

# Attack ads in us presidential elections



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Discuss to what extent attack ads are effective within presidential election campaigns in the U. S, with a focus on the 2012 election

### **In the 2012 U. S. Presidential Election**

Attack ads were a major part of the 2012 presidential election campaign in the U. S. In fact, the Washington Post reports that of the \$404 million that was spent on TV ads in favour of Barack Obama, 85% (\$343. 4 million) was spent on negative ads, while of the \$492 million spent on TV ads in favour of Mitt Romney, 91% (\$447. 72 million) was spent on negative ads (Andrews, Keating, & Yourish, 2012). The attack ad strategies of both candidates were very similar. In fact, the top ten U. S. states in which the candidates spent campaign funds on negative TV ads were exactly the same, with Florida, Virginia, and Ohio being the top three respectively (Andrews, Keating, & Yourish, 2012). Given that the vast majority of money spent on TV ads was spent on negative ads, it is reasonable to believe that there must be some efficacy to such ads. In this project, scholarly research on the effectiveness of attack ads in the 2012 U. S. presidential campaign is reviewed in order to answer the question when and in what circumstances were the attack ads effective during this election?

### **Interests Group Involvement and Attack Ads**

Recent trends in media and campaign ad funding may contribute to the high number of attack ads in the 2012 U. S. presidential campaign, as well as the campaign's high ratio of negative-to-positive ads. While the percentage of negative ads coming directly from the campaigns of the candidates increased significantly from 2008 to 2012, the majority of the increase in negative ads is attributable to the rise in campaign ads that were not funded

by the candidates' campaigns (Fowler, 2012). In fact, 60% of presidential campaign ads in 2012 were funded by groups other than presidential campaign groups (Fowler, 2012). This is a huge increase from 2008 in which 97% of ads were funded by presidential candidate campaigns (Fowler, 2012). The number of ads from interest groups increased by 1, 100% from 2008 to 2012, while the number of TV ads from political parties increased from zero in 2008 to almost 10, 000 in 2012 (Fowler, 2012). Moreover, in 2008, ads from presidential candidates were only 9% negative, while those from interest groups were 25% negative (Fowler, 2012). These numbers quickly changed by 2012, in which 53% of ads from the presidential candidates themselves were negative and 86% from interest groups were negative (Fowler, 2012). The increase in the involvement of special interest groups in advertisement campaigns only partially explains the increase in attack ads in 2012. The change in media and the rise of social media may be able to explain partially both the increase in special interest group participation and the increase in attack ads.

### **Polarized Parties and Polarized Media**

Several recent changes in news media may have affected not only the number of political attack ads, but also the efficacy of such ads. One major change in news media is that it now covers political ad campaigns much more than in the past. In fact, from 1960 to 2008, the percentage of political news articles and segments that covered political ads rose by over 500% (Geer, 2012). On one hand, the increased coverage of political ads may be because of the increase in attack ads. After all, attack ads tend to be more controversial and 'news-worthy' than positive ads. On the other hand,

however, the increase in attack ads may be, in part, the result of an increase in media coverage of negative ads. Geer (2012) argues that “ news media now cover negative ads so extensively that they have given candidates and their consultants extra incentive to produce and air them” (p. 423). There may or may not be a mutualistic relationship between attack ads and media coverage of political ads. Nevertheless, the clear increase in both may help to increase the efficacy of attack ads, given that such ads may receive more media coverage.

If it is the case that the media’s willingness to cover negative political ads more than positive ads does, in fact, encourage more attack ads, there is not a necessary increase in the efficacy of such ads. Geer (2012) holds that the increase in media coverage on attack ads does not mean that such coverage is in any way influential to voters; that is, it is not typically the goal of news organizations to influence voters. Thus, while an attack ad may receive more public attention because of the media, the increase in attention may not be necessarily favourable or unfavourable to any candidate.

Another recent change in news media is its partisanship. Now, many U. S. news outlets are partisan or are considered to be partisan by viewers. For example, just as Fox News is considered to be a conservative news organization that promotes Republican politicians over Democratic politicians, MSNBC is considered to be a liberal news organization (Jacobson, 2013). The polarization of the media may actually be the result of the polarization of the current two-party federal political system in the U. S. (Sides & Vavreck, 2014). In the last decade, the democratic and republican political parties in the U. S. have moved further away ideologically, resulting

in substantial gridlock in Congress (Sides & Vavreck, 2014). Such disagreement and polarization may, on one hand, lead to an increase in attack ads. Attack ads may seem more effective when there is such a large ideological divide between the parties. On the other hand, such political polarization has likely contributed to the polarization of news outlets (Sides & Vavreck, 2014), which, in turn, further encourages attack ads. Even with the increase in polarized parties and media outlets, attack ads may not be an effective means to sway voters towards or away from particular candidates.

### **Attack Ad Rationale and Efficacy**

A meta-analysis of research studies on the effects of political attack ads reveals that attack ads tends to be more memorable and stimulate more knowledge about political campaigns than positive campaign ads (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007). Despite these effects, campaign attack ads were not found to be effective at convincing individuals to either change their votes or to vote in an election (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007). Moreover, the results of the meta-analysis revealed that attack ads have significant negative effects on individual perceptions of the political system, trust in government, and public mood (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007).

