

POLITICAL ADVERTISING AND ELECTION RESULTS*

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We study the persuasive effects of political advertising. Our empirical strategy exploits FCC regulations that result in plausibly exogenous variation in the number of impressions across the borders of neighboring counties. Applying this approach to detailed data on television advertisement broadcasts and viewership patterns during the 2004–12 presidential campaigns, our results indicate that total political advertising has almost no impact on aggregate turnout. By contrast, we find a positive and economically meaningful effect of advertising on candidates' vote shares. Taken at face value, our estimates imply that a one standard deviation increase in the partisan difference in advertising raises the partisan difference in vote shares by about 0.5 percentage points. Evidence from a regression discontinuity design suggests that advertising affects election results by altering the partisan composition of the electorate. *JEL* Codes: D72, M37, P16.

I. INTRODUCTION

The advent of television has had a profound impact on how politicians communicate with their constituents. While Harry S. Truman traveled over 30,000 miles and shook over half a million hands during the 1948 presidential campaign, only four years later, Dwight D. Eisenhower leveraged the power of TV advertisements to reach a far greater audience at substantially lower cost. Today, political advertising is the primary method by which candidates reach out to voters in the United States. Leading up

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to the presidential election in 2012, candidates and their supporters aired more than 1.1 million TV ads ([Washington Post 2012](#); [Wesleyan Media Project 2012](#)). Even during the preceding off-year congressional election, TV advertising accounted for between 40% and 50% of campaigns' budgets ([Ridout et al. 2012](#)).

Social scientists have long been interested in the consequences of political mass communication. Fearing that voters may be easily manipulated by self-interested agents, some equate persuasion with propaganda (e.g., [Lippmann 1922](#); [Herman and Chomsky 1988](#)). Others note that even self-serving messages may further the democratic process by providing citizens with potentially valuable information about candidates and their competitors (see, for example, [Bernays 1928](#); [Downs 1957](#)). Despite the long-standing scholarly interest and the ubiquity of political advertising in modern democracies, our understanding of its effects remains incomplete.

A small well-identified literature documents large electoral effects in consolidating democracies ([Durante and Gutierrez 2014](#); [Larreguy, Marshall, and Snyder 2017](#); [Da Silveira and De Mello 2011](#)). As pointed out by [Larreguy, Marshall, and Snyder \(2017\)](#), however, political advertising in mature democracies is typically thought to have only a negligible impact. Commercials appear to be ineffective at engaging the electorate ([Ashworth and Clinton 2007](#); [Krasno and Green 2008](#)), and their impact on individuals' opinions is extremely short-lived ([Gerber et al. 2011](#)). Taken at face value, these findings contradict campaigns' choices. Why allocate close to half of all available funds to a mode of campaigning that promises only minimal results?

In this article, we reexamine the impact of political advertising on elections in the United States. Our findings are at odds with the conventional wisdom of minimal effects. Although we do confirm previous null results with respect to turnout, we present evidence of a positive and economically meaningful impact of advertising on candidates' vote shares.

To estimate the causal effect of political advertising, we build on work by [Toniatti \(2014\)](#) and [Shapiro \(2018\)](#). Specifically, we exploit Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations that result in plausibly exogenous variation in the number of advertisements across county borders. The FCC grants media companies local broadcast rights for a set of counties called a demographic market area (DMA) or media market. Candidates, in turn, determine television-advertising strategies at the DMA level. By

comparing neighboring counties that are in the same state but assigned to different media markets, our approach relies on thousands of regulation-induced discontinuities in the advertising exposure of constituents.¹

In the political domain, nearly all ads are purchased at the DMA level (Goldstein and Freedman 2002). Yet on average, a set of border counties constitutes only about 5% of markets' combined population. Since ad prices and campaigns' strategies are likely determined by aggregate, market-level factors, one would expect that a particular border county exerts only minimal influence on the decision of how much air time to buy in a given DMA. If correct, then differences in advertising intensity across neighboring counties that are assigned to different DMAs should be as good as random, especially after conditioning on counties' time-invariant features. As a partial test of this assumption, we show that observables explain only a trivial amount of the variation in advertising intensity across neighboring border counties. An F -test fails to reject the null hypothesis that electorates' observable characteristics are jointly uncorrelated with different measures of political advertising, with p -values ranging from .349 to .655.

We apply our identification strategy to uniquely detailed data for the 2004, 2008, and 2012 presidential elections. Instead of imputing viewership from self-reported media consumption or noisy cost estimates, we derive measures of how often each political ad was actually seen by using information on ad broadcasts combined with viewership data provided by the Nielsen Company. To evaluate existing claims about political advertising's impact on voter engagement, we study aggregate turnout as well as vote shares. While naïve estimates suggest that advertising plays an important role in mobilizing the electorate, our within-border-pair results imply that the positive correlation between the number of advertisements and overall turnout is spurious. Our results are robust with respect to an array of different specifications, including alternative measures of advertising intensity and different time windows before the election.

After demonstrating that our empirical approach has the potential to detect spurious relationships in the raw data, we explore the impact of political advertising on actual votes. In stark

1. Our empirical approach is also closely related to previous work by Ansolabehere, Snowberg, and Snyder (2006) and Snyder and Strömberg (2010), who exploit media market definitions to explore the effect of news media coverage on the incumbency advantage and on political accountability, respectively.

contrast to the results with respect to aggregate turnout, we find that advertising has a nontrivial impact on candidates' vote shares. According to our estimates, a one standard deviation increase in the partisan difference in advertising, that is, the average citizen seeing about 22 more ads promoting one candidate rather than the other, increases the partisan difference in vote shares by about half a percentage point.

We study the mechanisms behind this effect in a supplemental analysis relying on official turnout histories for millions of registered U.S. voters. To gauge the contribution of compositional changes of the electorate (i.e., the extensive margin) relative to effects on individuals' preferences and opinions (i.e., the intensive margin), we implement a regression discontinuity (RD) design that compares partisans who live nearby but on opposite sides of media market borders. Our RD evidence suggests that partisan differences in turnout depend on partisan differences in political advertising. The size of the RD estimates implies that compositional changes can explain much of the effect of advertising on vote shares. Although political advertising does not appear to lead to universally higher voter engagement, it alters the partisan composition of voters, which in turn affects election results.

II. RELATED LITERATURE

This article contributes to a large body of work on the consequences of political mass communication (see, e.g., [Zaller 1992](#)). Although the minimal effects thesis of [Klapper \(1960\)](#) dominated the literature until the late 1980s, more recent scholarship often reaches different, contradictory conclusions. For instance, some argue that political advertising enlarges the electorate by informing and engaging citizens (e.g., [Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004](#)). Others contend that the increasing use of negative advertisements hurts the democratic process, as it turns voters away from the polls ([Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995](#); [Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Simon 1999](#)). [Iyengar and Simon \(2000\)](#) and [Geys \(2006\)](#) provide reviews of this literature, "which for the most part lacks compelling strategies for identifying causal effects" ([Della Vigna and Gentzkow 2010](#), 650).

There are a handful of exceptions. The first is a large, randomized controlled trial by [Gerber et al. \(2011\)](#). Eleven months before the 2006 gubernatorial election in Texas, the authors randomly assigned the timing of an ad campaign across 18 media markets.

Relying on a panel of opinion surveys, the evidence indicates a sizable but fleeting impact on constituents' attitudes. Within one to two weeks, the campaign's effect had all but vanished.

Ultimately, our research design and results complement those of [Gerber et al. \(2011\)](#). Although we lack true randomization, we are able to study real-world election outcomes as opposed to self-declared attitudes and opinions. Moreover, we explore the effects of campaign advertising in a competitive environment, where average spending per media market is more than an order of magnitude higher than in the experiment of [Gerber et al. \(2011\)](#). Importantly, the results in this article suggest that much of advertising's impact on vote shares is due to changes in the partisan composition of the electorate. This may explain why campaigns advertise so much—often months before the election—despite short-lived effects on individuals' opinions.

Another exception is a recent field experiment by [Kendall, Nannicini, and Trebbi \(2015\)](#), who collaborated with an Italian mayor to send voters randomized messages. Relative to the control group, voters who received campaign messages about the mayor's valence updated their beliefs and increased their support by about 4.1 percentage points. The effect was smaller when the message was delivered via mass mailings rather than by phone, or when it contained information about the mayor's ideology instead. Like [Kendall, Nannicini, and Trebbi \(2015\)](#), we study actual vote shares. Motivated by the U.S. experience, we focus on TV commercials and their quantity rather than on how voters update beliefs when presented with different information.²

In addition, we contribute to rapidly growing literatures on the political economy of mass media and persuasion (see [DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010](#); [Prat and Strömberg 2013](#) for reviews). [DellaVigna and Kaplan \(2007\)](#) demonstrate that the addition of Fox News to local cable networks increased Republican presidential vote shares by about half a percentage point, implying a persuasion rate of $f = 11.6$.³ In a similar vein,

2. Another strand of the literature uses structural techniques to estimate the impact of political advertising. [Gordon and Hartmann \(2013\)](#) argue that advertising increases aggregate turnout as well as the respective candidate's vote share. [Martin \(2014\)](#) concludes that these effects operate primarily by "persuading" rather than "informing" constituents.

3. The persuasion rate should be interpreted as the percentage of individuals who change their behavior in response to receiving a particular message ([DellaVigna and Kaplan 2007](#)).

Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya (2011) estimate that Russian voters with access to an independent TV station were significantly more likely to vote for opposition parties ($f = 7.7$). In the U.S. context, Gentzkow (2006) shows that the introduction of television itself reduced voter turnout in congressional elections by about two percentage points per decade ($f = 4.4$), while Gentzkow, Shapiro, and Sinkinson (2011) find that historically, availability of at least one newspaper per county increased turnout by one percentage point ($f = 12.8$).⁴

With persuasion rates between 0.01 and 1.1, our estimates of advertising's effectiveness are only a fraction of those in existing work. This is not surprising. Seeing a few dozen 30-second political ads constitutes an arguably less intense treatment than having year-round access to newspapers or an additional TV station. Moreover, from a theoretical perspective the effect of partisan advertising ought to be smaller than that of (slanted) news, at least if journalists are less biased than campaigns (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006; Knight and Chiang 2011). Beyond estimating the effects of political advertising on electoral outcomes, we contribute to this literature by shedding light on the channels through which the persuasive effects of the media operate.

Regarding political advertisements as signals sent by a biased source, the results in this article also speak to the question of whether such messages can persuade receivers, or whether they will necessarily be perceived as cheap talk (see, e.g., Kamenica and Gentzkow 2011; Knight and Chiang 2011). Prat (2002) shows that a ban on campaign advertising may improve welfare, even if voters are perfectly rational. Gentzkow and Kamenica (2017) consider the impact of competition on information provision. They demonstrate that competition between different senders may increase or decrease the amount of information revealed in equilibrium. Our findings indicate that voters do react to biased messages from different senders. Moreover, in Online Appendix C we provide suggestive evidence of approximately constant returns to scale in the number of messages that voters receive.

4. Other important contributions include Groseclose and Milyo (2005) and Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) on measuring media bias, Durante and Knight (2012) on partisan control of the media, Strömberg (2004) on radio's impact on public spending, Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel (2009) on media and Hispanic voter turnout, and Martin and Yurukoglu (2017) on media bias and polarization.

III. MEDIA MARKETS AND POLITICAL ADVERTISING IN THE UNITED STATES

When Dwight D. Eisenhower advertised in the 1952 presidential election, almost all viewers received the broadcast signal through over-the-air antennae.⁵ Whether an advertisement reached a particular household depended on the strength of the station's signal, the local terrain, and the quality of the household's antenna. The increasing popularity of cable television over the next three decades removed these technological barriers and gave viewers access to the content of any station offered by their cable provider. In response to cable companies' increasing market power, Congress and the FCC implemented a series of policies to protect local TV stations. In particular, the 1992 Cable Act included a "must-carry" provision that required cable providers to include local broadcast stations.

To implement the regulation and to determine which local stations corresponded to a particular cable subscriber, the FCC adopted Nielsen's definition of media markets. According to Nielsen's classification system, U.S. counties are uniquely assigned to a DMA based on historical viewing patterns.⁶ DMAs are usually centered around the largest metropolitan area in the region. For example, the Philadelphia DMA includes eight surrounding counties in Pennsylvania, eight counties in New Jersey, and two in Delaware. Any cable provider serving a customer in one of these 18 counties is required to include local Philadelphia broadcast stations in the customer's cable package.

