

Facebook political ads more partisan, less negative than TV

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Credit: Kon Karampelas

More political candidates may be shifting primarily to social media to advertise rather than TV, according to a study of advertising trends from the 2018 campaign season. The study, published recently in *American*

Political Science Review, also found that Facebook political ads were more partisan, less negative and less issue-focused than those on TV.

"The 2018 race showed that [social media](#) can be helpful to candidates who may not have a lot of resources, including challengers and those who are not already well known," said Travis Ridout, Washington state University political science professor and a corresponding author on the study. "It allows them to get their messages out."

Facebook ads are more practical for many down-ballot candidates who cannot afford the high price of TV advertising, Ridout added. A much broader range of candidates also used Facebook ads than TV.

Ridout along with co-authors from Bowdoin College, and Emory, Stanford and Wesleyan universities, analyzed Facebook and TV advertising data for nearly 7,300 candidates in the 2018 federal and state level races. They found that the vast majority, about 6,000, only advertised on the social media platform. A little more than 1,000 candidates used both Facebook and TV advertising. Only 242 relied on TV ads alone. The study focused on advertising by candidates' campaigns as opposed to advertising by political action committees, also known as PACs, and other outside groups.

While Facebook's affordability was an equalizing factor, the researchers also noted that the platform's ability to target ads often limits the audience—which may explain why Facebook [political ads](#) tended to be more partisan and contained less information about actual issues. The candidates appeared to be using Facebook to speak to their supporters. They used TV to reach undecided voters.

"TV political advertising is almost always about persuasion. It's 'vote for me' or 'don't vote for the other candidate'," said Ridout. "There's some of that persuasion on Facebook too, but there are more fundraising ads

and acquisition ads that urge voters to 'take this survey' or 'provide your email address'. The other purpose is for mobilization: encouraging supporters to register to vote, attend a campaign rally or find their polling place."

The Facebook ads also tended to avoid the double-edged sword of negative [advertising](#). According to Ridout, negative ads can make people who might have supported an opponent decide to stay home on election day, but they can also make some of those same voters angry, encouraging them to go to the polls. These types of ads still appeared more often on TV than social media in 2018.

Given the "emotional gut punch" TV is able to deliver more effectively than Facebook, and the many older avid voters who still watch television, Ridout doesn't expect TV political ads to go away any time soon. Still, during the 2020 campaign and in the future, the [political scientist](#) expects to see campaigns put more money put into social media, and that comes with its own set of problems.

"As more of us are getting messages from politicians online, as opposed to through television, it portrays a world for us in which things are more partisan," Ridout said. "Misinformation policies on social [media](#) also don't seem to be equally enforced. Sometimes they are enforced for small fry, but for rich candidates, they will just rewrite the rules. We may be handing a lot of power to Google and to Facebook in particular, to make really big decisions about how Americans are informed prior to election day."

More information: Erika Franklin Fowler Et Al, Political Advertising Online And Offline, *American Political Science Review* (2020). [DOI: 10.1017/S0003055420000696](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000696)

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