Methodology of the Study

Buying Time 2000 is founded upon three separate databases compiled in SPSS format: television tracking data in 1998; television tracking data in 2000; and a party soft money database for the 2000 election cycle. The first two databases were initially complied by the Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG), a business specializing in political consulting and reporting, and shall be referred to as "television advertising" databases throughout this study. Using satellite technology originally developed by the U.S. Navy for tracking Soviet submarines, CMAG collects television commercials aired in the top 75 (of 216) media markets across the nation, an area that contains more than 80% of American households. This technology detects the slots in television programming when commercials appear, assigns a unique digital fingerprint to each commercial, and transmits snapshots of every four or five seconds of each commercial to CMAG headquarters, where the ad is transformed into a storyboard (*see* Appendix D for examples), along with information about the date, time, and station on which the commercial appeared. CMAG later adds information on estimated costs of each commercial.

CODING AND AUGMENTING THE CMAG TELEVISION TRACKING DATA

After CMAG captured the content of ads in storyboards, students under the direction of Professor Ken Goldstein at the University of Wisconsin examined the content of the ads and coded each one for several specific variables. This process allowed for an enhanced description of political advertising in 2000 (*see* coding sheet, Appendix C). To code each ad, students viewed the storyboards of each distinct ad: the physical readout of what CMAG was able to capture on screen. Each storyboard consists of visual snapshots from the ad as well as the full text of the script.

Students at the University of Wisconsin/Madison viewed each of the 3,327 unique political ads that aired a total of 940,755 times in various markets across the nation and coded each of the ads for content.[1] Most of the content codes were objective in nature: Did the ad use any of the "magic words" currently used to test for express advocacy such as "vote for (candidate X)," "reject (candidate X)," or "(candidate X) for Congress"? Was a candidate identified or pictured in the ad? What action, if any, did the ad encourage viewers to take? Some of the content codes were subjective in nature, such as: In your opinion, is the primary purpose of this ad to provide information about or urge action on a bill or issue, or is it to generate support or opposition for a particular candidate?

Multiple coders examined each storyboard to ensure accuracy and high inter-correlation amongst coders. The authors also examined storyboards to verify coder accuracy with respect to specific factual characteristics, such as whether a candidate was featured in the ad.[2] When results from the database needed to be confirmed, the storyboards were used to check the database outputs.

CMAG provides information on about 300 political races, including federal elections, state elections, and judicial elections. Non-campaign ads involving legislative or policy issues are also captured by CMAG. As with *Buying Time 1998,* the focus of *Buying Time 2000* is restricted to ads pertaining to federal races. For the purposes of this study, the extensive and highly-detailed data generated by CMAG provide information on 2,871 distinct ads by candidates, parties, and groups aired more than 845,000

times in the 2000 calendar year (removing ads referring to state or judicial elections). The complete television advertising database analyzed here includes information from CMAG on the length of each ad, the number of times each ad was aired and in which markets, and an estimated cost of each media buy, along with the information from the coders about the content and tone of the ads.

SPONSORS AND UNITS OF MEASURE

Ads are distinguishable by their sponsor, content, and the measure of their impact. The sponsors of ads in the 2000 federal elections consisted of presidential and congressional candidates, national and state party committees, and independent groups.[3] Content analysis includes a wide range of variables, including the full text of each ad, the use (or lack of use) of magic words often associated with express advocacy, and the coders' interpretations of the purpose and intent of each ad. The two main measures of the impact of an ad are the number of airings and the amount estimated to have been spent on the ad.

When discussing the number of ad airings, it is important to note the distinction between the number of ad spots and the number of distinct ads. While more than 845,000 spots aired in federal elections in calendar year 2000, there were just 2,871 distinct ads aired by all sponsors. Some sponsors used few ads aired with particularly high frequency, while other sponsors used various different ads which aired only a few times. One type of ad purchase which relies on multiple airings is the cookie-cutter ad. A cookie-cutter ad is a template ad that is altered to target a specific race. These ads often share the same images and script except for the final frame, which is tailored to mention the appropriate candidate for that ad buy. With this method, independent groups and parties have used a single ad skeleton to impact an assortment of races across the country.

The CMAG cost estimates are the most readily digestible to the layperson. The database describes how much an ad aired at a particular time would be expected to cost. However, the cost estimates for the 2000 races unquestionably underestimate the true amount spent on the television ads. All cost figures offered in this study

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1. Data for an estimated 100 additional distinct advertisements were discovered upon a spot check of selected television networks late in the course of research, but the missing data are not extensive and do not significantly affect the results of the study.

2. Intercoder consistency was not always proof against error. For example, multiple students concluded that an ad featured a candidate when the person was in fact an officeholder who was not running for election. Such coding errors were corrected. When coders disagreed with respect to a particular question, Professor Goldstein made the judgment as to the appropriate code.

3. For the purposes of *Buying Time 2000*, coordinated expenditures by parties and candidates have been attributed to the party.

under-estimate the actual costs because (i) estimates do not include any costs beyond media buys, such as production costs; (ii) estimates are limited to major media markets and do not include all media markets; and (iii) estimates are of typical market prices, not actual market prices that increase as demand increases or as Election Day nears.

This last caveat is extremely important in understanding how much the CMAG cost estimates under-report actual costs. Because television stations may reserve the right to preempt advertisements at the last minute and without warning, players often pay premium prices to ensure that their ad will run during specific time slots. These premiums, not accounted for by CMAG, ensure that an ad will not be preempted by another buyer. With the extremely high volume of ads on the air in 2000, anecdotal reports confirm that significant premiums were paid on many ads aired in close proximity to Election Day.[4] This suggests that CMAG cost estimates are lower than the actual outlay. All that said, the cost estimates nevertheless are proportional between the sponsors and provide perspective on the world of political advertising and are roughly in line with other studies on campaign spending.[5]

The data are reflected throughout this report in the form of charts and tables. A few notes on terminology in these tables. Figures are frequently totaled at the bottom of each table as "Table Total." These totals will include any missing data and so they may add up to a slightly higher number than the summation of individual rows in the table. The term "Col %" refers to the percentage of values in a column of the table and "Row %" refers to the percentage of values in a row of the table. "Sum %" is the percentage of the sum of the values—always dollars—in the table.