Similar provisions apply to satellite TV providers. If a satellite provider chooses to offer any of an area's local stations, such as an affiliate of the major TV networks, then the Satellite Home Viewer Act of 1998 requires it to carry all of them. By 2010, more than 90% of households subscribed to either cable or satellite TV (Nielsen 2011).

Importantly for our purposes, local broadcast television is the primary method that political candidates use to reach voters. Out of a total of \$2.6 billion in political advertising expenditures leading up to the 2008 general election, approximately \$2 billion was directed at broadcast television, compared to only \$200

5. A mere 70 communities had access to cable TV in 1950 (FCC 2012).

6. Only seven counties are assigned to multiple DMAs. These counties are excluded from the analysis.

million for national cable networks, about \$400 million for radio, and less than \$25 million for digital media (Seelye 2008; Borrell Associates 2013). Even in 2012, when, according to Zac Moffat, digital director of Mitt Romney for President, voter engagement via platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube constituted the biggest change relative to prior years, online advertising accounted for less than 15% of the paid media budget of the presidential campaigns (Scola 2012; O'Connor 2015). TV ads placed through local broadcast networks attract the lion's share of funds because they reach a large number of potential voters in key geographic areas. The coarseness of Nielsen's DMA definitions, however, limits candidates' ability to engage in further location-based targeting. As a consequence, campaigns typically determine their TV advertising strategies at the DMA level (Goldstein and Freedman 2002; Ridout 2007).

Journalistic accounts suggest that political campaigning has undergone an analytics revolution over the last few election cycles. Its most profound impact, however, has been on campaigns' ground operations and digital outreach. Based on the description of one Obama-campaign insider, prior to 2012, TV ad buys were decided by "guys sitting in a back room smoking cigars, saying 'We always buy 60 Minutes'" (Scherer 2012). Only in 2012 did campaigns start to use big data to better target their TV advertisements (Issenberg 2013; Fowler, Franz, and Ridout 2016). Internal estimates of the Obama campaign suggest that these optimization efforts resulted in efficiency gains of about 14% relative to 2008 (Scherer 2012). If correct, then improvements in targeting did yield nontrivial cost savings. Yet relative to the uncertainty inherent in statistical estimates of advertising's effectiveness, an improvement of 14% appears to be rather modest—about the same size as the standard errors on our main result.⁷

7. To understand why improvements in targeting are likely of minor consequence for estimates of advertising's effectiveness, let f denote the persuasion rate and let p be the share of persuadable viewers, that is, the share of viewers who may change their behavior in response to seeing a particular spot. Advertising's impact is given by $\Delta y = fp + 0(1 - p) = fp$. According to Scherer (2012), big data enabled the Obama 2012 campaign to select programs viewed by a greater number of persuadable voters, e.g., "Miami-Dade women under 35." If the campaign reached, on average, 14% more persuadable voters per ad, then, absent simultaneous improvements in f , Δy also increased by 14% relative to 2008—a modest improvement compared to the standard errors below. We are unaware of anecdotal evidence to suggest that campaigns have also become better at producing more persuasive spots.

Nonetheless, targeted campaign activities that are correlated with ad buys on local broadcast TV pose a threat to our identification strategy. In the [Online Appendix](#), we address this potential issue in two complementary ways. First, we disaggregate our results by election year. Because the targeting of advertisements was still in its infancy in 2004 and 2008, we can assess whether our estimates are sensitive to this change in technology. Second, we present results that differentiate between battleground and non-battleground states. This is useful because resource constraints force presidential candidates to focus their efforts on swing states. The fact that our estimates for nonbattleground states, where campaigns have no meaningful ground game, line up with those for competitive states suggests that unobserved, targeted voter-mobilization activities are not a first-order concern.

IV. DATA AND ECONOMETRIC STRATEGY

IV.A. Econometric Approach

As explained already, we exploit the coarseness of Nielsen's DMA classifications to estimate the electoral impact of political advertising. At its core, the empirical strategy in this article builds on a large literature in labor economics, which uses spatial policy discontinuities to estimate the economic effects of state-wide minimum wages (see [Card and Krueger 1994](#); [Dube, Lester, and Reich 2010](#)), right-to-work laws ([Holmes 1998](#)), and school zoning regulations (e.g., [Black 1999](#)). Our approach is also closely related to several papers that rely on media market definitions to explore the importance of mass media for the political economy (see [Campbell, Alford, and Henry 1984](#); [Niemi, Powell, and Bicknell 1986](#); [Ansolabehere, Snowberg, and Snyder 2006](#); [Snyder and Strömberg 2010](#)).⁸ [Shapiro \(2018\)](#) uses essentially the same identification strategy to estimate a structural model of demand spillovers from pharmaceutical advertising.

For an intuitive illustration of our approach, consider [Figure I](#), which displays counties and DMAs in the state of Illinois. Illinois has 102 counties served by 10 media markets. We

8. [Ansolabehere, Snowberg, and Snyder \(2006\)](#), for instance, compare incumbent vote margins in markets where content originates in the same state as voters with margins in markets where content originates out of state. [Snyder and Strömberg \(2010\)](#) use congruency between newspaper markets and congressional districts to study the impact of press coverage on political accountability.

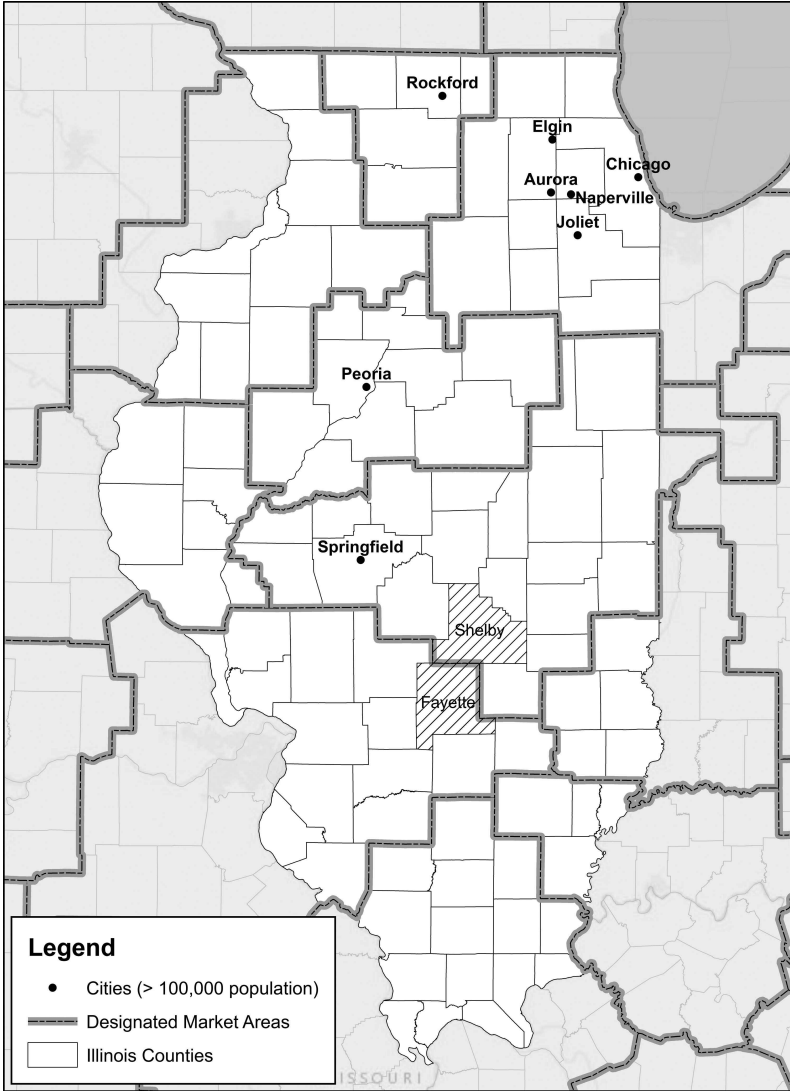


FIGURE I

Counties and Media Markets in Illinois

Figure displays counties, media markets, and cities with a population of more than 100,000.

define a “border county pair” as two neighboring counties that are assigned to different DMAs. To ensure that our results are not contaminated by comparisons across potentially very different state-level electoral environments (say, due to states’ varying competitiveness), we restrict attention to border-county pairs in which both counties belong to the same state.

For example, we examine Fayette and Shelby Counties (highlighted in Figure I). Both are quite rural. As of the 2010 census, Fayette County had roughly 22,100 inhabitants and a median household income of \$41,300. Shelby County had about 22,400 residents with a median household income of \$44,600. Importantly for our purposes, they straddle a media market border. Fayette County is located at the far east of the St. Louis market, whereas Shelby County is part of the Champaign-Springfield-Decatur DMA. Being assigned to the former rather than the latter media market has significant consequences for voters’ exposure to political advertising. Within 60 days leading up to the 2008 election, local broadcast stations in the St. Louis DMA aired thousands of presidential ads, while the Champaign-Springfield-Decatur market registered fewer than 20.

On average, border counties account for only about 5% of DMAs’ combined population. Since almost all political advertising is purchased at the DMA level, one would expect that prices and campaigns’ strategies are determined by aggregate, market-level factors, on which individual border counties have only a small influence. If correct and if every border county has exactly one within-state neighbor, then inferring the causal impact of political advertising on outcome y is conceptually straightforward. Consider, for instance, the econometric model

$$(1) \quad y_{c,t} = \alpha_c + \mu_{p,t} + \phi \text{Ads}_{c,t} + X'_{c,t} \gamma + \varepsilon_{c,t},$$

where $\text{Ads}_{c,t}$ measures the intensity of political advertising in county c during election year t , α_c denotes a county fixed effect, $\mu_{p,t}$ marks a year-specific fixed effect for border-county pair p , and $X_{c,t}$ is a comprehensive vector of time-varying controls. The coefficient of interest is ϕ , which is identified by comparing deviations from the mean in one county to deviations from the respective mean in the neighboring county. Intuitively, identification in our approach comes from thousands of local discontinuities created by FCC

regulations. In total, our data contain 5,924 of these county-level natural experiments.⁹

Complications arise when border counties have multiple neighbors located in other DMAs. For instance, as shown in [Figure I](#), Fayette County forms a within-state border-county pair not only with Shelby but also with Effingham County. As a consequence, the total number of border-county pairs exceeds the number of border counties, which precludes us from directly estimating the border-pair fixed effect. We resolve this issue by stacking observations so that a particular county appears in our sample exactly as many times as it can be paired with a within-state across-DMA neighbor. This allows us to treat $\mu_{p,t}$ as a nuisance parameter (see [Dube, Lester, and Reich 2010](#)). Stacking does not affect the intuition for how ϕ is identified.¹⁰

To allow for arbitrary patterns of serial correlation and for correlation in the residuals of counties that are geographically close, our border-pair regressions cluster standard errors by state and media market border, using the two-way clustering procedure of [Cameron, Gelbach, and Miller \(2011\)](#). Clustering also corrects for the correlation that is introduced by stacking.

IV.B. Data Sources

We apply this estimation strategy to uniquely detailed data on the intensity of political advertising during the 2004, 2008, and 2012 presidential campaigns. Information on the broadcast of political advertisements is available through a cooperation between the Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG) and the Wesleyan Media and Wisconsin Advertising Projects ([Goldstein and Rivlin 2007](#); [Goldstein et al. 2011](#); [Fowler, Franz, and Ridout 2015](#)). According to CMAG, the data form a complete record of all political ads that aired on any of the national TV or cable networks.¹¹ In

9. There are 2,529 natural experiments in our data for 2008 and 2012, but only 866 for 2004. As explained in [Section IV.B](#), this difference arises because the 2004 data cover only the 100 largest media markets.

10. Another possibility that does not involve stacking would be to replace the border-county pair fixed effect with one for the DMA-border segment, i.e., the entire border between two media markets. This, however, comes at the cost of comparing counties that are further apart from each other, and thus likely less similar on unobservables. Nevertheless, both approaches yield qualitatively similar results (see [Spenkuch and Toniatti 2016](#)).

11. Small-sample audits have found that the CMAG data are highly correlated with invoice data from TV stations. For example, in an audit of Philadelphia

2004, the 100 largest media markets, or about 86% of the U.S. population, are covered. For 2008–12, coverage was expanded to all 210 DMAs. The CMAG data include time stamps for each ad, the sponsoring group (i.e., a candidate's campaign, the national party, independent interest groups, such as PACs), the candidate it supported, and more detailed, human-coded information on its content.

