chapter 4

The Players and Their Ads

Chapter Three offered a discussion of the historical and legal evolution of political advertising in American campaigns. That discussion explained how political advertising sponsors can manipulate the content of their ads to avoid campaign finance regulation. This chapter now focuses on the sponsors and content of their ads.

There are three general categories of players in the world of political advertising: candidates, parties, and groups. The third category of political players—groups—includes all independent committees, organizations, and individuals who participate in the political arena. This chapter explores the roles of each of these three players in the world of political advertising. The magnitude of their involvement in political advertising in the 2000 federal elections is compared and the content and nature of their ads are examined. Also explored in this chapter are the different types of ads that result from the complexities of campaign finance law and the interplay between content and sponsor. In addition, the length and tone of ads by all sponsors are noted, along with other variables.

SCOPE OF ADVERTISING IN 2000

The television advertising database shows that there were 940,755 airings of political television commercials in federal, gubernatorial, and judicial elections over the 2000 calendar year in the nation's top 75 media markets—at a total cost of $672,045,453. In federal elections only, a total of 2,871 unique ads were aired 845,923 times at an estimated cost of $628,655,572. The airings of these ads were fairly evenly distributed among presidential, Senate and House elections—despite great differences in the numbers of candidates in each type of election—and were concentrated most heavily in the general elections (*see* Figure 4-1). The greatest share of these airings occurred in the last few months prior to Election Day.

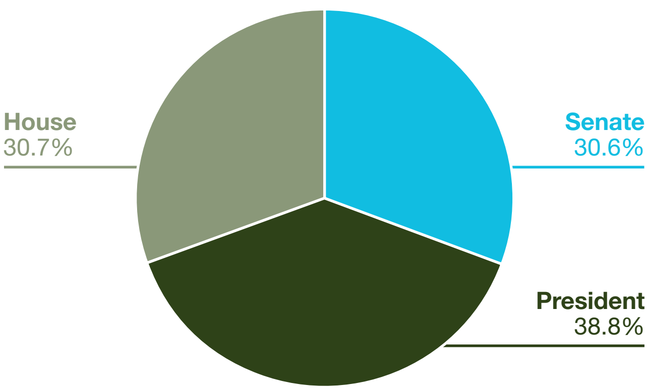

Figure 4-1. Airings of Television Advertising in Federal Elections, 2000 Calendar Year

Over all elections combined in 2000, candidates were the principal sponsors of most political television ads, with party committees running second, and independent groups third (*see* Figure 4-2). Parties played almost no role in primary elections, but became a viable political player in the general election at all levels—House, Senate and presidential. There was, however, one very important caveat to this overall trend which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five: for the first time in recent history, the total cost of political advertising by parties exceeded that of political ads sponsored by candidates in the 2000 presidential general election. In all other federal elections, candidate advertisements continued to outpace advertisements by both parties and groups.

Although group-sponsored ads were not as prominent as candidate and party ads in 2000, group ads are rapidly gaining ground. In the 2000 election, there were 142,421 airings of political television ads sponsored by independent groups—at a cost conservatively estimated at $98 million. In the 1998 congressional general elections, groups spent less than $11 million to air 21,712 ads.

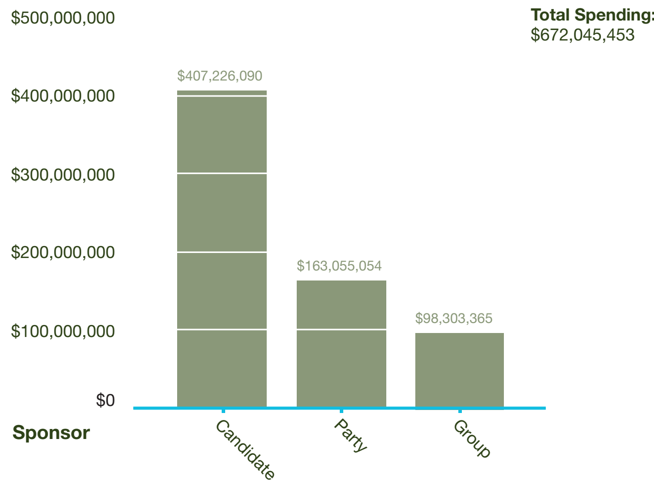

Figure 4-2. Cost of Media Buys in the 75 Major Media Markets, by Candidates, Parties, and Groups

