

Presidential elections: Electoral College increases ad spending in typical election

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The advertising landscape during presidential elections could look a whole lot different if each American were to vote for his or her own preferred candidate, instead of having to do so collectively through the current Electoral College system. This is according to Brett Gordon of Northwestern University and Wesley Hartmann of Stanford Graduate School of Business in the US, in a study published in Springer's journal *Quantitative Marketing and Economics*.

During the US [presidential election](#), candidates strategically allocate their resources to states most likely to tip the [election](#) outcome. Under the current state-level Electoral College, so-called battleground states arise where competition is especially intense. This is because most states use a winner-take-all rule to assign all their electoral votes to the candidate who receives most of that state's popular votes. This currently leads to candidates' spending most of their time and money on advertising, visits, get-out-the-vote activities and supporter mobilization just to sway a minority of voters in these states. In the process, scant attention is paid to the majority of the electorate who reside in more polarized states with foregone outcomes.

When reforming the presidential electoral process is discussed, a direct voting system is most often bandied about as a viable alternative. Such a system would eliminate state-level contests and allow for each vote to count equally in a national contest. It would also eliminate the power of marginal voters to determine the election outcome.

Gordon and Hartmann set out to quantify how such a direct vote could change the intensity of advertising competition and the degree to which it would be more evenly distributed across markets during presidential elections. They modelled voters' decisions using a simple aggregate market share model. Four sources of data from the 2000 and 2004 election were combined and analyzed. This included data collected by the Campaign Media Analysis Group about how much candidates spent on advertising in the top 75 markets (which account for 78 percent of the national population), advertising cost and actual voting outcomes at a county level. Information such as local demographics, economic conditions and what the weather was like on Election Day were also taken into account.

They found that if a direct vote system were to be followed, advertising would indeed be spread more evenly across [states](#). Total spending levels would either decrease or increase depending on the contestability of the popular vote. If it had been used during the extremely closely contested 2000 election (Al Gore vs George W. Bush), spending would have been 13 percent higher than it actually was. On the other hand, it would have dropped 54 percent during the more clear-cut 2004 elections (John Kerry vs George W. Bush). How much funding candidates have available, and the actual cost of advertising, influences how much will be spent during a campaign.

"These results suggest that the Electoral College greatly increases advertising spending in typical elections," says Gordon.

"With a direct vote during a typical election, one would either see substantially less [advertising](#) spending or a substantial change in other candidate strategies, such as their policy positions," adds Hartmann.

More information: Brett R. Gordon et al. Advertising competition in presidential elections, *Quantitative Marketing and Economics* (2016).

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