Political Advertising and the Electoral College

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Spending on Political Advertising

Sources: PQ Media; USA Today, S&P Capital IQ.
Political Advertising

• Increasing $$$ directed to political advertising
  – By candidates, national parties, interest groups

• Evidence that TV advertising in elections matters (Huber & Arceneaux, 2007; Gerber et al., 2011; Gordon & Hartmann 2012)
How Much Does Political Advertising Matter?

Data: advertising by candidate-market and county-level voting in 2000 and 2004 presidential elections

What would happen without advertising?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Electoral Votes</th>
<th>Which States Switch?</th>
<th>Spending</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>Zero Ads</td>
<td>States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>+OR(7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gore</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>+FL(25) +NH(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>+WI(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Political Advertising and Electoral Design

- Advertising can shift election outcomes

- Can changing the electoral system reduce the “sensitivity” of the election outcome to advertising?
  - How does the electoral college influence candidates’ advertising incentives?
  - What would happen under an alternative system?
Electoral College is a winner-take-all contest in each state.

Incentives under the winner-take-all rule:

- Candidates focus intensely on battleground states \(ightarrow\) one-third of the population receives 90\% of all advertising

- Minimizes role of voters in non-battleground states \(\rightarrow\) pivotal nature of battlegrounds leads them to have higher turnout (Gerber et al., 2009)
2000 Presidential Advertising: Republican

Sources: Campaign Media Analysis Group, Authors’ calculations.
2000 Presidential Advertising: Democrat

Sources: Campaign Media Analysis Group, Authors’ calculations.
An Alternative: Direct Popular Election

- All states are “in play”, no battlegrounds

- Popular support exists
  - 72% of Americans favor it (Washington Post/Kaiser Foundation/Harvard, 2007)
  - National Popular Vote bill adopted in 9 states (132 electoral votes)

- Would a direct national vote result in a more even distribution of advertising?

- Would overall spending increase? Voter turnout?
Observed Advertising under the Electoral College
Predicted Advertising under a Direct Popular Vote
### Comparing Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2000 Election</th>
<th>Electoral College</th>
<th>Direct Popular Election</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population Exposed to Ads</td>
<td>122M</td>
<td>162M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Spending</td>
<td>$117M</td>
<td>$188M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending per Capita</td>
<td>Battlegrounds (Std. Dev.) $0.76 (0.34)</td>
<td>$0.61 (0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Battlegrounds (Std. Dev.) $0.12 (0.26)</td>
<td>$0.57 (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting</td>
<td>Popular Margin 0.54% for Gore</td>
<td>1.34% for Gore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voter Turnout 62.6%</td>
<td>64.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

- Political advertising can shift election outcomes

- Move to direct popular vote would:
  - Bring all the states into play
  - Increase voter turnout by 2.4 million
  - But likely would increase the importance of fundraising because larger sums needed to reach newly relevant population of voters
“There’s going to be a lot of money spent. I’m not saying that’s the best thing for America, but it’s not a bad thing for the CBS Corporation.”

-Les Moonves, CEO of CBS