MAGIC WORDS AND ADVERTISEMENTS

When the magic words test is applied to campaign advertisements in the real world, it has very little, if any, correlation with electioneering activity. Political ads by party committees, which were universally perceived as electioneering by the coders in this study, almost never employ magic words. Even candidate ads, which are defined as electioneering by law, employ magic words only 10% of the time. The low percentage of candidate ads using magic words highlights how unnecessary such words are to convey an explicit electioneering message. That parties and groups can also effectively convey their electioneering messages without magic words is not surprising, but the legal ramifications are enormous. Avoiding magic words has no value for candidates, but for parties and groups it means that ads can be paid for with $100,000 or $1,000,000 contributions (*see* Figure 4-3).

The different magnitudes of the types of political ads reveal how the different players attempted to bend the campaign finance rules to their advantage in the 2000 elections. While all candidate ads are included in the regulatory framework of contribution limits and disclosure requirements, nearly all television ads sponsored by parties and groups eschew magic words. The absence of such words places the ads into the category of issue ads, which are not fully covered by federal laws, if covered at all. In

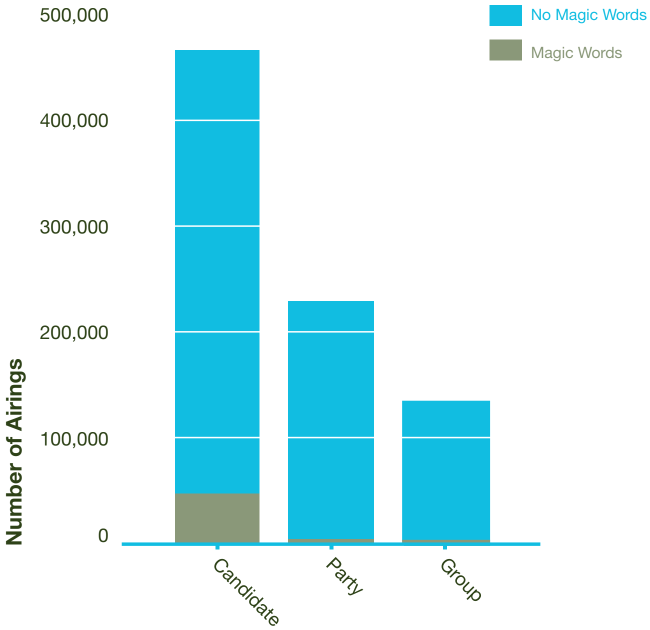

Figure 4-3. Use of Magic Words in Political Advertisements, by Candidates, Parties, and Groups

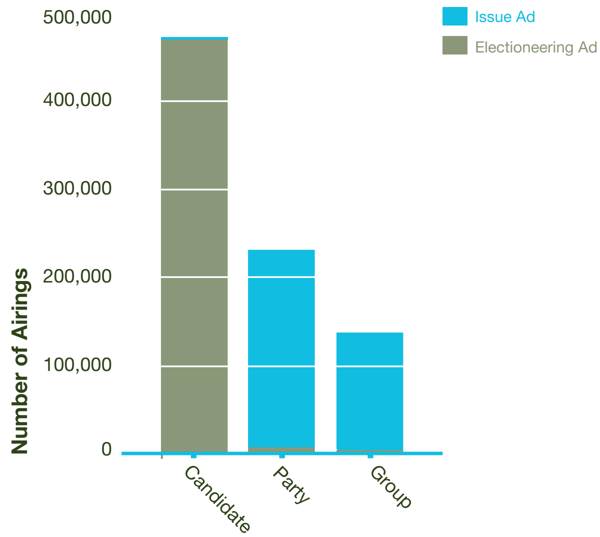

Figure 4-4. Airings of Issue Ads by Sponsor

the case of party issue ads, soft money may be used to finance part or most of these ads. In the case of group-sponsored ads, only a small fraction of these ads are subject to federal law because groups rarely elect to use the magic words used to test for express advocacy. Thus, like party ads, the vast majority of group-sponsored ads are issue ads exempt from federal regulations that can be paid for with contributions of unlimited size and from any sources (*see* Figure 4-4).

