility of such a political information scale.

¹⁰I ran the models a number of different ways. I tried separate model runs with only one exposure measure (candidate, party, or interest group), plus an additional control for total number of ads in the respondent’s market. This was to account for potential correlation effects across exposure measures. The substantive results are generally unaffected.

¹¹Full Model results are available from the author upon request. Because of panel attrition (and competitive state over-sampling in the BYU/UW survey) I weight all BYU models using the `pweight` command in STATA. I also estimate all models with robust standard errors.

¹²I estimate both models using logit. In Table 6 in the Appendix I show the full model results for the 2000 and 2004 party difference models, to demonstrate the model specification for all of the models that follow.

¹³Unless otherwise noted, reference to low and high exposure means one standard deviation below and above the specific measure’s mean.

¹⁴Significance for independents is determined if the added coefficients are together different from 0. This is assessed in Stata by the `test` command: `test [main effect] + [interaction]=0`

¹⁵Because the 2004 model also includes the pre-election perception of party differences, the reported probabilities are estimated for a respondent who did not perceive differences in the pre-election interview.

¹⁶These models were estimated using OLS.

¹⁷This approach also has the pleasing effect of including as much information as possible, but without too much strain on the model estimation. In other words, consider the alternative—three measures for exposure to Democratic ads; three measures for Republican ad exposure; and six more when I interact exposure with party identification.

¹⁸I re-examined all of the models in this paper using total exposure, instead of negative/contrast exposure. These reported effects are the only differences of note.

¹⁹Republicans and Democrats are both weak and strong partisans. Independents are both pure and leaning.

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Table 1: Exposure Effects on Party Difference and Preference for Divided Government, 2000 and 2004

Exposure	Pty Differences, 2000 <i>post-election</i>	Pty Differences, 2004 <i>panel</i>	Divided Gov't, 2000 <i>pre-election</i>
Candidate Ads	.162**	n.s	n.s
Party Ads	n.s.	n.s	n.s
IG Ads	-.113*	n.s	n.s
Cand. Ads/partisans	.184*	n.s.	-.117+
Party Ads/partisan	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
IG Ads/partisans	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Cand. Ads/independent	n.s	n.s	n.s
Party Ads/independent	n.s	n.s	n.s
IG Ads/independent	-.139+	-.269+	n.s

†All tests are two-tailed; n.s. indicates non-significant; **p<.01; *p<.05; +p<.10

†Measures are logged totals of Republican and Democratic exposure

†Partisan and Independent effects are from a specification with all three exposure measures and exposure interacted with self-identified independent. Coefficients and significance assessments for independents are the combined coefficient (partisan plus independent).

Table 2: Exposure Effects for General Party Thermometer and Likes and Dislikes, 2000 NES Pre-Election Interview

Exposure	Pty Thermometer	Pty Likes	Party Dislikes
Candidate Ads	n.s.	n.s	n.s
Party Ads	n.s	n.s	n.s
IG Ads	n.s.	n.s	n.s
Cand. Ads/partisans	n.s.	-.072+	n.s.
Party Ads/partisan	n.s.	.080*	n.s.
IG Ads/partisans	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Cand. Ads/independent	.934+	.113*	n.s
Party Ads/independent	n.s	n.s.	n.s
IG Ads/independent	n.s	n.s	n.s

†All tests are two-tailed; n.s. indicates non-significant; **p<.01; *p<.05; +p<.10

†Measures are logged totals of Republican and Democratic exposure

†Partisan and Independent effects are from a specification with all three exposure measures and exposure interacted with self-identified independent. Coefficients and significance assessments for independents are the combined coefficient (partisan plus independent).

Table 3: Exposure Effects for Party-Specific Feeling Thermometer and Likes and Dislikes, 2000 NES Pre-Election Interview

Exposure	Democratic Thermometer	Republican Thermometer
Democratic Candidate Adv.	n.s.	n.s
Dem. Party Adv.	n.s.	n.s
Dem. IG Adv.	n.s.	n.s
	Democratic Likes	Republican Likes
Dem. Candidate Adv.	n.s.	n.s. (-.010+)
Dem. Party Adv.	n.s.	n.s.
Dem. IG Adv.	.076*	n.s.
	Democratic Dislikes	Republican Dislikes
Dem. Candidate Adv.	n.s. (-.009)*	n.s. (-.011*)
Dem. Party Adv.	n.s	n.s (.032+)
Dem. IG Adv.	n.s	n.s

†All tests are two-tailed; n.s. indicates non-significant; **p<.01; *p<.05; +p<.10

†Parenthetical entries are effects for total ad exposure, instead of just negative and contrast exposure.