ACCURACY AND RECODING

Because of the importance for public policy purposes of how many genuine issue ads featuring a candidate were aired by groups within 60 days of an election, the authors examined in detail all of the group ad storyboards aired during that time frame. Special attention was given to ensure that the database was accurate with regard to whether or not a candidate was featured, whether magic words were used, and whether the ad was aired in the candidate's state or district. Ads that were coded incorrectly were recoded by Prof. Ken Goldstein at the University of Wisconsin. Professor Goldstein made all final determinations on coding accuracy of the students.

The sheer volume of ads in 2000—the total number of spots was more than triple the 1998 total—meant that the database when first compiled contained multiple errors. These errors usually took the form of missing data values, where the database simply did not contain the information CMAG intended to record. In these cases, efforts were made to determine the missing values, either by extrapolating from other data or by researching the specific race to which an ad pertained.

In order to make the data more manageable, the information provided by the coders was simplified by the authors with the creation of new summary variables. New variables—such as the competitiveness of electoral districts and incumbency—were created to aggregate the data and to provide the authors with additional tools for analysis. The "competitiveness" of electoral districts, for example, was a composite variable based on pre-election analyses by Stuart Rothenberg of *Roll Call,* the *Cook Political Report,* and pre-election polls by CBS News.

From a methodological perspective, cookie-cutter ads offered their own unique coding problems. Cookie-cutter ads are identical except for mentioning different candidates in different jurisdictions. At times the technology did not allow CMAG to distinguish that a candidate running for office in one state was erroneously mentioned in an ad aired in a different state. In these instances, Professor Goldstein reviewed the cookie-cutter ad outlays and recoded the ads appropriately.

SOFT MONEY DATABASE

To supplement the coded CMAG database in this study, the authors compiled a database of soft money spending by the state and national parties, which shall be referred to as the "soft money database" throughout this study. The soft money database is a composite of four FEC data files, comprising the reports required of all national and state party committees which expended soft

4. Senator Robert Torricelli offered an amendment to the McCain-Feingold Bill on March 28, 2001, aimed at reducing the premiums ad purchasers are forced to pay television stations in order not to be preempted. The debate over the amendment illustrated how stations had made millions off premiums charged to candidates who were fearful of losing their time slot to another advertiser.

5. See, for example, David Magleby ed., "Election Advocacy: Soft Money and Issue Advocacy in the 2000 Congressional Elections" (Feb. 2001), available at [www.byu.edu/outsidemoney]; and Annenberg School of Public Policy, "Issue Advertising in the 1999-2000 Election Cycle" (2001), available at [www.appcpenn.org].

money in relation to the 2000 federal elections. The party committees of all 50 states plus the national party committees of major and minor parties are included.

Self-reported itemized expenditures by the party committees have been coded by the authors for seven types of expenditures:

1.

media-issue advocacy (television and radio buys and production, direct mail advertisements and mail production associated with issue advocacy);

2.

general mail (other mail expenditures not associated with issue advocacy);

3.

voter mobilization (all get-out-the-vote (GOTV) expenditures, telephone banks, phone expenses associated with GOTV, voter registration activities, absentee mail drives, slate mailers, lawn signs and any other expense associated with voter drives);

4.

consultants (outside consultants, lawyers, and accountants);

5.

party salaries (wages, salaries, benefits, and other employment-related expenses of party staff);

6.

administration (operations and overhead); and

7.

fundraising (all expenses directly associated with fundraising).

Most direct mail expenditures in this study have been classified in the media-issue advocacy category. Not all political scientists would agree.[6] Party direct mail is sometimes assumed to consist primarily of party-building appeals, such as lists of party endorsements and slate mailers. A recent study of issue advocacy in the 2000 elections, however, documented a dramatic rise in party direct mail activity coinciding with the rise in overall party electioneering issue advocacy. The study further found that much of this direct mail advertising resembled the content and tone of television and radio electioneering issue ads. The direct mail appeals were generally non-personalized mass appeals and electioneering in nature, mostly mailed as Election Day neared, frequently negative in tone, and usually paid for by soft money. These are patterns identical to televised electioneering issue ads. As the author of that study concluded:

"A focus on soft money and issue advertising that only catalogues broadcast ads misses much of the story. In 2000, as in 1998, candidates, interest groups, and the political parties waged an intense ground war through mail, telephone calls, and person-to-person contact. . . . Parties and interest groups sometimes employed cookie-cutter mailers, using the same template in different races but inserting the local candidate's name and image."[7]

Recognizing that party direct mail has become another avenue for soft money spending on behalf of electioneering issue ads, this study classifies most party direct mail as such, unless otherwise indicated. Any direct mail designated for such activities as party slate mailers, absentee mail ballot drives, or other mailings designated for mobilizing voters rather than electioneering issue advocacy are classified in this study as "voter mobilization." This soft money database serves as the foundation for Chapter Seven of this report.

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6. See, for example, Ray La Raja and Elizabeth Jarvis-Shean, "Assessing the Impact of a Ban on Soft Money: Party Soft Money Spending in the 2000 Elections" Policy Brief, Institute of Governmental Studies and Citizens' Research Foundation (July 6, 2001).

7. David Magleby, op. cit., at fn. 4