

## Political Advertising Implications on Voters Behavior

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**ABSTRACT:** *Political Advertising is a communication tool where parties and candidates spend most of the budget of the electoral campaigns. In the recent years, political advertising became the primary method by which candidates reach out voters in Albania. And the important question in the present case remains; does political advertising work or not work in countries defined as emerging democracies? The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the potential impact of political advertising on higher voters' turnout and their political choice. To help fulfill this objective will be summarized basic theory of political advertising impact on emerging democracy and its implications on voters' choice. Understanding electorate voting behavior before and after being exposed to different media advertisements is a key element for political actors. This paper will present a theoretical framework in which further researches describing Albanian case could be developed.*

**Keywords:** *political advertising, voting behavior, democracy, negative advertising, persuasion.*

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### I. Introduction

Understanding political campaign effects has gained an increasing attention during the last years. Often the television is accused for reducing the politics in a television show, but it is fair to say that politics uses the television vehicles, to the point that politicians have become modern rock stars, with their more or less defined audience, ready to join and fight for the final victory, win the elections. Set that way, the political battle is reduced in a tiny sphere made of generic topics that are easy to understand and available to all; the goal is to capture the attention (and hopefully the vote) of that segment of voters, who decides only a few minutes or a few seconds before selecting the political party. Some scholars suggest that political advertising is ineffective at engaging the electorate (Ashworth and Clinton 2007; Krasno and Green 2008), and that it has only extremely short-lived effects on individuals' opinions (Gerber et al. 2011). Others think that messages may further the democratic process by providing citizens with potentially valuable information about candidates and their competitors (Bernays 1928; Downs 1957). Thus election campaigns are the strong symbolic moment which is able to convey and reinforce the political offer, the results: obtaining people consent.

John Stuart Mill stated that "Democracy only works when you have an informed citizenry at its core" - but the key question is whether political advertising informs or manipulates citizens? Political communication through electoral advertising in its various forms is often cause for concern, it is considered inappropriate; because uses persuasion on voters emotional level, which influences the citizen/voter behavior that instead - according to an ideal vision of democracy - should operate in a rational manner, though ongoing information. Some empirical studies results highlight the fact that political advertising has a seductive effect on people at the risk of influencing, misleading and deviance. In fact the political advertisements emphasize message, tone, candidates' personality (or their advisors) at the expense of the real problems.

Researches on this topic has explored the impact of the tone of advertising (whether it is positive, negative or mixed) on voter turnout (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, & Simon 1999; Goldstein & Freedman, 1999, 2002a; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Lau & Pomper, 2004; Peterson & Djupé, 2005; Wattenberg & Briens, 1999); advertising's impact on candidate impressions (Garramone, Atkin, Pinkleton, & Cole, 1990; Hitchon & Chang, 1995; Kaid & Boydston, 1987); and the relationship between ad exposure and democratic attitudes such as political interest and efficacy (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Freedman, Franz, & Goldstein 2004; Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Schenck-Hamlin & Proctor, 2000).

The ever-increasing importance of political advertising had substantially contributed to the interest in applying consumer marketing theories and practices to political campaigns (Dermody & Scullion, 2001; Kotler, 1975). The importance of mass media and political advertising was also evident in reviews of the development of modern political marketing (Blumenthal, 1980; Kotler, 1975; Maarek, 1995; Nimmo, 1999; Shama, 1976). Various studies are developed (none in Albania) to understand whether political advertising affects election outcomes, studies that are of first order importance for public policy (Prat 2002; Prat and Strwomberg 2013). The main question of this paper is further explored by analyzing two key elements of political advertising; persuasion and negative ads. By explaining these topics accurately and their implications, this study tends to give a full-argued answer to the main question; influence of political advertisement on emerging democracies.

## **II. Does Political Advertising Persuade?**

Use of media as a communication tool has had an irrevocable change on how politicians communicate with their citizens. Now they can reach a greater audience that would be impossible to reach through electoral meetings. Scholars have been interested on the effects of political advertising since first spot ad campaign broadcast on television (1952): "Eisenhower answers America". Some of the best available empirical evidence suggests that political advertising is ineffective at engaging the electorate (Ashworth and Clinton 2007; Krasno and Green 2008) and that it has only extremely short-lived effects on individuals' opinions (Gerber et al. 2011). Others, however, note that even self-serving messages may further the democratic process by providing citizens with potentially valuable information about candidates and their competitors (Bernays, 1928 and Downs 1957). But are people informed or persuaded by political ads? The persuasive aspect means that ads may have an impact on voters' behavior even when ads contain no information about the candidates' quality or the party program. Studies support the persuasive view, by experimentally showing that, by appealing different emotions, advertising can have differing effects on voters' behavior (Brader, 2005). Valentino et al. (2004) presents evidence in support of persuasion where advertising seems to have larger effects on less informed individuals. If advertisements persuade rather than inform constituents, then special interest groups may be able to exert political influence by directly targeting voters (Baron 1989, 1994; Grossman and Helpman 1996, 2001). Albanian scholars have touched only tangibly political ads effects on voters' choice and how political parties use the media to communicate with their electorate. According to Krasniqi (2010) during 2009 electoral campaign the governing party used frequent advertisements that emphasized NATO membership and visas liberalization, mediating them as government achievements without offering a balance of positive and negative impact on economy and citizens life standard. Use of this persuasive political advertising affected election turnout even in cities that had gone through economic decline and social problems (Krasiniqi, 2010). Further observational research, will find evidence if campaign advertisements motivate or inform citizens or persuade voters to support a particular candidate in Albania.