Because political advertisements air at all times of the day and during different programs, the total number of ads that are broadcast in a particular market makes for a questionable measure of advertising intensity, that is, the number of ads that people actually saw. To directly gauge constituents' exposure to political advertising, we use detailed viewership information provided by the Nielsen Company. Nielsen is the market leader in television-audience measurement. At the heart of Nielsen's efforts is a proprietary technology that tracks the media consumption of a representative cross section of households. Relying on metering devices installed in about 30,000 households, Nielsen monitors which channel is being watched at any particular point in time on all TVs in the home. In addition, each year the company collects approximately 2 million week-long TV diaries. These data then form the basis of the Nielsen ratings, which are available by gender and age group for each DMA.

We measure advertising intensity in impressions per capita among voting-aged adults. An impression is defined as one viewer being exposed to one commercial. Our metric of advertising intensity thus corresponds to the number of ads seen by the average adult in a particular DMA. Given that CMAG and Nielsen time stamps do not perfectly match, we average the Nielsen-reported number of impressions (among all viewers age 18 and older) over 30-minute intervals, and assign the corresponding value to the particular instance in which an ad aired. To assess aggregate presidential advertising, we focus on a 60-day time window leading up to the election and, for each market, sum impressions over all local broadcasts of all presidential ads, including those sponsored by

stations, [Hagen and Kolodny \(2008\)](#) report that less than 2% of ads were missing from the CMAG sample.

the national parties and other interest groups.¹² In symbols, aggregate presidential advertising in media market d during year t is defined as $Ads_{d,t} \equiv \sum_k \sum_{s=1} S_{k,d,t} \frac{Imps_{s,k}^{18+}}{Pop_{d,t}^{18+}}$, where k indexes candidates and $S_{k,d,t}$ denotes the total number of spots in support of candidate k that aired in that market within 60 days before the election.¹³

We measure partisan advertising in the same way, except that we sum only over ads that support a particular candidate—either through positive messaging related to the candidate or through negative messaging directed at his opponent. Since Nielsen ratings are only available at the DMA level, we assign the same advertising measures to all counties within a given market. If viewing habits in border counties differ from those in the remainder of the media market, then our advertising variable is likely to contain measurement error, which would bias our estimates toward zero. Nevertheless we believe that the Nielsen data constitute the best available source of information on how many potential voters viewed a particular spot.¹⁴

County-level information on the total number of voters, votes for each presidential candidate, write-ins, and so on, come from the *CQ Voting and Elections Collection* ([Congressional Quarterly 2015](#)). To calculate voter turnout, we combine these data with population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau. All individuals age 18 and older are considered potential voters. Although this broad categorization includes some who are ineligible to vote (e.g., felons and noncitizens), it has the advantage of being robust to endogenous voter registration.

12. This includes ads sponsored by PACs and, in the post-*Citizens United* era, by super PACs. Although individual point estimates do, of course, vary, our results are qualitatively and quantitatively robust to excluding these advertisements.

13. According to CMAG, approximately 0.5% (0.1%) of spots in 2008 (2012) aired on cable channels. Since the Nielsen data do not contain information on the viewership of cable channels disaggregated by DMA, we exclude these ads from our calculations. Similarly, our baseline measure of advertising intensity does not account for spots that aired nationally on any of the major networks because the CMAG data contain no information on national ads in 2004. In 2008 (2012), less than 0.2% (0.9%) of ads aired nationally. The robustness checks in [Online Appendix Tables A.9 and A.11](#) demonstrate that including national ads has virtually no effect on the estimated coefficients for the respective elections.

14. We have also experimented with other measures of advertising intensity and different time windows, obtaining qualitatively very similar results (see [Online Appendix Tables A.9 and A.11](#)).

To obtain information on the observable characteristics of counties' residents, we turn to the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. To measure election coverage by the local press, we count the number of election-related articles in the Factiva database, weighted by the respective newspapers' circulation in a particular county. In addition, we use the slant index of [Gentzkow and Shapiro \(2010\)](#) to proxy for newspapers' political leanings. Data on candidate appearances by media market come from [Shaw \(2007\)](#), [Huang and Shaw \(2009\)](#), and FairVote.org. For more detailed information on the data and precise definitions of all variables used throughout the analysis, see [Online Appendix F](#).

IV.C. Descriptive Statistics and Tests of the Identifying Assumption

Combining all different sources, [Table I](#) displays summary statistics for our county-level data set by border-pair status. There is considerable variation in advertising intensity. The average county in our data records 71 impressions per capita. In some areas, however, voting-aged adults see more than 450 spots, whereas other counties have virtually no presidential ads on TV. Variation with respect to turnout and vote shares is also quite large.

[Table I](#) further shows that border counties are not perfectly representative of the United States as a whole. Although turnout is broadly comparable across border and nonborder counties, the former are less populous and have lower median incomes. More important for our purposes is whether, conditional on constituent characteristics, advertising intensity is truly as good as random across media market borders. If so, then the estimates below recover a local treatment effect. That is, we estimate the impact of political advertising on voters who viewed a given number of ads only because they lived on either side of a DMA border.

Unfortunately, our identifying assumption that differences in advertising intensity are uncorrelated with differences in time-varying unobservables is fundamentally untestable. One may be willing to judge its plausibility, however, by asking whether differences in observables predict differences in advertising. A correlation between political advertising and border counties' time-varying observable characteristics would raise concern about a similar correlation with unobservables.

TABLE I
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, POOLING ACROSS 2004–2012

	All countries				Border-pair countries			
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Media Market Measures								
Presidential impressions per capita (in 10s)	7.24	10.76	0.00	46.94	7.49	10.88	0.00	46.94
Partisan difference in imps. per cap. (in 10s)	0.55	2.14	-5.81	9.35	0.57	2.17	-5.81	9.35
Number of political ads (in 1,000s)	3.40	5.68	0.00	32.45	3.45	5.62	0.00	32.45
Nonpresidential political imps. per cap. (in 10s)	17.16	14.73	0.00	66.35	16.92	14.73	0.00	66.35
Candidate Visits	2.01	3.52	0.00	19.00	2.00	3.49	0.00	19.00
County-Level Variables								
Turnout (%)	57.58	9.57	15.49	100.00	57.02	9.55	24.93	100.00
Lagged turnout (%)	57.21	9.65	15.16	100.00	56.67	9.54	24.93	100.00
Democratic two-party vote share (%)	40.65	14.11	3.47	93.98	40.15	13.15	3.47	90.69
Republican two-party vote share (%)	59.35	14.11	6.02	96.53	59.85	13.15	9.31	96.53
Percent white (%)	79.30	19.28	1.32	100.00	79.75	19.04	1.32	100.00
Percent minority (%)	20.70	19.28	0.00	98.68	20.25	19.04	0.00	98.68
Percent high school dropouts (%)	20.17	8.79	2.45	65.46	21.18	8.99	2.45	65.46
Percent high school educated (%)	55.54	6.75	17.81	74.30	56.13	6.48	25.82	74.30
Percent college educated (%)	24.29	9.44	6.45	75.16	22.70	8.68	6.45	65.27
Percent foreign born (%)	4.27	5.39	0.00	51.20	3.80	4.95	0.00	51.20

TABLE I
CONTINUED

	All counties				Border-pair counties			
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Median household income (in \$1,000)	43.54	11.54	18.38	122.84	41.82	10.51	18.38	107.82
Percent in poverty (%)	14.71	6.01	0.00	49.45	15.40	6.04	0.00	49.38
Employment to population ratio (%)	93.45	2.48	72.65	98.88	93.16	2.51	72.65	98.37
Total voting-aged population (in 1,000s)	81	249	0	7,622	56	168	0	3,082
Newspaper slant	0.46	0.04	0.36	0.59	0.46	0.04	0.36	0.59
Newspaper election coverage (in 100s)	1.69	3.28	0.01	29.09	1.62	3.23	0.01	29.09
Number of unique counties								2,012
Number of county-year observations								5,252

Notes. Entries are descriptive statistics for the most important variables in our county-level data set. For precise definitions and the sources of all variables, see [Online Appendix F](#).

Table II provides suggestive evidence that this concern is not warranted. The results therein are based on the estimator in equation (1), using different measures of political advertising as outcomes. For ease of interpretation, all variables have been standardized, so the coefficients refer to the standard deviation change in advertising resulting from a one standard deviation increase in the regressor.

Regardless of which advertising measure we consider, few of the point estimates in Table II are economically large or statistically significant. In fact, for each specification a joint F -test is unable to reject the null hypothesis that all coefficients are exactly equal to zero, with p -values ranging from .349 to .655. Remarkably, observable characteristics explain less than 1% of the within-variation in the respective measure of advertising intensity.¹⁵

For a subset of 31 media markets we have been able to obtain transcripts of televised news shows ahead of the 2008 election. In Online Appendix B, we rely on these transcripts to measure election coverage by local TV stations. Reassuringly, differences in news coverage do not predict differences in political advertising. Moreover, Online Appendix D presents placebo tests asking whether future advertising “affects” current election results. It does not. Of the 81 point estimates in Online Appendix Table A.7, only 4 are statistically significant, most of which have the “wrong” sign.

Our interpretation of these results is that differences in political advertising between border counties are essentially random. We hasten to add, however, that it is impossible to definitively prove the validity of our identifying assumption.

V. POLITICAL ADVERTISING AND ELECTION RESULTS: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

V.A. *Political Advertising and Turnout*

We now explore the effect of total political advertising on voter turnout. Pooling over the 2004–12 presidential elections, Table III presents the results, relying on our sample of stacked border-pair

15. In addition, we have used our border-pair estimator to regress each outcome on each covariate separately. Two out of 50 coefficients are statistically significant at the 5%-confidence level, and the distribution of p -values is statistically indistinguishable from a uniform distribution (see Online Appendix Figure A.5).

TABLE II
POLITICAL ADVERTISING AND BORDER-COUNTY CHARACTERISTICS

Independent variables (in standard deviation units)	Presidential advertising (in standard deviation units)				
	Both candidates	Democratic candidate	Republican candidate	Partisan difference	Nonpresidential political advertising
Total voting-aged population	0.098 (0.107)	0.046 (0.122)	0.153 (0.130)	-0.246 (0.356)	0.210 (0.188)
Percent minority	-0.054 (0.178)	-0.050 (0.189)	-0.055 (0.184)	-0.001 (0.337)	0.047 (0.240)
Percent foreign born	-0.019 (0.080)	-0.009 (0.096)	-0.029 (0.072)	0.045 (0.180)	-0.091 (0.123)
Percent high school dropouts	0.019 (0.058)	0.034 (0.060)	0.001 (0.066)	0.090 (0.140)	-0.104 (0.098)
Percent college educated	0.013 (0.071)	0.012 (0.072)	0.013 (0.072)	0.001 (0.103)	-0.001 (0.092)
Median household income	-0.108 (0.064)	-0.143 (0.073)	-0.065 (0.058)	-0.227 (0.117)	0.031 (0.092)
Percent in poverty	-0.086 (0.044)	-0.074 (0.041)	-0.096 (0.052)	0.033 (0.085)	-0.035 (0.048)
Employment to population ratio	0.010 (0.040)	0.014 (0.041)	0.006 (0.042)	0.023 (0.070)	-0.014 (0.071)

TABLE II
CONTINUED

Independent variables (in standard deviation units)	Presidential Advertising (in standard deviation units)				
	Both candidates	Democratic candidate	Republican candidate	Partisan difference	Nonpresidential political advertising
Newspaper slant	0.008 (0.045)	0.030 (0.054)	-0.018 (0.039)	0.125 (0.094)	-0.146* (0.060)
Newspaper election coverage	-0.082 (0.060)	-0.075 (0.059)	-0.088 (0.060)	0.010 (0.044)	0.026 (0.038)
H ₀ : all coefficients = 0					
F-Statistic	0.908	1.149	0.771	0.844	1.010
p-value	.534	.349	.655	.590	.450
Within-R ²	0.007	0.006	0.008	0.007	0.007
Number of observations	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848

Notes. Entries are coefficients and standard errors when estimating equation (1) with different measures of political advertising as the outcome variable, as explained in the main text. The respective measure of advertising is given at the top of each column. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are two-way clustered by state and media market border and reported in parentheses. All variables have been standardized, so that the coefficients refer to the standard deviation change in the outcome due to a standard deviation change in the respective covariate. For precise definitions and the sources of all variables, see [Online Appendix F](#). ** and * denote statistical significance at the 1% and 5% levels, respectively.

