Typeface decisions grow in importance as a political branding tool
28 July 2021, by Peter Ramjug

A recent study by Northeastern professor Katherine Haenschen, who researches the intersection of digital media and politics, explores the role of fonts in political branding. Haenschen found that typefaces are chosen to convey information about the candidates and differentiate them from their opponents, thus making fonts a form of political communication.

Researchers interviewed graphic designers to analyze more than 900 candidates' logos from the 2018 U.S. midterm elections, which saw Democrats pick up a net 41 seats in the House of Representatives to gain the majority, and Republicans retain control of the Senate.

Visuals are often overlooked and under-studied in the field of political communication, but have grown as online content shifted from text-based blogs to more image-oriented platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, the study found.

The analysis adds to the growing area of research by offering an empirical look at typeface selection in political candidates' logos and wordmarks—which is a type of text-only graphic treatment.

Your research found that typefaces in and of themselves were not inherently political, but convey information about the candidate. What kind of information?

We found that a lot of things predict what typeface people will use. One is party: Republicans are more likely to use serif than sans-serif fonts relative to Democrats. And they were more likely to use script or handwriting.

Incumbents were more likely to use serif, so that tells us that there's a trendiness to the design that shows up in the logos that someone who got elected to Congress in 2008 or 2010 has a logo that's probably from that era, that looks a little bit different than design now which leans more toward sans serif fonts.

Men were less likely to use script or handwriting than female candidates were, and more likely to use slab serif, so we see differences based on party, on years in office, on incumbency, and candidate gender.

[Note: Throughout this interview, Haenschen refers to serif, sans-serif, and slab-serif fonts. Common parlance in typography, serifs are the small lines attached to larger portions of a letter, such as the small downward strokes at the top, and the horizontal line on the bottom of a capital "T" in the font on this page. Sans-serif fonts, such as Arial, do not include the extra lines. And in slab-serif fonts, the serifs, or additional lines, are generally thicker and more pronounced.]

It sounds like there's a lot of thought that goes into choosing fonts.

We talked to eight graphic designers and they talked a lot about their process, about how they
tried to find a font that conveyed the candidate, their qualities, and their attributes.

So if a person is steadfast and dependable, you want a font that conveys steadfastness and dependability. It wasn't so much that the font was necessarily liberal or conservative, but a font that felt very traditional might work better for a more conservative candidate. But they stressed that the challenge is that you have to use the candidate's name, so you have to find a font that works with that name.

The designers talked about using all capital letters or all lowercase. Or, just last name, or first name, or different combinations of letters.

It's being made for yard signs and buttons and stickers and mailings and websites, so it has to work in different formats and it has to really be legible. You have to see it when you're driving by a sign on the highway. And it has to work on a postcard and it has to work on a website, so there's a lot of constraint in terms of the function of the logo itself.

What got you interested in delving deeper into the issue of fonts?

It's all well and good to say "Oh, this Republican has this font and this Democrat has that font." But if it doesn't change how people feel about the candidates or how they feel about them at the ballot box, then, maybe it doesn't have a broader impact.

So that's what we're looking at now. It's trying to understand when does the design have an impact and if you give people any other information, does that kind of swamp the effect of the graphic design?

The congressional midterms are next year. What do you think is going on behind the scenes at some of the designers you interviewed?

On one hand we talked to Ben Ostrower, who runs a major creative firm. He did Kamala Harris's logo. But then we talked to folks who work with local candidates, people running for school board, running for judge, and so on.

For the folks that are going to be running these well-funded, competitive congressional campaigns, I think there's increasingly an awareness that you need to have some sort of visual branding put together to make it part of your roll-out on social media. When you do that two-minute YouTube video, you also need to have the logo, the brand, the website, the Facebook page. It all has to look good when you start.

The 2022 midterms are going to be really interesting. These wild swings back and forth that we've seen in the past few midterms may not apply. It's a big open question of whether the midterms are as traditionally bad for the incumbent president's party as we've seen before. With everything else that's going on with COVID-19 and the economic recovery, it's a big question mark.

Is there a correlation between the professionalism of a logo and it raising the chances of victory?

There's probably some sort of relationship, yes. Having good graphic design means you spent money on it, which means you had money to spend early on, because all of this design work gets done before they launch their campaign and their website and send their fundraising appeals out. You want the logo on everything, so you get the logo done before you launch.

That means you had enough money in starting up your campaign to engage in some sort of professional services, and I think that we see both a rise of professionalization in terms of increasing numbers of consultants in politics, and that kind of goes hand-in-hand with raising more money.

So I would say if you saw a head-to-head comparison of an extremely unprofessional logo and a professionally designed logo, I would think to myself that the candidate who has the more professional logo probably has more funding, probably has more campaign infrastructure, and is probably better suited to win.

More information: Understanding Typeface Selection by Political Campaigns: news.northeastern.edu/interact ...
Provided by Northeastern University

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.