## **III. Effects Of Negative Advertisement**

Electoral campaigns are dynamic and an important change in recent elections (Albanian local and national elections during 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015) is the extended use of negative ads. Media itself has helped accelerate this trend, with increased focus on negative advertising, creating a vicious cycle of politics attack. But are negative ads effective at mobilizing or persuading voters? During electoral campaigns, candidates try to win the support of voters in order to win on Election Day. This process is a zero-sum game. A vote for one candidate is generally one less vote for the opponent. Accusing an opponent is not necessarily classified as negative advertisement. Candidates could criticize the political platforms or candidates' positions. Studies tend to define negative advertising based on the "tone" of the message and on the dramatic elements used in preparing advertisement messages. It uses weak points that the opponent candidate could not reply with proper arguments. But attacking the opponent could induce negative feeling towards advertisement author. Tough attacks can have a boomerang effect, stimulating feelings of defense or compassion toward the attacked candidate, especially if it turns out that the accusations are unfounded. Some studies suggest that negative campaign ads are more easily remembered and, therefore, have a greater influence on voters' attitudes and vote decisions and candidates who run negative ads are more likely to win. Other research suggests that running negative ads makes a candidate more likely (or at least equally likely) to lose. There are also conflicting conclusions about the effect of negative advertising on voter turnout - some research concludes that the increasing use of negative advertisements hurts the democratic process, as it turns voters away from the polls (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Ansolabehere et al. 1999) while other findings suggest that intense competition (often characterized by negative campaigning) enhances voter turnout (Lau and Sigelman, 1999).

Political parties in Albania continue to use negative ads in election communication even if they do not have any filed experiments suggesting about its desired impact on election outcomes. They could reduce the impact on voter turnout and be responsible for the high public cynicism and indifference towards politics, representing this way a serious threat to democracy. Negative ads may diminish the power of civic duty and make the public disenchanted with both candidates which in turn could lead to depress turnout.

## **IV. Political Advertising As A Useful Tool In Democracy**

Despite the longstanding scholarly interest and the ubiquity of political advertising in modern democracies, our understanding of its effects still remains incomplete. Political parties in new democracies are facing a decline on politics credibility and participation due to the charges of corruption. Parties in attempt to avoid this perception need to put more effort into convincing their voters, by adapting sophisticated models of political marketing (Voltmer, 2006) often referred as "Americanization of Political Campaigns" (Swanson and Manchini, 1996). 'Americanized' campaigns suit the parties in emerging democracies to create a democratic political order since they have lack of effective communication with their electorate. The need for information is of great

importance for citizens in transitional democracies where people face a high level of uncertainty (Voltmer2006). Voltmer points out that these voters might be extremely vulnerable to media messages and have a different reaction to the political messages compared to Western democracies, since the latter have a stable relationship between politics, media and citizens.

A desired outcome of political advertising is to use proper approaches to turn citizens from apathy even antipathy toward political participation. It may increase participation in elections and make political candidates accountable to keep the promises delivered through ads. Advertisement could provide and distribute information to a large number of people. According to Freedman (1999) political advertising enlarges the electorate by informing and engaging citizens. However as Polat (2005) argues, the linkages between more information and increasing political participation are not self-evident, as this depends on whether people can access and use properly this information. This information needs to be processed by the people in order to have meaning and motivate them to take place on Election Day; otherwise it is nothing more than a waste of time and money.

## V. Conclusions

This exploratory study intended to examine the essential function between political advertisement as a form of massive communication in emerging democracies and voters' participation. Identifying voters' prior beliefs or defining if the content of advertising is informative or persuasive is a challenging task, and requires strong structural assumptions. This study aimed to open a new perspective on political advertising influence in voters' turnout and its impact on choice and bring forward the use of theoretical expectations as a powerful tool for political consultants when designing campaigns in emerging democracies. To evaluate its impact on voter engagement, an experimental study is planned in 2017 (national election year), which will take place before electoral campaign and after electoral campaign. Experiments and corroborating evidence from election results will attempt to reveal significant evidence on advertising impact on voters' choice, which type of advertising has greater impact (positive or negative) on candidate evaluation and how this relates based on the characteristics of the ads viewer.

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