TABLE III
ESTIMATING THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING ON VOTER TURNOUT, 2004–2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Percent voter turnout						
Panel A: All presidential advertising						
Presidential impressions per capita (-10)	0.205** (0.060)	0.127** (0.031)	0.140** (0.038)	0.014 (0.014)	0.013 (0.016)	0.016 (0.010)
Fixed effects:						
County	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Year	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Border-pair × year	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls:						
Baseline controls	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Lagged dependent variable	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Sample	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties
R ²	0.056	0.960	0.962	0.988	0.988	0.960
Number of observations	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848

TABLE III
CONTINUED

	Percent Voter Turnout					
	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Panel B: Positive versus negative presidential advertising						
Positive impressions per capita (± 10)	0.365** (0.105)	0.116* (0.049)	0.100* (0.049)	-0.014 (0.035)	-0.002 (0.034)	0.011 (0.030)
Negative impressions per capita (± 10)	0.146* (0.058)	0.129** (0.034)	0.156** (0.039)	0.020 (0.014)	0.018 (0.017)	0.018 (0.015)
H ₀ : both coefficients = 0	6.744	8.377	8.038	1.135	0.633	1.322
F-Statistic	.003	.001	.001	.330	.536	.277
p-value						
Fixed effects:						
Country	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Year	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Border-pair \times year	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls:						
Baseline controls	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Lagged dependent variable	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Sample	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties
R ²	0.060	0.960	0.962	0.988	0.988	0.960
Number of observations	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848

Notes: Entries are coefficients and standard errors from estimating ϕ in equation (1) by ordinary least squares. The outcome variable in all specifications is voter turnout, as percentage of counties voting-aged population. The upper panel estimates the impact of presidential advertising, and the lower panel distinguishes between positive and negative ads. All estimates are based on our sample of stacked border-pair counties, as explained in the main text. The set of included controls and fixed effects varies across columns. Our set of baseline controls includes all covariates shown in Table II, as well as candidate visits, and total nonpresidential advertising. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are two-way clustered by state and media market border, and reported in parentheses. ** and * denote statistical significance at the 1% and 5% levels, respectively.

counties.¹⁶ The simple OLS estimate in column (1) suggests that an additional 10 impressions per capita raise voter turnout by almost 0.21 percentage points. Put differently, a one standard deviation increase in presidential advertising is associated with an increase in turnout of about 2.2 percentage points. Adding county fixed effects to control for time-invariant unobservables reduces the point estimate by more than a third. Yet it remains statistically significant and sizable. Based on the evidence presented so far, it would appear that political advertising leads to a nontrivial increase in voter engagement.

Column (4) implements our cross-border-pair estimator in [equation \(1\)](#). Remarkably, comparing only neighboring counties reduces the coefficient on total advertising to near zero. The sharp reduction in the point estimate between columns (2) and (4) suggests that campaigns advertise more in areas and years in which citizens are more likely to vote anyway. Since counties that are geographically close tend to experience similar shocks, our border-pair estimator is able to account for this confound, while more naïve approaches cannot.

Column (5) additionally controls for all time-varying covariates shown in [Table II](#), all nonpresidential political advertising, as well as candidate visits as a proxy for campaigns' ground operations. The last column in [Table III](#) controls for the lagged dependent variable in lieu of county fixed effects. This specification may be more appropriate if campaigns directly base their advertising decisions on the outcome of the last election. Moreover, the model in column (6) lets us split the data by year to estimate the impact of political advertising separately for each election (see [Online Appendix D](#)).

The results in the lower panel of [Table III](#) are based on the same specifications as those in the upper one but allow for heterogeneity in the impact of "positive" and "negative" advertising.¹⁷ Although estimates that allow for the effect to vary by tone are less precise, they are almost equally close to zero. All in all, there

16. In [Online Appendix Table A.8](#), we show that estimates for the sample of all counties with available advertising measures are qualitatively and quantitatively very similar to those in columns (1)–(3) of [Table III](#).

17. All evaluations of advertisements' tone are due to human coders of the Wesleyan Media and Wisconsin Advertising Projects. See [Freedman and Goldstein \(1999\)](#) for a detailed description of the coding process.

is little to no evidence to conclude that political advertising has a meaningful impact on aggregate turnout.¹⁸

In the [Online Appendix](#), we probe the robustness of our findings with respect to the weighting scheme, different measures of advertising intensity, and various time windows before the election (see Table A.9). We also investigate how the results vary across years. Broadly summarizing, our robustness checks produce estimates that tend to be close to zero and statistically insignificant. In particular, we obtain almost identical results when we reweight border-pair counties by the inverse number of times that they appear in our stacked data set. Our results are also qualitatively robust to restricting attention to border-pairs that contain less than 5%, or even 2%, of the respective DMAs' combined population. We find this reassuring, as our identifying assumption is most plausible in cases where border counties are highly unlikely to affect campaigns' decisions.

Furthermore, our point estimates remain nearly unaffected when we focus on county pairs that are (almost) entirely contained within the same congressional districts, and we find similar effect sizes in battleground and nonbattleground states. In the former, campaigns' unobserved ground operations may pose a serious threat to our identification strategy. The latter set of states, however, remains typically untreated, as finite resources force campaigns to focus their mobilization efforts. Observing qualitatively similar effects in both sets of states suggests that campaigns' ground operations are likely not a significant confounder.¹⁹

A remaining worry is measurement error in advertising intensity. Although our measure of advertising is likely more precise than any in the literature, we cannot rule out that viewing habits in border counties differ from the respective market average, or that a nontrivial number of border-county households receive their TV signal from the "wrong" DMA. In 2010, for instance, about 9.5% of U.S. households relied on terrestrial antennae for

18. A clear limitation of our approach is that the estimator in [equation \(1\)](#) imposes constant marginal effects. Although we find that this is a reasonable assumption given the range of our data (see [Online Appendix C](#)), we cannot completely rule out potentially nontrivial macro effects of advertising on turnout.

19. Also, if local campaigning increases turnout, and if campaigning is positively correlated with advertising intensity, then our estimates of the impact of political ads on turnout should be upward biased. The fact that the results are close to zero is consistent with the view that local campaigning does not systematically vary across media market borders within the same state.

their TV programming (Nielsen 2011). If a nontrivial number of households watches TV stations from a neighboring DMA, then our advertising measure overstates the true difference in treatment intensity, leading to estimates that are biased toward zero.

Under some assumptions, however, it is possible to gauge the severity of the bias. Suppose that a fraction of q randomly chosen households receive their TV signal from the neighboring DMA. If these households were to exclusively watch programs originating in the “wrong” market, then the actual, unattenuated effect of political advertising would equal

$$(2) \quad \phi^* = \frac{1}{1 - 2q} \hat{\phi},$$

where $\hat{\phi}$ denotes the original estimate.²⁰ To get a sense of reasonable values for q , consider the case in which border-county households have the same propensity to rely on antenna TV as the national average, and further assume that one in two antenna households get their TV signal from the “wrong” DMA. In such a case, $q \approx 0.05$ and $\phi^* \approx 1.1\hat{\phi}$. Even if households in border counties were twice as likely as the national average to watch antenna TV, and if every single antenna household watched only programs that originated in the neighboring DMA, that is, even if $q \approx 0.2$ and $\phi^* \approx 1.67\hat{\phi}$, the true effect of political advertising on voter turnout would still be only a fraction of the variables’ correlation in the raw data. We therefore conclude that political advertising has at best a small impact on aggregate turnout.

This result is well aligned with Ashworth and Clinton (2007) and Krasno and Green (2008), who argue that advertising is ineffective at engaging the electorate. The main difference between our estimates and theirs is that ours are precise enough to rule out moderately large effect sizes. In our preferred specification in column (6) of Table III, the 95% confidence interval ranges from -0.004 to 0.036 percentage points. By contrast, Ashworth and Clinton (2007) estimate that having seen “many”

20. To derive equation (2), let turnout in border counties A and B be denoted by y_A and y_B , respectively, and let measured advertising be given by Ads_A and Ads_B . Abstracting from differences in covariates, the estimated effect of advertising equals $\hat{\phi} = \frac{y_A - y_B}{Ads_A - Ads_B}$. The actual amount of advertising seen by the constituents in A and B , however, is $Ads_A^* = (1 - q)Ads_A + qAds_B$ and $Ads_B^* = (1 - q)Ads_B + qAds_A$. It follows that $\phi^* \equiv \frac{y_A - y_B}{Ads_A^* - Ads_B^*} = \frac{\hat{\phi}}{1 - 2q}$.

campaign advertisements increased survey respondents' intent to vote by 0.7 percentage points, with a 95% confidence interval of $[-15.7, 17.1]$. [Krasno and Green \(2008\)](#) use gross ratings points (GRPs) to measure advertising intensity. Controlling for the lagged dependent variable and state fixed effects in a cross section of 128 DMAs, they find that the average TV viewer seeing 10 additional ads increases turnout by 0.05 percentage points. The 95% confidence interval on their coefficient ranges from -0.06 to 0.16 , which narrowly excludes the naïve OLS estimate.

V.B. Political Advertising and Vote Shares

The foregoing evidence suggests that our empirical approach is capable of distinguishing between true effects and relationships that are spurious. We now use it to study advertising's impact on vote shares.

[Table IV](#) focuses on the impact of partisan differences in advertising on differences in vote shares. We define both variables so that positive values indicate an advantage of the Democratic candidate over his Republican opponent, that is, $\Delta Ads \equiv Ads_D - Ads_R$ and $\Delta v \equiv v_D - v_R$. As in the preceding analysis, column (1) shows a strong, positive raw correlation between dependent and independent variable. The next two sets of columns add county fixed effects and controls for demographics, economic conditions, candidate visits, newspaper reporting, and nonpresidential advertising. This decreases the estimated correlations substantially, but does not render them meaningless.

Columns (4)–(6) implement our border-county pair identification strategy. Comparing only neighboring counties leads to a further reduction in the coefficients. At the same time, the estimated coefficients become much more precise. Taking the point estimates in columns (4)–(6) at face value, a one standard deviation increase in the partisan difference in presidential advertising—the equivalent of potential voters seeing an additional 21 spots for the Democratic candidate rather than the Republican one—increases the Democratic candidate's vote share by about 0.49 to 0.67 percentage points relative to that of his Republican opponent. It therefore appears that political advertising has a nonnegligible impact on election results, especially if one suspects that measurement error in advertising intensity attenuates the coefficients.

In [Online Appendix D](#), we present results from a battery of sensitivity and robustness checks. Although the point estimates

TABLE IV
ESTIMATING THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING ON TWO-PARTY VOTE SHARES, 2004–2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Partisan difference in presidential two-party vote shares						
Difference between Democratic and Republican imps. per cap. (-10)	1.054* (0.397)	0.364 (0.188)	0.391* (0.176)	0.222** (0.049)	0.231** (0.047)	0.304** (0.041)
Fixed effects:						
County	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Year	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Border-pair × year	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls:						
Baseline controls	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Lagged dependent variable	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Sample	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties
R ²	0.007	0.968	0.971	0.996	0.997	0.990
Number of observations	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848

Notes: Entries are coefficients and standard errors from estimating ϕ in equation (1) by ordinary least squares. The outcome variable in all specifications is the partisan difference in two-party presidential vote shares (in percentage points), with larger values indicating more votes for the Democratic candidate. The independent variable of interest is the partisan difference in presidential advertising (in impressions per capita), defined as the difference between advertising in support of the Democratic candidate and that for the Republican competitor. All estimates are based on our sample of stacked border-pair counties, as explained in the main text. Our set of baseline controls includes all covariates shown in Table II, as well as partisan differences in candidate visits and nonpresidential advertising. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are two-way clustered by state and media market border, and reported in parentheses. ** and * denote statistical significance at the 1% and 5% levels, respectively.

for the 2004 election are smaller than those for 2008 or 2012, the baseline estimates for these years are statistically indistinguishable from each other ($p = .210$). This is noteworthy because 2004 and 2008 pre-date the analytics revolution in electioneering, after which narrowly targeted campaign activities may pose a problem for our identification strategy. It is also reassuring that the estimated effect of political advertising on vote shares remains qualitatively the same when we limit the sample to counties whose populations comprise less than 2% of the respective media markets, that is, counties for which we believe our approach to be the most credible. Interestingly, there is no evidence to suggest that advertising was differentially effective in battleground and nonbattleground states, or across states with clear partisan leanings. We do find evidence that political ads exerted greater effects on less educated populations. Splitting our sample into counties above and below the median share of college graduates yields point estimates (standard errors) of 0.231 (0.063) and 0.436 (0.081), which are statistically distinguishable at the 5% confidence level (see [Online Appendix Table A.11](#)).