Because none of the players makes much use of magic words, issue ads by the parties and groups—whether electioneering in intent or aimed at genuine issue discussion—comprise the bulk of their advertising. The legal consequences of issue advocacy vary somewhat for parties and groups. Parties must report the financial activity behind all of their advertising. However, party "issue" ads may be financed in part by funds received from sources that would otherwise be illegal—corporate and union treasuries and donations in excess of the party contribution limits. The significance of soft money spending by the parties is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven. Issue ads sponsored by groups, whether genuine or not, escape federal campaign finance laws in terms of both contribution limits and disclosure requirements, and thus who paid for the ads will usually be hidden from the public.[1]

REMOVING THE VEIL OF ISSUE ADS

The nature and content of issue ads needs further elaboration at this point. The category of issue ad splits into two very important sub-categories: *genuine issue ads* versus *electioneering issue ads.* As shown below, the magic words standard for distinguishing issue ads from campaign ads allows many campaign ads for and against candidates to operate outside of the rules intended to govern them. Through the veneer of issue advocacy, political parties, corporations, labor unions and ideological groups have turned the magic words standard of express advocacy into a major loophole in federal and state campaign finance laws.

Without a doubt, a significant share of issue ads are in fact genuine issue ads discussing pressing public policy issues or pending legislative matters. According to the

1. In some cases, groups have avoided using magic words because they make for ineffective advertising, not necessarily out of a desire to conceal financial sources. This has led to an interesting situation in the full public financing system of state elections in Maine. In Maine, participating candidates who are opposed by significant independent expenditure activity (which is reported), as opposed to issue advocacy (which is not reported), may receive additional public financing to offset those reported independent expenditures. One Democratic-leaning group which purchased electioneering issue ads across the state opted to report that spending rather than conceal the information. The Republican-dominated elections commission then decided to count the spending as independent expenditures and awarded additional public funds to Republican candidates.

coders of this study, about $42 million of group spending on political advertising involved discussion of issues or legislation unrelated to an election. However, even more was spent by independent groups on electioneering issue ads—those intended to influence the outcome of candidate elections. More than $49 million was spent by groups on issue ads intending to generate support or opposition for a specific candidate. And while issue ads discussing political issues or pending legislation—genuine issue ads-are distributed fairly evenly throughout the year, electioneering issue ads primarily air near Election Day. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six, nearly 80% of group-sponsored electioneering issue ads aired within 60 days of November 7; most of the remainder of electioneering issue ads appear to have aired around primary election dates.

The content of group ads offers clues to the sponsors' intent. Almost half (49.7%) of all group-sponsored ads throughout the 2000 calendar year mentioned or otherwise depicted a candidate. While a significant percentage of group-sponsored ads called for viewers to "send a message or call someone to express yourself" (28.8%), a very small percentage of group ads actually urged action or attention to a particular matter (4.3%). Even fewer identified a specific bill number of pending legislation to act upon (1.3%). In total, about 58% of all group-sponsored advertisements over the course of the entire calendar year were coded as electioneering, rather than providing information or urging action on issues or legislation.

Taking advertisements sponsored by groups and parties together, one can easily recognize the poverty of the magic words test. To start, all ads sponsored by parties, bar none, were perceived as electioneering whether or not they used magic words. About 58% of all group advertisements were perceived as electioneering. Together, 83% of ads aired in 2000 by parties and groups were not about informing citizens about a policy issue or a legislative matter, but instead were about electing candidates. This was an increase over 1998, when 75% of the advertisements aired by parties and groups were perceived as electioneering ads (*see* Figure 4-5).

