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Trump and Harris are spending millions on TV ads. Are they effective? Experts weigh in

BY BRENDAN RASCIUS

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What makes for a good presidential campaign advertisement? Elections experts weigh in. *Photo from Lucrezia Carnelos, UnSplash*

With less than three months until the election, presidential campaigns are now spending money hand over fist to flood the airwaves with television advertisements.

Former President Donald Trump's campaign recently spent over \$37 million — just in one day — on TV ads in seven key states. Meanwhile, Vice President Kamala Harris' campaign launched a \$90 million TV advertising blitz to air over three weeks also in seven battleground states.

By the time Election Day rolls around, the total amount spent on political advertising, with TV spots taking the lion's share, is projected to surpass \$12 billion, according to one estimate.

With all that money at stake, one might think presidential campaign ads are down to a science, with finely-tuned 60-second spots reliably turning viewers into voters.

But, there is no formula for a perfect commercial, as each election is unique, and their overall effect is actually quite small and getting smaller, according to political and communication experts.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD PRESIDENTIAL AD?

"I don't think that there is such a thing as the perfect campaign ad, at least not across time and space," Jacob Neiheisel, a professor of political science at the University at Buffalo, who researches elite communication, told McClatchy News. "What works in one electoral context may not in another."

"Ads speak to the zeitgeist of their era," Susan Ohmer, a professor emeritus at the University of Notre Dame who specializes in media and presidential elections, told McClatchy News.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when TV ads were in their infancy, snappy jingles and animation were the name of the game.

For example, Dwight Eisenhower's 1952 campaign deployed its now-famous "I Like Ike" commercial, and in 1960, John Kennedy's campaign rolled out its "Kennedy for Me" TV spot.

"Each of these two commercials has a memorable, specially written jingle that sticks with you," Ohmer said.

Another unforgettable ad came in 1964, as part of the campaign to elect Lyndon Johnson. The ad, known as "Daisy," juxtaposed footage of a girl counting flower petals with the detonation of a nuclear bomb. At the end, the narrator says, "The stakes are too high for you to stay home."

"Combining an image of innocence with a deep-seated fear that voters may have makes this commercial register," Ohmer said.

As the decades passed, campaign commercials became more sophisticated, moving beyond catchphrases and simple imagery.

Ronald Reagan's 1984 "It's Morning Again in America" ad, for example, rattled off glowing statistics about homeownership, interest rates and inflation.

"That commercial offered reassurance — to some people, at least — that life was as it should be under Reagan," Ohmer said.

"Trump's commercial about 'American Workers' from 2016 shares a similar confident tone but it is about rebuilding rather than keeping things as they are," Ohmer added.

In the present day, while much has changed about the political climate, a few simple ingredients for political ads still endure.

Succinctness and memorability are paramount. So too are the ability to rouse strong feelings — perhaps of reassurance or fear — and to tap into contemporary culture, Ohmer said.

The Harris campaign's debut ad, which features the song "Freedom" by Beyoncé, "certainly engages with current popular culture," Ohmer said.

Another crucial element for winning ads: expert storytelling.

They should answer the question: "What's my story? What's the theme that underlies the entire campaign?" Jeff Gulati, a political science professor at Bentley University, told McClatchy News.

"The story or theme conveyed in these ads should be concise and easy for voters to understand, convey a sense of emotional urgency, establish a clear difference between the candidates, and be credible," Gulati added.

Broadly speaking, negativity — often aimed at political opponents — can also prove a potent tool, though it can risk backlash effects, Neiheisel said.

HOW EFFECTIVE ARE THEY?

Generally speaking, political ads tend to have short-term, minor effects on the outcome of a presidential election, though they can be useful at the margins, experts said.

"In the grand scheme of things, we think that ads are mostly good at persuading people and have small-to-nonexistent effects on things like voter turnout," Neiheisel said.

Part of the reason for this is that political ads — which are targeted towards "persuadables" and "soft supporters" — take about half a dozen viewings for a voter to actually pay attention, Gulati said.

"Reaching a voter six times today in the way we consume television is very difficult," he added.

Further, with polarization levels at historic highs, there are simply fewer persuadable voters out there than in past elections, Gulati said.

But, despite their small impact, candidates are wary of skipping out on ads, Lynn Vavreck, a professor of political science at UCLA, told McClatchy News.

“You also wouldn’t want to cede the advertising game to your opponent, that may produce larger effects than if you were also advertising at the same time,” Vavreck said.

With that being said, TV ads can be particularly effective in some instances, like when introducing a lesser-known candidate to the broader public, Ohmer said.

They can also play bigger roles in close races, like this year’s election is shaping up to be, Vavreck said.