V.C. Instrumental Variables Estimates

As a further robustness check, [Tables V and VI](#) present results from an instrumental variables strategy in the spirit of [Krasno and Green \(2008\)](#) and [Huber and Arceneaux \(2007\)](#). Given that campaigns tend to focus their resources on states in which the race is likely to be close, these authors observe that some voters are exposed to more political ads than others simply because they happen to live in a DMA that partially overlaps with a battleground state. Going back to the example in [Figure I](#), Illinois voters living in the St. Louis media market saw more political ads than those in the Champaign-Springfield-Decatur DMA at least partly because the former market also serves voters in Missouri, where the 2008 election was highly competitive. We build on this insight and combine it with our border-pair approach.

Comparing neighboring counties within the same state, [Table V](#) demonstrates that the share of a media market's population that is contained in a battleground state is indeed a strong predictor of advertising intensity. Voters in noncompetitive states see more presidential ads on TV when their own DMA overlaps to a greater extent with a battleground state than the neighboring market. Conversely, individuals in competitive states

TABLE V
FIRST-STAGE REGRESSIONS

	Democratic imps. per cap.		Republican imps. per cap.		Total pres. imps. per cap.		Partisan diff. in imps. per cap.					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Share of DMA's population in battleground state	33.016** (9.579)	56.427** (8.141)	56.222** (8.190)	12.137 (9.893)	44.032** (7.309)	43.890** (7.322)	45.153* (17.616)	100.458** (14.862)	100.112** (14.928)	20.878* (8.303)	12.395** (4.306)	12.332** (4.303)
Fixed effects:												
County	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
Border-pair × year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Baseline controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lagged turnout	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Lagged partisan diff. in imps. per cap.	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Sample	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties
R ²	0.967	0.918	0.918	0.971	0.919	0.919	0.973	0.926	0.926	0.858	0.744	0.744
Number of observations	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848

Notes. Entries are coefficients and standard errors for the first stage of the instrumental variables strategy in Section VC. All estimates are based on our sample of stacked border-pair counties, controlling for the full set of covariates. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are two-way clustered by state and media market border, and reported in parentheses. ** and * denote statistical significance at the 1% and 5% levels, respectively.

TABLE VI
INSTRUMENTAL VARIABLES ESTIMATES

	Turnout		Partisan diff. in vote shares	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: Reduced form				
Share of DMA's population in battleground state	0.284 (0.342)	-0.043 (0.272)	1.900 (1.046)	1.181** (0.353)
Fixed effects:				
County	Yes	No	Yes	No
Border-pair \times year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls:				
Baseline	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lagged dependent variable	No	Yes	No	Yes
Sample	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties
R^2	0.967	0.918	0.918	0.971
Number of observations	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Panel B: 2SLS				
Total presidential impressions per capita ($\div 10$)	0.063 (0.063)	-0.004 (0.027)		
Partisan difference in imps. per cap. ($\div 10$)			0.917 (0.514)	0.824* (0.404)
Fixed effects:				
County	Yes	No	Yes	No
Border-pair \times year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls:				
Baseline	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lagged dependent variable	No	Yes	No	Yes
Sample	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties	Border counties
First-stage F -Statistic	6.18	43.39	7.51	11.63
Number of observations	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848

Notes. Entries in Panel A are reduced-form estimates for the instrumental variables strategy in [Section VC](#). Entries in Panel B are two-stage least squares estimates based on the same instrument. All estimates are based on our sample of stacked border-pair counties, controlling for year-specific border-pair fixed effects and the full set of covariates. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are two-way clustered by state and media market border, and reported in parentheses. ** and * denote statistical significance at the 1% and 5% levels, respectively.

see fewer political ads when the share of nonbattleground voters who reside in the same DMA is larger.²¹ Importantly, advertising in support of the Democratic candidate is more responsive to DMAs' "battleground population share" than that supporting the

21. As explained in [Online Appendix F](#), we define battleground states according to the classification by RealClearPolitics.com six to eight weeks prior to the election.

Republican one. Leading up to the 2008 election, Barack Obama and John McCain pursued different strategies (see, e.g., [Franz and Ridout 2010](#)). Not only did the former campaign advertise more than the latter, it also put greater emphasis on highly competitive states, such as Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, and Nevada. As a consequence, our instrument is predictive not just of total presidential advertising but also of partisan differences therein.

[Table VI](#) displays reduced form as well as two-stage least squares estimates of the impact of political advertising on turnout and vote shares. Intuitively, the identifying assumption is that differences in the extent to which neighboring DMAs overlap with battleground states are uncorrelated with time-varying differences in unobserved determinants of individuals' voting decisions. If this exclusion restriction is indeed satisfied, then the IV estimates have a causal interpretation.

Relative to their counterparts in [Tables III](#) and [IV](#), three out of the four 2SLS coefficients are larger in magnitude but also less precisely estimated. With p -values of .081 and .047 the estimated effect on vote shares remains marginally significant. Based on these estimates, we continue to conclude that political advertising has no appreciable effect on overall turnout but skews the outcome of the election in favor of whichever candidate advertises more.

Notwithstanding the imprecision of the IV results, the estimates in [Table VI](#) are useful for at least two reasons: (i) they correct for attenuation bias due to measurement error in advertising intensity, and (ii) they help address an array of potential confounds. [Shapiro \(2018\)](#), for instance, documents cross-media market differences in advertising for antidepressants, and there may well be other, unobserved variables that also vary across DMA borders. For some unobserved factor to bias our IV estimates, it would not only have to affect the election result in the respective county, it would also have to be systematically correlated with the extent to which the remainder of the media market overlaps with battleground states. Given that DMA borders were drawn by Nielsen based on historical viewing patterns, most unobserved determinants of election outcomes seem a priori unlikely to be correlated with whether other counties in the same DMA belong to a competitive state.

V.D. Partisan Effects

Next, we return to our workhorse empirical model and investigate heterogeneity in the effect of Democratic and Republican advertising. [Table VII](#) presents results for vote shares that are defined relative to the entire voting-age population. This frees us from having to adjust for turnout when we calculate persuasion rates in [Section VII](#). More important, using population-based vote shares as dependent variables allows for the theoretical possibility that one candidate's advertising has no effect on the (absolute) support for his opponent.

Although some of the estimates in [Table VII](#) are small and lack statistical significance, as a whole the evidence suggests that own advertising increases support for the respective candidate, while a rival's spots are detrimental to it. Of course, this pattern would emerge automatically had we used regular two-party vote shares as outcomes. With vote shares defined relative to the entire voting-eligible population, however, there is no mechanical reason for the apparent symmetry in the estimates.

One plausible explanation—especially in light of our null result with respect to aggregate turnout—is that the persuasive effects of political advertising operate primarily on the intensive margin. That is, advertising might convince those who would have gone to the polls anyway to vote for one candidate rather than the other. Another possible rationalization is that political advertising works on the extensive margin by affecting who turns out to vote. For instance, advertising by the Democratic candidate might mobilize Democratic supporters or left-leaning moderates while deterring voters who would choose their Republican opponent. In the aggregate such compositional effects might happen to offset each other, which would explain why there appears to be no meaningful impact on overall turnout.

VI. POLITICAL ADVERTISING AND THE PARTISAN COMPOSITION OF THE ELECTORATE

Using only aggregate data there is little hope to credibly distinguish between these two explanations. To shed at least some light on the mechanism behind our main result, we have acquired individual-level voter-registration data for the lower 48 states and the District of Columbia. The Help America Vote Act of 2002 requires that all states maintain a

TABLE VII
PARTISAN IMPACTS

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	Democratic vote share (as percentage of the voting-age population)			Republican vote share (as percentage of the voting-age population)			Partisan difference in vote share (as percentage of the voting-age population)		
Democratic imps. per cap. ($\div 10$)	0.089** (0.019)	0.089** (0.017)	-0.073* (0.031)	-0.073* (0.031)	-0.087** (0.027)		0.162** (0.035)	0.175** (0.028)	
Republican imps. per cap. ($\div 10$)	-0.028 (0.025)	-0.033 (0.024)	-0.035 (0.024)	0.064* (0.031)	0.064* (0.031)		-0.063* (0.029)	-0.098** (0.035)	
Partisan difference in imps. per cap. ($\div 10$)			0.082** (0.019)			-0.084** (0.027)			0.165** (0.029)
H_0 : both coefficients = 0									
F-Statistic	3.407	4.926	-	1.661	2.863	-	3.309	6.152	-
p-value	.009	.000	-	.272	.030	-	.012	.000	-
Fixed effects:									
County	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
Border-pair \times year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls:									
Baseline	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lagged dependent variable	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Sample	Border countries	Border countries	Border countries	Border countries	Border countries	Border countries	Border countries	Border countries	Border countries
R^2	0.995	0.983	0.983	0.992	0.975	0.975	0.996	0.987	0.987
Number of observations	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848	11,848

Notes. Entries are coefficients and standard errors from estimating models akin to equation (1) by ordinary least squares. The respective outcome variable is given at the top of each column, with all vote shares defined with respect to counties' entire voting-age population. All estimates rely on our sample of stacked border-pair counties and control for year-specific border-pair fixed effects. The remaining controls vary across columns. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are two-way clustered by state and media market border, and reported in parentheses. ** and * denote statistical significance at the 1% and 5% levels, respectively.

TABLE VIII
SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR THE VOTER REGISTRATION DATA, 2008 AND 2012
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

	All voters		< 25 km to DMA border		< 5 km to DMA border	
	Mean	Std. dev.	Mean	Std. dev.	Mean	Std. dev.
Demographics						
Female	0.54	0.50	0.54	0.50	0.53	0.50
Age	47.10	17.21	48.16	17.18	48.72	16.83
Years registered at current address	14.26	11.77	14.95	12.24	14.77	12.04
Turnout and political affiliation:						
Voted in 2008 general election	0.74	0.44	0.75	0.43	0.75	0.43
Voted in 2012 general election	0.67	0.47	0.69	0.46	0.70	0.46
Registered Democrat	0.31	0.46	0.31	0.46	0.29	0.46
Registered Republican	0.24	0.43	0.26	0.44	0.27	0.44
“Other” or no party information	0.45	0.50	0.43	0.50	0.44	0.50
GIS measures						
Distance to nearest DMA border (km)	71.36	69.51	14.43	6.91	2.70	1.41
Street address level match	0.85	0.36	0.83	0.38	0.86	0.35
Zip code level match	0.15	0.36	0.17	0.38	0.14	0.35
City level match	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
Number of voters	160,994,973		28,256,683		3,470,665	
Number of observations	251,864,443		45,388,798		5,667,868	

Notes. Entries are descriptive statistics for the most important variables in our voter registration data set, by distance to the nearest media market border within a voter’s state of registration. For precise definitions and the sources of all variables, see [Online Appendix F](#).

single, computerized voter registration list that is regularly updated by removing individuals who are deceased or ineligible, as well as duplicate entries in accordance with the National Voter Registration Act of 1993. The resulting lists include voters’ residential address, date of registration, and turnout history.

For a subset of individuals, we have information on date of birth, gender, and party affiliation. In particular, 39 states’ voter registration files have either a dedicated “party” field, or they contain enough information to determine in which party’s primary (if any) a given individual participated. We identify individuals as a “registered Democrat” or “registered Republican” if the state lists them as such or if they voted in the respective party’s primary. Voters who are not officially affiliated with any of the two

major parties and did not participate in one of their primaries are classified as “other.”²²

VI.A. Empirical Approach

To assess whether political advertising leads to changes in the partisan composition of the electorate, we geocode all addresses and use the information on voters’ precise locations relative to DMA borders in a regression discontinuity (RD) design (Thistlethwaite and Campbell 1960; Lee and Lemieux 2010). That is, we compare turnout among registered Democrats and Republicans who live on opposite sides of media market borders. Specifically, we are interested in whether the partisan difference in turnout varies discontinuously at the border. In Section VI.C, we show that advertising’s impact on the partisan difference in turnout is a key parameter in assessing the importance of the compositional channel.

