

# New research determines if political 'air war' or 'ground game' is most effective

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New research has shed light on how various political campaign activities influence voters. It found that a candidate's mass media advertising is more likely to influence independent voters, while the campaign's

'ground game,' targeting voters through grassroots outreach, is more effective at reaching a candidate's base.

The research study, to be published in the October issue of the INFORMS journal *Marketing Science*, "The Air War versus the Ground Game: An Analysis of Multi-Channel Marketing in U.S. Presidential Elections," is authored by Lingling Zhang of the University of Maryland and Doug J. Chung of Harvard University.

"We decided to study the effects of multichannel marketing in the context of the U.S. [presidential elections](#) to determine which approaches are not only more powerful in political applications, but also to see what we can learn and apply across other applications of multichannel marketing," said Chung.

Through their work, the researchers analyzed the multichannel marketing strategies of U.S. presidential campaigns from 2004 through 2012 to identify harbingers for how successful elections are won and will be won in battleground states (states that are considered largely undecided) going forward.

"With more technologies to better target individual voters, the question of how different campaign activities work in different [voter](#) segments presented itself to us as increasingly important," said Zhang. "As a result, we saw an opportunity to compare the 'air war' and the 'ground game' of campaigns to gauge effectiveness."

The air war constitutes mass media advertising, consisting mostly of [television advertising](#), whereas the ground game represents door-to-door canvassing, phone calls to households, direct mail to homes, and neighborhood signage.

The study's authors found that since the ground game emerged as more

influential among partisan voters, or those who already know who they plan to vote for, the primary objective of the ground game is to encourage [voter turnout](#). And while the air war was determined to have less impact on turnout, it does have greater influence in persuading voters to see a candidate more or less favorably.

"While field campaigning tends to specifically focus on turnout of those whose minds are made up, television advertising, which is less targeted but more informational in nature, tends to be better received by those who are undecided and could still change their minds," said Chung. However, [advertising](#) by outside [political groups](#), which has become more prevalent in recent elections, tends to be more negative in nature and is better received by a candidate's base.

**More information:** Lingling Zhang et al. The Air War vs. the Ground Game: An Analysis of Multichannel Marketing in U.S. Presidential Elections, *Marketing Science* (2020). [DOI: 10.1287/mksc.2020.1241](https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.2020.1241)

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