A more recent meta-analysis conducted by Fridkin and Kenney (2011) found that in some cases campaign attack ads can be effective at lower voter evaluations of targeted candidates. However, Fridkin and Kenney (2011) also found that in certain circumstances, attack ads lower voter evaluations of the attacking candidates. For an attack ad to be effective, the researchers found that the attack ad must bring up a relevant issue that is reinforced with fact or must present the opposing candidate as being uncivil in some

significant way. Otherwise, the attack ad may have no effect or even a negative effect on voters. Additionally, Fridkin and Kenney (2011) found that effects from attack ads on voter evaluations of candidates tend to be very small.

### **Social Media and Attack Ads**

The rise of social media has dramatically changed the political advertising landscape. The 2012 presidential campaign features another strong social media showing by President Obama, who outspent every other candidate in social media advertising in his successful 2008 presidential run (West, 2013). Social media allowed Obama to reach key demographics much more effectively than general television commercials allowed (West, 2013). Social media allows candidates to contrast a higher number of messages and aim specific messages at target audiences effectively (West, 2013). This is extremely important during a time in which there are so many issues of disagreement between the two major U. S. political parties and in which transparency is highly valued (West, 2013). Social media outlets serve as a significant platform for all political ads and their content, altering the ways in which we tend to think about politics and the media.

Another important aspect of social media and attack ads is that social media acts as a platform for social discussions on attack ads. Just as the news media tends to cover attack ads more than positive political ads, members of social media sites tend to openly discuss attack ads more than positive political ads (Hong & Nadler, 2012). Thus, the rise of social media may have further encouraged the use of attack ads during the 2012 U. S. presidential election. Even so, as with news media, there is no significant evidence that

the increase in news media coverage generated from attack ads alters voter behaviour or attitudes (Hong & Nadler, 2012). As a result, the effectiveness of attack ads cannot be confirmed.

### **A Deeper Look into the 2012 Election and its Attack Ads**

The 2012 presidential election featured Mitt Romney, who spent significantly more on attack ads than Barack Obama (Andrews, Keating, & Yourish, 2012). Moreover, a greater ratio of Romney's television ads were attack ads (Andrews, Keating, & Yourish, 2012). Nevertheless, Obama was the victor in the election, as well as the popular vote. The results of the 2012 presidential election, however, do not suggest that attack ads are ineffective. Incumbent candidates are more likely to win elections, including presidential elections, in the U. S. than non-incumbents (Sides & Vavreck, 2014). Thus, the efficacy of the attack ads used by either candidate cannot be determined based on the outcome of the election alone.

Of the six most memorable attack ads of the 2012 U. S. presidential election, West (2013) argues, five were attack ads. The first is an attack ad from Obama about Romney's Swiss Bank account. This attack ad may have been effective with moderate voters because it singled Romney out as having a major interest in big business, as opposed to improving the middle-class (West, 2013). Additionally, the ad had high relevance to a real issue, which meets the Fridkin and Kenney (2011) criteria for an ad that may be effective at reducing favourability with a particular candidate. The second ad is from Romney and targeted Obama's failure to bring unemployment levels to acceptable levels (West, 2013). This ad targeted a real issue, while providing a positive aspect, which is that Romney has the business experience to

create jobs as President. The third attack ad is also from Romney and claimed that Obama's recent tax plan would raise taxes on the middle class (2013). This can be viewed as a direct rebuttal to Obama's attack ad and consequently addresses a real and relevant topic.

The fourth memorable attack ad in this campaign is the attack from the American Crossroads, which is a Super Political Action Committee (PAC). The attack targets Obama's celebrity status (West, 2013). This attack fails to address any real issue and, thus, should not be viewed under the Fridkin and Kenney (2011) criteria as being able to influence voter favourability toward Obama. Finally, the Priorities USA Super PAC targeted Romney's capitalization on Bain Capital, again indicating that Romney does not have the interests of the middle-class in mind, but instead has the interests of the upper-class in mind. This attack ad addresses a highly relevant issue.

For the most part, the attack ads of the 2012 U. S. Presidential Election were likely to be somewhat effective in decreasing voter favourability. While there is no strong evidence that attack ads actually sway voter decisions or voter turnout (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007), there is evidence that voter favourability of a candidate can be decreased through political attack ads when such ads address a relevant issue (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011). Moreover, attack ads tend to generate considerably more media attention than positive political ads. While this may seem, *prima facie*, to benefit candidates who put out attack ads, there is no evidence that such media coverage influences voter behaviour. Thus, the logic behind one of the primary reasons for attack ads may be flawed. Nevertheless, the 2012 U. S. Presidential Election featured a number of attack ads, many of which were on-topic and relevant, <https://assignbuster.com/attack-ads-in-us-presidential-elections/>



others were off-topic and irrelevant. The actual effectiveness of these attack ads is not currently known, though they likely, at the very least, increased media coverage for the targeted candidates.

## References

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