As above, we define the partisan difference in advertising as the number of impressions per capita in support of the Democratic candidate minus that for his Republican opponent. We then say that a particular voter lives “left” (“right”) of the border if partisan differences in presidential advertising are smaller (larger) in the DMA in which she resides than in the neighboring one.

Interpreting our RD setup through the standard instrumental variables framework (Hahn, Todd, and van der Klaauw 2001), we calculate the impact of partisan differences in political advertising on partisan differences in turnout by forming the Wald estimator:

$$\begin{aligned} & \Delta(t_D - t_R) \\ &= \frac{\lim_{m_i \rightarrow 0^+} (\mathbb{E}[t_i | i = D, m_i] - \mathbb{E}[t_i | i = R, m_i]) - \lim_{m_i \rightarrow 0^-} (\mathbb{E}[t_i | i = D, m_i] - \mathbb{E}[t_i | i = R, m_i])}{\lim_{m_i \rightarrow 0^+} \mathbb{E}[Ads_D - Ads_R | m_i] - \lim_{m_i \rightarrow 0^-} \mathbb{E}[Ads_D - Ads_R | m_i]} \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

Here, t_i is an indicator for whether individual i turned out to vote, and m_i denotes her distance to the nearest media market border, with negative values assigned to voters who live on the “left.” Ads_D and Ads_R are the number of Democratic and Republican impressions per capita, respectively.

22. We also classify as “other” individuals whose recent vote history indicates that they had participated in different parties’ primaries.

While our voter registration data are well suited to estimate the numerator of [equation \(3\)](#), our advertising measure varies only at the DMA level and is therefore likely to overstate the true difference in the advertising exposure of voters in the vicinity of media market borders. This is because individuals who live close to the border may be more likely to use terrestrial antennae to watch TV stations from the “wrong” DMA. If true, then our Wald estimates are biased towards zero.

Even in the absence of this issue, it bears emphasizing that RD methods can only identify local average treatment effects ([Imbens and Angrist 1994](#)). That is, we estimate the impact of political advertising on the set of voters who live close to media market borders. Since identification comes from only a small percentage of the electorate, the results below may not generalize to the U.S. population as a whole.

At the same time, our RD strategy has at least two advantages. First, constituents’ exposure to radio advertising and campaigns’ ground operations is unlikely to exhibit a sharp discontinuity at within-state media market borders and therefore should not bias the RD estimates. Second, identification in our setting actually comes from differences in discontinuities.²³ Thus, unlike traditional RD designs, our estimation strategy allows for other variables to vary discontinuously across media market borders, as long as these variables do not differentially affect turnout among Republicans and Democrats (see [Grembi, Nannicini, and Troiano 2016](#) for a discussion of identification in the DRD design).

In the [Online Appendix](#), we present evidence consistent with the more demanding assumption that there are no discontinuities in other, predetermined variables. Briefly, to check for irregularities in the running variable, we look at population density in the vicinity of DMA borders. Based on the evidence in [Figures A.11 and A.12](#), there is little reason to suspect that individuals in our sample are more likely to settle on one side of the border than on the other. Similarly, we find no evidence of meaningful differences in how long voters on either side of the border have

23. To see this, rearrange the numerator of [equation \(3\)](#) to $(\lim_{m_i \rightarrow 0^+} \mathbb{E}[t_i | i = D, m_i] - \lim_{m_i \rightarrow 0^-} \mathbb{E}[t_i | i = D, m_i]) - (\lim_{m_i \rightarrow 0^+} \mathbb{E}[t_i | i = R, m_i] - \lim_{m_i \rightarrow 0^-} \mathbb{E}[t_i | i = R, m_i])$. The first term denotes the discontinuity in turnout among Democrats, while the second one gives the discontinuity in turnout among Republicans.

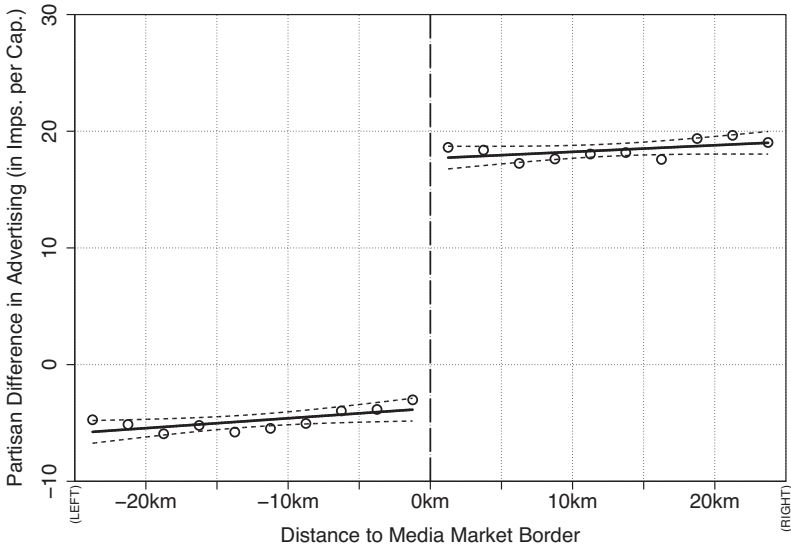


FIGURE II

Average Partisan Difference in Political Advertising in the RD Setup

Figure plots the mean partisan difference in advertising within 2.5 km-wide bins around media market borders. Larger values indicate more advertising in support of the Democratic candidate than for the Republican competitor. The sample consists of all registered Democrats and Republicans for whom our voter registration data contain a valid address as of the respective election. As explained in the main text, we use voters' residential addresses to calculate distance to the nearest within-state media market border, with negative values assigned to individuals who live in a media market in which the partisan differential in presidential advertising is lower than in the neighboring one. For precise definitions and the sources of all variables, see the Online Data Appendix.

been registered at their current address (see Table A.13), which helps to ameliorate concerns about selective attrition.

We also test for discontinuities in voters' age, gender, party affiliation, and turnout in other elections (see Tables A.14–A.17). The point estimates are small, and often of varying sign. In the same vein, Table A.18 shows that partisan differences in non-presidential political advertising do not systematically vary “left” and “right” of the DMA border. In particular, the sign of the estimated discontinuity is an order of magnitude smaller than that in [Figure II](#). [Online Appendix Tables A.19–A.21](#) test for systematic differences in newspaper circulation, local school expenditures,

and property values, none of which appear to exhibit a discontinuity.²⁴

VI.B. RD Estimates

Table VIII presents basic, descriptive statistics for our voter registration data. Given that most states did not create statewide, digital voter registration databases until after 2004, turnout histories for earlier years tend to be incomplete.²⁵ We therefore focus on the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. Another important limitation of our data is that we only observe the current address at which someone is registered. Since we cannot retrospectively ascertain individuals' place of residence, we restrict attention to cases in which a voter's registration pre-dates the respective election. For the average individual in our sample, the straight-line distance between her residence and the nearest media market border is about 71 km. Eighteen percent, however, live within 25 km of a DMA border; and about two percent reside within 5 km.

Pooling over all partisans living within 25 km of a media market border, Figures II and III depict our main RD results. Figure II shows raw averages for the partisan difference in advertising within 2.5 kilometer intervals on either side of the border, that is, the denominator in equation (3). Figure III does so for the numerator, the partisan difference in turnout.

By construction, media market borders feature a large discontinuity in partisan advertising.²⁶ On average, the size of the gap is a bit more than 20 impressions per capita. That is, voting-aged adults to the "right" of the border see about 20 additional ads favoring the Democratic candidate. Partisan differences in turnout

24. Data on these outcomes come from the Alliance for Audited Media, the National Center for Education Statistics, and CoreLogic/DataQuick. See [Online Appendix F](#) for details.

25. In Wisconsin, for instance, voter registration and participation lists were maintained by municipal clerks, and municipalities with populations of 5,000 or less were exempt from such record keeping. Although the state of Wisconsin does not include turnout information prior to 2006 with its official voter registration data, other states do. These lists provide an accurate picture of turnout in earlier election cycles only where locally maintained records were thoroughly integrated into the statewide database. In our data, turnout numbers for 2004 are often substantially lower than what would be expected based on official statistics.

26. The fact that the average number of impressions varies across bins on either side of the border is due to differences in the spatial distribution of voters across DMAs.

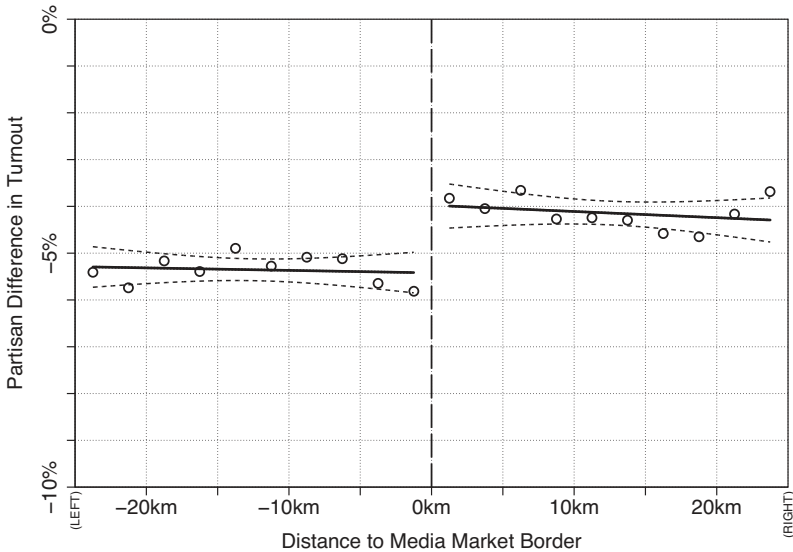


FIGURE III

Partisan Differences in Turnout around Media Market Borders

Figure plots the mean partisan difference in turnout within 2.5 km-wide bins around media market borders. Larger values indicate higher turnout among registered Democrats relative to their Republican counterparts. The sample consists of registered Democrats and Republicans for whom our voter registration data contain a valid address as of the respective election. As explained in the main text, we use voters' residential addresses to calculate distance to the nearest within-state media market border, with negative values assigned to individuals who live in a media market in which the partisan differential in presidential advertising is lower than in the neighboring one. For precise definitions and the sources of all variables, see the Online Data Appendix.

also exhibit a discontinuity. Registered Democrats living just to the “left” of the border are between five and six percentage points less likely to go to the polls than their Republican counterparts, but the gap narrows by almost two percentage points among those living just on the other side. The evidence in Figures II and III, therefore, suggests that partisan differences in political advertising induce changes in the partisan composition of the electorate.

Based on the graphical analysis, one would conclude that an increase in the partisan difference in advertising by 10 impressions per capita raises turnout of registered Democrats by nearly one percentage point relative to their Republican counterparts. Of course, this simple analysis is subject to a number of

limitations. First, there is no a priori reason for why the true functional relationship between the running variable and differences in turnout would need to be linear. Second, [Figures II and III](#) pool over different natural experiments and may be affected by unobserved spatial heterogeneity. In what follows, we probe the results of the graphical analysis by using nonparametric techniques ([Hahn, Todd, and van der Klaauw 2001](#); [Porter 2003](#)).

[Table IX](#) presents the results. The estimates in the upper panel refer to the numerator of the Wald estimator and are based on the following “differences in discontinuities” specification:

$$(4) \quad y_{i,p,s,e} = \alpha_{p,s,e} + \tau \mathbf{1}[p = D] \times \mathbf{1}[m_i > 0] + \delta \mathbf{1}[m_i > 0] \\ + g_p^l(m_i) \times \mathbf{1}[m_i < 0] + g_p^r(m_i) \times \mathbf{1}[m_i > 0] + \xi_{i,p,s,e},$$

where $y_{i,p,s,e}$ is an indicator variable for whether voter i , who is a registered supporter of party $p \in \{D, R\}$ and lives close to border segment s , went to the polls in election e . $g_p^l(\cdot)$ and $g_p^r(\cdot)$ are flexibly specified, party-specific polynomials of distance, which are allowed to differ on either side of the threshold. To control for unobserved spatial heterogeneity, we divide every DMA border into segments of up to 10 km length and include $\alpha_{p,s,e}$, a party- and election-specific fixed effect for each of them. The parameter of interest is τ .