†Exposure is measured as the unlogged difference in Republican and Democratic exposure of the type specified, scaled to units of 100 ads.

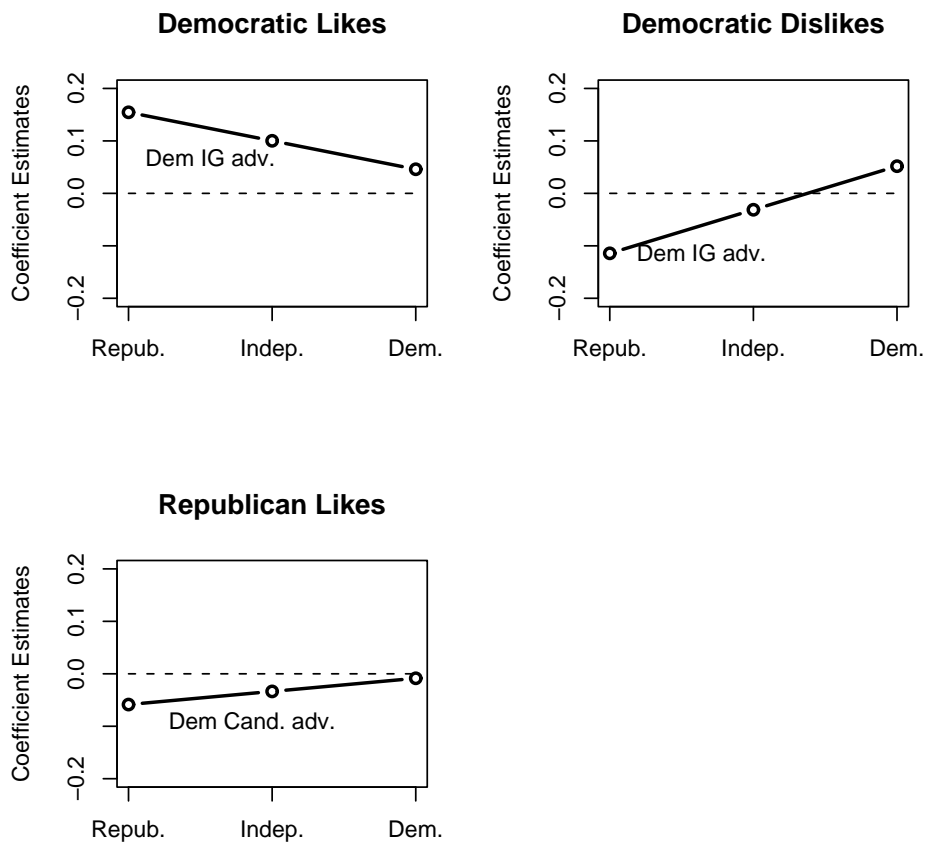
Table 4: Summary Table for Heterogeneity Exposure Effects, 2000 NES Pre-Election Interview

	Significance
Democratic Thermometer	n.s.
Republican Thermometer	n.s.
Democratic Likes	see Figure 1
Democratic Dislikes	see Figure 1
Republican Likes	see Figure 1
Republican Dislikes	n.s.

†Row entries are dependent variables from separate models, where all three advantage measures were included along with those measures interacted with a three category partisan identifier (Republican, Independent, and Democrat)