All estimates use a rectangular kernel with the respective bandwidth indicated at the top of each column. Going from left to right, the bandwidth increases from 500 m to 5 km, with the last column relying on 10-fold cross-validation for bandwidth selection ([Ludwig and Miller 2005](#)). Successive rows use higher-order polynomials to approximate $g_p^l(\cdot)$ and $g_p^r(\cdot)$.

Our nonparametric estimates of τ range from 0.9 to 2.3 percentage points, which is roughly in line with the graphical analysis. [Online Appendix Table A.22](#) decomposes the point estimates into changes in turnout among registered Democrats and Republicans. The sign pattern suggests that registered Democrats are more likely to vote—even in absolute terms—the more the Democratic candidate advertises relative to the Republican one. For registered Republicans we tend to observe the opposite effect, though the coefficients are more variable from one specification to the next.

One, admittedly speculative, explanation for why political advertising may also have demobilizing effects is that a sub-

TABLE IX
RD ESTIMATES OF THE EFFECT OF PARTISAN DIFFERENCES IN POLITICAL ADVERTISING ON PARTISAN DIFFERENCES IN TURNOUT, 2008 AND 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Local polynomial	Bandwidth (in meters)			
	500	1,000	5,000	10-fold C-V
Panel A: Partisan difference in turnout across DMA borders				
Linear	0.011 (0.009)	0.015* (0.007)	0.016** (0.003)	0.018** (0.004)
Quadratic	0.014 (0.010)	0.009 (0.009)	0.019** (0.005)	0.019** (0.006)
Cubic	0.023 (0.012)	0.012 (0.010)	0.018** (0.007)	0.018** (0.007)
Quartic	0.017 (0.012)	0.013 (0.011)	0.019** (0.007)	0.020** (0.008)
Number of observations	214,950	461,645	3,198,904	—
Panel B Wald estimator				
Linear	0.005 (0.004)	0.006 (0.003)	0.006** (0.002)	0.007** (0.002)
Quadratic	0.007 (0.005)	0.004 (0.004)	0.008** (0.003)	0.008* (0.003)
Cubic	0.012 (0.006)	0.006 (0.005)	0.008* (0.004)	0.008* (0.003)
Quartic	0.009 (0.006)	0.007 (0.005)	0.009* (0.004)	0.009* (0.004)
Number of Observations	214,950	461,645	3,198,904	—

Notes. Entries in Panel A are estimates of the discontinuity in the partisan difference in turnout across media market borders, that is, τ in equation (4). Larger values indicate an increase in turnout of registered Democrats relative to registered Republicans. Panel B displays Wald estimates of the effect of partisan differences in political advertising on partisan differences in turnout (see equation (3)). All Wald estimates have been scaled so that the coefficients refer to the impact of 10 impressions per capita. As explained in the main text, the running variable is voters' distance to the nearest within-state media market border. All estimates are based on local polynomial regressions using a rectangular kernel. The order of the local polynomial is given on the left of each row, and the respective bandwidth is indicated at the top of each column. The rightmost column uses 10-fold cross-validation for bandwidth selection, with the holdout sample consisting of observations that lie within 3 km of a media market border. Following [Imbens and Lemieux \(2008\)](#), we use the optimally chosen bandwidth for the outcome equation for the Wald estimator. To account for unobserved spatial heterogeneity, every specification includes party-specific fixed effects for individual border segments of up to 10 km length. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are clustered by media market border and reported in parentheses. ** and * denote statistical significance at the 1% and 5% levels, respectively.

stantial share of ads are negative. As in the experiments of [Ansolabehere and Iyengar \(1995\)](#), attack advertising may diminish the psychological benefits of turning out to support a particular candidate. Unfortunately, RD estimates that attempt to disentangle the effects of positive and negative advertising are too imprecise to draw any conclusions. As a whole, however, the reduced-form evidence suggests that partisan differences in presidential advertising alter the partisan composition of the electorate.

The lower panel of [Table IX](#) uses 2SLS squares to implement the Wald estimator.²⁷ To facilitate comparisons with the results in the remainder of the article, we scale the coefficients so they refer to the impact of 10 impressions per capita. The resulting Wald estimates range from 0.4 to 1.2 percentage points. The median coefficient is about 0.8 percentage points.²⁸ Based on this evidence, we conclude that political advertising has a detectable impact on the partisan composition of the electorate.

VI.C. Assessing the Importance of Compositional Changes

How important are these compositional shifts? Under the assumption that registered partisans are more likely to vote for their own party's candidate than for his competitor, we can assess how much of the estimated effect of political advertising on vote shares can be explained by changes in the partisan composition of the electorate alone.

Formally, let candidates' vote shares be given by v_D and v_R , and assume that, conditional on going to the polls, registered partisans vote for the candidate of their own party with probability $\pi > 0.5$. With v_D and v_R defined relative to the entire voting-eligible population, the following accounting identity must always hold:

$$v_D - v_R = [\pi t_D s_D + (1 - \pi) t_R s_R + \omega t_O s_O] \\ - [(1 - \pi) t_D s_D + \pi t_R s_R + (1 - \omega) t_O s_O].$$

Here, t_p denotes turnout among supporters of party p , s_p is their population share, and ω stands for the likelihood that "others"

27. For completeness, [Online Appendix](#) Table A.24 presents the "first stage" estimates, that is, the denominator of the Wald estimator.

28. Replacing the border segment fixed effect in [equation \(4\)](#) with one for every individual and thus exploiting only the time series variation in our data yields Wald estimates between 0.4 and 0.6 percentage points.

will vote for the Democratic candidate. Noting that $s_D \approx s_R$ among voters close to media market borders, we can decompose changes in the partisan difference in vote shares into

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta(v_D - v_R) &\approx (2\pi - 1)s\Delta(t_D - t_R) + (2\omega - 1)(1 - 2s)\Delta t_O \\ &\quad + 2s(t_D - t_R)\Delta\pi + 2(1 - 2s)t_O\Delta\omega \\ (5) \quad &\quad + 2s\Delta(t_D - t_R)\Delta\pi + 2(1 - 2s)\Delta t_O\Delta\omega. \end{aligned}$$

The first term on the right-hand side of [equation \(5\)](#) denotes the contribution of changes in turnout among partisans, and the second one refers to turnout of unaffiliated individuals. The terms in the row beneath constitute the effect of changing preferences (that is, changes in the probability of voting for a particular party, conditional on going to the polls), while the ones in the third row refer to the interaction between shifts in both preferences and turnout.

To assess the importance of the compositional channel, suppose that political advertising has no effect on preferences and beliefs and that it leads to no changes in turnout among unaffiliated voters. [Equation \(5\)](#) then simplifies to

$$(6) \quad \Delta(v_D - v_R) \approx (2\pi - 1)s\Delta(t_D - t_R).$$

Assuming that Democrats and Republicans each represent one-third of the population (i.e., $s = 0.33$), and relying on the range of the Wald estimates for plausible values of $\Delta(t_D - t_R)$, [Figure IV](#) plots the right-hand side of [equation \(6\)](#) as a function of π . For comparison, in [Table VII](#) we estimated that political advertising raises the partisan difference in vote shares by 0.165 percentage points (horizontal line).

Naturally, as the fraction of partisans who vote for the candidate of their own party increases, differences in turnout explain a greater proportion of the difference in vote shares. To get a sense of plausible values for π , we turn to the American National Election Survey (ANES). Among other questions, the 2008–2009 ANES Panel Study elicited respondents' vote choice in the 2008 presidential election as well as their self-declared party affiliation prior to election day. Respondents could identify as “strong Republican/Democrat,” “not very strong Republican/Democrat,” “independent Republican/Democrat,” or as truly “independent.” Almost 86% of those who self-identified as “strong” or “not very strong”

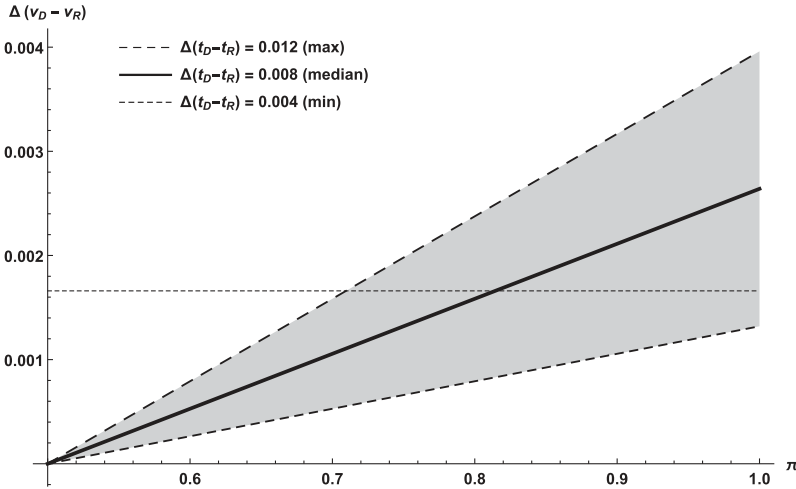


FIGURE IV

Assessing the Importance of Compositional Changes of the Electorate

Figure plots the change in the partisan difference in vote shares due to changes in the partisan composition of the electorate ($\Delta(v_D - v_R)$) as a function of the probability that a registered partisan votes for her party (π). We use the range of the Wald estimates in the lower panel of [Table IX](#) as plausible values for $\Delta(t_D - t_R)$, the impact of partisan differences in advertising on partisan differences in vote shares. The horizontal line indicates the effect size implied by the coefficient in column (9) of [Table VII](#). For details, see the main text.

Democrats later indicated that they voted for Barack Obama. Conversely, about 92% of self-declared Republicans supported John McCain. Although self-reported votes are notoriously unreliable indicators of actual choices, the available evidence suggests that π may exceed 0.8. If correct, then changes in turnout among partisans can explain most, if not all, of the estimated impact of advertising on vote shares.

VI.D. Sensitivity and Robustness Checks

We conducted an extensive set of sensitivity and robustness checks. To conserve space, the corresponding results are presented in [Online Appendix Tables A.25–A.29](#). The evidence in these tables indicates that our RD estimates are robust to controlling for voters' observable characteristics and advertising related to non-presidential races. We also obtain qualitatively and quantitatively similar results when we restrict attention to the set of voters for

whom our geocodes are the most precise, that is, those for whom the geocoding procedure is able to locate a voter's street address, or when we only compare voters on opposite sides of media market borders within the same congressional district.

To assess the impact of measurement error in advertising intensity, we turn to the FCC's Significantly Viewed List (FCC 2005). In 2005, the FCC issued an updated, comprehensive assessment of all media markets in the United States. In particular, it released a list of counties where out-of-market broadcast stations have a nontrivial viewership. In [Online Appendix Table A.29](#), we restrict our sample to voters who live in counties where no out-of-market station appears on the FCC's list. Consistent with the idea that measurement error introduces attenuation bias, the majority of the resulting Wald estimates are larger than their counterparts in [Table IX](#). At the same time, we note that the smaller sample size leads to standard errors that make any quantitative comparisons highly speculative.

VI.E. Total Presidential Advertising and Turnout

So far we have restricted attention to registered partisans, as this has allowed us to assess the importance of the compositional channel. We now provide a partial test of the hypothesis that political advertising also transmits useful information.

Theoretical work that relates the quality of voters' information to turnout typically concludes that in a given election, informed individuals are more likely to vote than are the uninformed (see [Feddersen and Pesendorfer 1996, 1999](#)). The intuition behind this result is that informed voters are less likely to make a mistake by choosing the ex post worse candidate. If information does indeed increase turnout, and if political advertising contains new information, we would expect that independent voters who see more political ads on TV are more likely to turn out than those who see fewer spots.

We test this hypothesis using a slight modification of our RD design. Instead of assigning a particular voter to either side of the DMA border according to the partisan difference in presidential advertising, we do so based on whether total presidential advertising in her DMA exceeds that in the neighboring one. Despite a large discontinuity in total advertising (see [Figure V](#)), the Wald estimates in the upper panel of [Table X](#) suggest that unaffiliated voters who are exposed to more political ads are no more likely to turn out.

TABLE X
TOTAL POLITICAL ADVERTISING AND TURNOUT, 2008 AND 2012 PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTIONS

Local polynomial	Bandwidth (m)			
	500	1,000	5,000	10-fold C-V
Panel A: Wald estimates for unaffiliated voters				
Linear	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Quadratic	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)
Cubic	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Quartic	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)
Number of observations	190,883	383,419	2,468,964	-
Panel B: Wald estimates for all voters				
Linear	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Quadratic	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.002* (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)
Cubic	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)
Quartic	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Number of observations	405,833	845,064	5,667,868	-

Notes. Entries in Panel A are Wald estimates of the impact of total presidential advertising on turnout among voters who are not affiliated with either of the two major parties. Panel B displays Wald estimates of the impact of total presidential advertising on all registered voters. All estimates have been scaled so that the coefficients refer to the impact of 10 impressions per capita. As explained in the text, the running variable is voters' distance to the nearest within-state media market border. All estimates are based on local polynomial regressions using a rectangular kernel. The order of the local polynomial is given on the left of each row, and the respective bandwidth is indicated at the top of each column. The rightmost column uses 10-fold cross-validation for bandwidth selection, with the holdout sample consisting of observations that lie within 3 km of a media market border. Following [Imbens and Lemieux \(2008\)](#), we use the optimally chosen bandwidth for the outcome equation of the Wald estimator. To account for unobserved spatial heterogeneity, every specification includes fixed effects for individual border segments of up to 10 km length. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are clustered by media market border and reported in parentheses. ** and * denote statistical significance at the 1% and 5% levels, respectively.

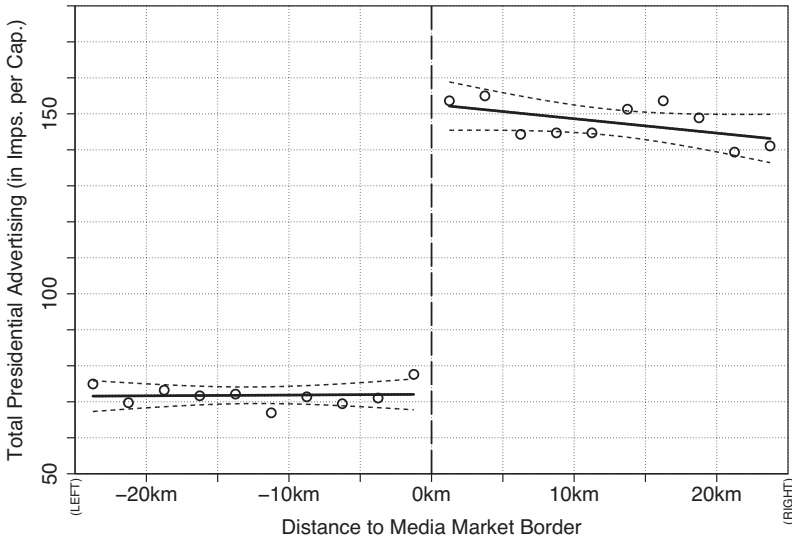


FIGURE V

Differences in Total Presidential Advertising across DMA Borders

Figure plots average total presidential advertising within 2.5 km-wide bins around media market borders. We use voters' residential addresses to calculate distance to the nearest within-state media market border, with negative values assigned to individuals who live in a media market in which total presidential advertising is lower than in the neighboring one. For precise definitions and the sources of all variables, see the Online Data Appendix.

For completeness, [Figure VI](#) and the lower panel of [Table X](#) present results for turnout among all voters. Again, there is no evidence of a positive discontinuity at the DMA border, which implies that our previous finding of a minimal effect of presidential advertising on overall turnout is not an artifact of using aggregate data. Although we find no evidence in favor of the idea that political advertising endows voters with useful information, we readily acknowledge that a better test would consider actual votes.

In sum, our RD results suggest that political advertising induces changes in the partisan composition of the electorate, which offset in the aggregate. To be clear, we do not claim that changes in the partisan composition of the electorate will always exactly cancel out. However, in an environment with two candidates who have roughly the same number of supporters, and if ads have both mobilizing and demobilizing effects, one would expect a

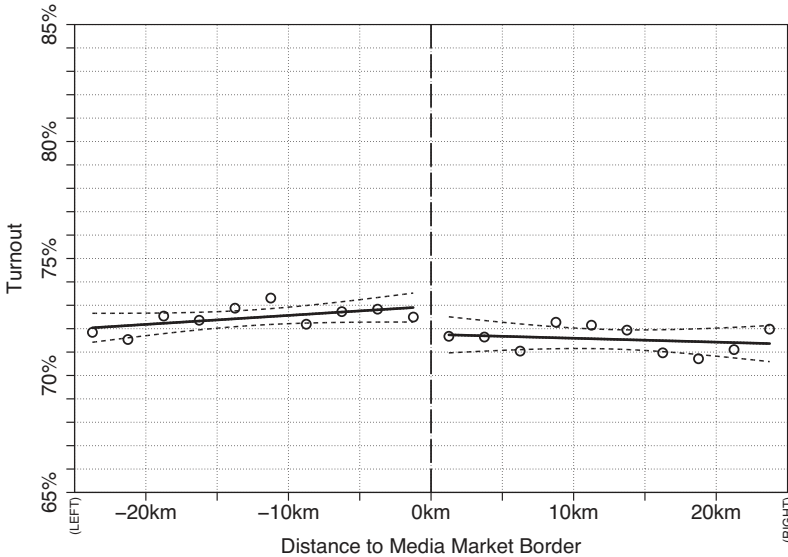


FIGURE VI

Differences in Overall Turnout across DMA Borders

Figure plots average turnout among all voters within 2.5 km-wide bins around media market borders. We use voters' residential addresses to calculate distance to the nearest within-state media market border, with negative values assigned to individuals who live in a media market in which total presidential advertising is lower than in the neighboring one. For precise definitions and the sources of all variables, see the Online Data Appendix.

considerably smaller net impact—especially when both campaigns advertise in similar proportions.

VII. DISCUSSION

To put the estimated effect of political advertising on vote shares into perspective, we follow [DellaVigna and Kaplan \(2007\)](#) and calculate persuasion rates. Intuitively, the persuasion rate measures the percentage of individuals who changed their behavior in response to being exposed to a particular message. Given that different studies use different left- and right-side variables, and in light of the fact that the share of individuals who are susceptible to being persuaded varies from one setting to the next, it is useful to rescale effect sizes in this way to make them more

comparable. Formally, the persuasion rate is defined as

$$(7) \quad f_p = \frac{1}{1 - \tilde{y}_p} \frac{\Delta y_p}{\Delta Ads_p},$$

where $\frac{\Delta y_p}{\Delta Ads_p}$ approximates the change in the outcome of interest induced by seeing additional advertisements in support of candidate p , and $1 - \tilde{y}_p$ is the fraction of individuals who may be swayed by the respective candidate's message.²⁹

We take the outcome of interest to be the partisan difference in vote shares defined as a percentage of the entire voting-age population. Defining y in this way has two advantages. First, it is not necessary to adjust for turnout. Second, we capture advertising's positive effect on own vote shares and any negative impact on the support for political rivals. If the Democratic candidate, for instance, is purely office motivated, then he should be indifferent between one more vote for himself and one less for his Republican competitor. As a consequence, $1 - \tilde{y}_D$, the target audience for his ads, includes everybody who does not already vote for him, that is, everybody who would either abstain or vote for his opponent.

First, we calculate the persuasion rate of one additional spot, given the observed overall level of advertising and candidates' equilibrium vote shares. To proxy for $\frac{\Delta y_p}{\Delta Ads_p}$, we rely on the point estimates in column (8) of [Table VII](#), divided by 10 to account for the fact that the coefficients refer to the impact of 10 impressions per capita. With the respective numbers in hand, the persuasion rate (and its standard error) is $f_D \approx 0.03\%$ (0.004%) for Democratic spots, and that for Republican advertising equals $f_R \approx 0.01\%$ (0.005%).³⁰

Next, we consider the share of potential voters who changed their behavior in response to a candidates' total advertising. To proxy for \tilde{y}_p in the absence of advertising by the respective candidate, we use the results in columns (2) and (5) of [Table VII](#) and predict counterfactual vote shares. $\frac{\Delta y_p}{\Delta Ads_p}$ is again given by the appropriately scaled coefficients in column (8) of the same table. The

29. [Online Appendix E](#) derives [equation \(7\)](#) formally. At the request of a referee, we note that f_p is a local measure of the effectiveness of advertisements. With a finite population the marginal impact of a particular message must eventually decline to zero.

30. To account for clustering at the state level, standard errors are calculated using the block bootstrap.

resulting persuasion rates are $f_D \approx 1.1\%$ (0.18%) and $f_R \approx 0.4\%$ (0.14%).³¹

Regardless of whether we calculate the persuasion rate for a single spot or for all of a candidate's combined advertising, the respective numbers are only a fraction of the persuasion rates reported in the literature (see [DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010](#)). Our findings are, therefore, consistent with the theoretical prediction that as long as journalists are less likely to be biased than campaigns, the effect of partisan advertising ought to be smaller than that of slanted news (e.g., [Knight and Chiang 2011](#)). Assuming constant returns to scale, for political advertising to be similarly persuasive as being exposed to Fox News ($f = 11.6$) or to "alternative facts" during the 2017 French presidential election ($f = 10.8$, see [Barrera et al. 2018](#)), a viewer would need to see about 500 spots. Within two months before the 2012 elections, only one media market registered a similarly high number of impressions per voting-aged adult. In 2004 and 2008 none did.

However, in light of the large number of viewers who see at least some political ads on TV, a more relevant metric might be advertising's aggregate impact. Within 60 days leading up to the 2008 presidential election, the average voting-aged citizen saw about 45 spots in support of Barack Obama and almost 30 ads favoring John McCain. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 206 million citizens were eligible to vote that year ([File and Crissey 2012](#)), which, along with the numbers above, implies that political advertising affected about 2.2 million voting decisions. Naturally, the effects of Democratic and Republican ads will partially offset each other, resulting in a smaller net impact. Still, simply eliminating the partisan difference in advertising by reducing the number of impressions in favor of Obama to the same level as those for McCain would have narrowed the difference in votes by more than half a million. Although this would not have made much of a difference in 2008, in years in which the election is close a similar-sized shift might well decide the overall outcome of the race.

To put the effectiveness of political advertising into perspective, we note that, leading up to the general election, Obama and McCain were estimated to have spent a combined \$366 million on

31. It is important to note that these numbers are based on Nielsen ratings data, which do not correct for viewer inattention during commercial breaks. Persuasion rates adjusted for inattention may well be higher.

TV ads (Seelye 2008), which implies a cost per persuaded voter of about \$170. Experimental evidence from get-out-the-vote studies suggest that direct mail or high-quality commercial phone banks generate an additional vote at a cost of about \$100 to \$200 (see, e.g., Green and Gerber 2015). Phone banks staffed with volunteers or door-to-door canvassing campaigns mobilize supporters at substantially lower cost—about \$30 to \$50 per vote—but are inherently limited in scale. Based on these back-of-the-envelope calculations, political advertising appears to be roughly as effective as other scalable modes of electioneering.

VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article we study the impact of political advertising on electoral outcomes. Our empirical strategy exploits FCC regulations that result in plausibly exogenous variation in the number of impressions across media market borders. Using aggregate county-level data and individual turnout histories for millions of U.S. voters, we find that advertising affects elections by altering the partisan composition of the electorate. Because registered partisans are more likely to vote for their own party's candidate than the competitor, these compositional changes give rise to nontrivial effects on actual election results.

We find no evidence, however, that advertising has an impact on overall turnout. In the aggregate, the mobilizing and demobilizing effects of political ads tend to cancel out. This may help explain why a large number of previous studies have detected only minimal or even no effects. More generally, our findings help explain why modern campaigns advertise so much, despite negligible changes in overall voter engagement and individuals' opinions about candidates. Even if political advertising does not have a lasting impact on preferences or beliefs, the evidence in this article suggests that it increases the respective candidate's vote share by bringing the "right" set of voters to the polls. Given the size of our estimates, partisan imbalances in political advertising have the potential to decide close elections.

The findings have potentially important implications for public policy, especially for campaign finance regulation in the post-*Citizens United* era. Ever since the Supreme Court's landmark decision, so-called super PACs may accept unlimited donations from individuals, corporations, and unions to overtly advocate for or against particular candidates. Because much of super PACs'

spending directly relates to campaign advertising, our results reinforce existing concerns about the ability of deep-pocketed donors to influence democratic outcomes.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

An [Online Appendix](#) for this article can be found at *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* online. Data and code replicating tables and figures in this article can be found in [Spenkuch and Toniatti \(2018\)](#), in the Harvard Dataverse, [doi:10.7910/DVN/KE9TEQ](https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KE9TEQ).

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