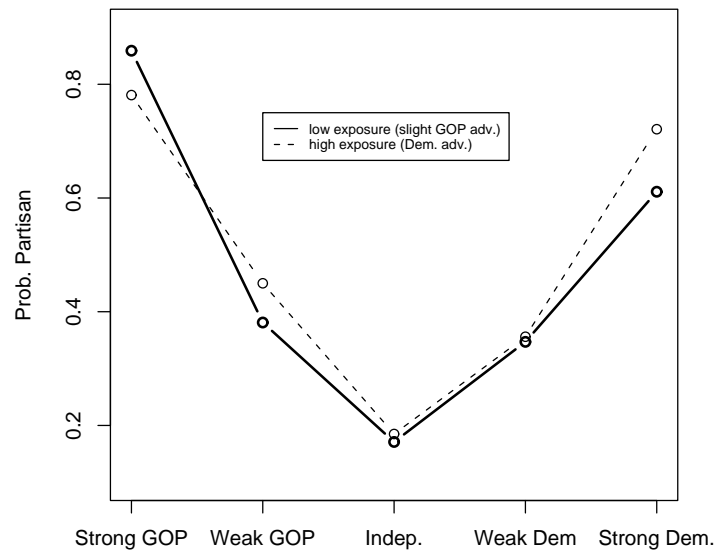
†n.s. indicates that no exposure effects were found.

Figure 1: Selected Heterogeneity Exposure Effects for Republicans, Independents, and Democrats



†Coefficient estimates for excluded advantage measures were non-significant.

Figure 2: Candidate Ad Exposure Effects on Party Identification, 2004 BYU



†Party and Interest Group exposure measures were insignificant; model was estimated by including pre-election party identity as an independent variable.

6 Appendix

Table 5: Summary Statistics

Exposure	N	Mean	Range	Standard Deviation
Candidate Ads (2000)	1236	4.12	(0, 8.75)	2.43
Party Ads (2000)	1236	3.55	(0, 8.10)	2.80
IG Ads (2000)	1236	2.73	(0, 7.12)	2.22
Candidate Ads (2004)	987	4.97	(0, 8.3)	2.68
Party Ads (2004)	987	4.63	(0, 8.4)	2.87
IG Ads (2004)	987	3.27	(0, 7.6)	2.63
Democratic Cand. Adv. (2000)	1236	-8.68	(-955.8, 1531.3)	239.60
Dem. Party Adv. (2000)	1236	37.76	(-661.8, 1435.8)	170.10
Dem. IG Adv. (2000)	1236	31.40	(-261.5, 1072)	118.54
Democratic Cand. Adv. (2004)	987	58.29	(-776.8, 1067.9)	213.42
Dem. Party Adv. (2004)	987	193.24	(-560.9, 1983.4)	290.05
Dem. IG Adv. (2004)	987	79.25	(-216.0, 1861.2)	187.44

†Measures for 2004 are for exposure only between the pre and post-election interviews.

†Measures for 2000 are for exposure up the respondent's pre-election interview.

Table 6: Full Model Results for 2000 and 2004 Party Difference Models from Table 1

<i>Variable</i>	2000	2004
Wave 2 Party Difference		2.236(0.303) **
Exposure Party Ads	-0.003(0.046)	0.011(0.095)
Exposure Candidate Ads	0.162(0.061) **	0.038(0.107)
Exposure IG ads	-0.113(0.057)*	0.020(0.081)
Age	-0.008(0.005)	-0.009(0.010)
Education	0.115(0.054)*	0.219(0.082) **
Union	0.336(0.225)	-0.001(0.346)
Married	-0.013(0.154)	0.456(0.270)+
African-American	-0.008(0.245)	-0.914(0.441)*
Female	0.197(0.152)	-0.505(0.285)+
Local News Viewing	-0.073(0.039)+	-0.039(0.031)
Party ID Strength	1.171(0.217) **	0.354(0.171)*
Generalized Political Info	0.294(0.054) **	0.069(0.119)
Competitive Senate race	-0.130(0.165)	-0.114(0.261)
Competitive Pres. Market	0.234(0.179)	-0.484(0.387)
Competitive House race	0.620(0.281)*	
Newspaper reading	-0.052(0.027)+	-0.023(0.051)
Contacted by Campaign	0.609(0.161) **	-0.033(0.356)
Income	0.006(0.003)*	
Constant	-1.345(0.349)	-0.577(0.737)
N	1205	972

†**p<.01; *p<.05; +p<.10—All tests are two-tailed, and robust SEs are in parentheses. Dependent Variable is whether or not a respondent reports seeing important differences between the parties. †Household income was not asked in the 2004 BYU/UW survey, and residence in a competitive House district was not assessed. All models using 2000 NES were run without both variables, and there were no substantive changes to any exposure coefficients.