CHARTING THE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN ELECTIONEERING ISSUE ADS AND GENUINE ISSUE ADS

Issue ads perceived as electioneering versus genuine employ starkly different content in their ads, and these differences reflect their respective roles in the world of political advertising. Again, genuine issue ads are intended to influence the public debate on pressing social issues or pending legislation. Electioneering issue ads are intended as campaign commercials, minus magic words, and are aired to influence the outcome of elections.

As such, one would expect the content of electioneering issue ads to be geared more toward specific candidates and less toward public policies or abstract issues. The opposite would be expected of genuine issue ads. Genuine issue ads would be expected to provide information useful for affecting public policies, while electioneering issue ads would be expected to shape the viewer's the image of a candidate. The database confirms these predictions.

Figures 4-6 through 4-9 demonstrate the substantive differences in content between genuine issue ads and electioneering issue ads. Almost all genuine issue ads avoid

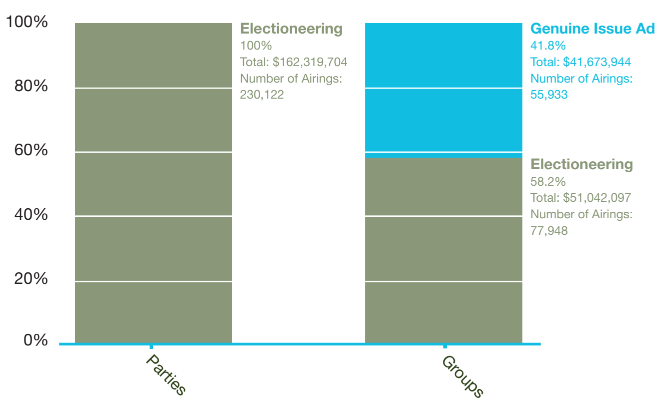

Figure 4-5. Electioneering Advertising vs. Genuine Issue Advocacy Sponsored by Parties and Groups, Calendar Year 2000

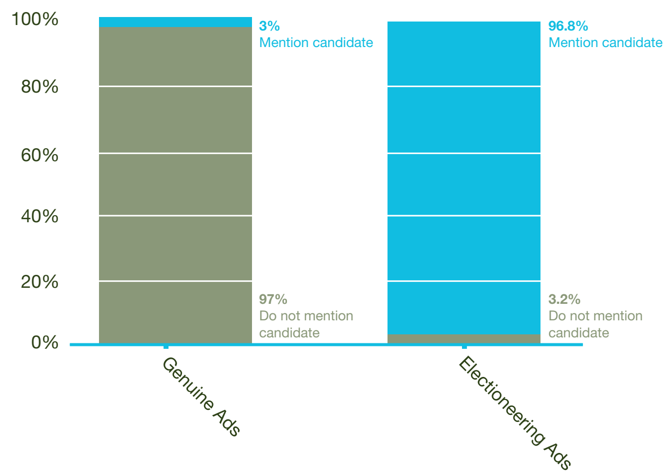

Figure 4-6. Proportion of Issue Ads That Mention a Candidate

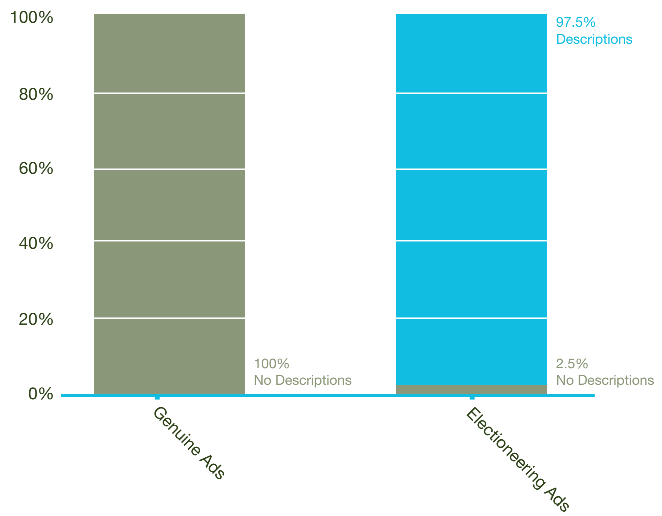

Figure 4-7. Proportion of Issue Ads Using Descriptions of Candidates

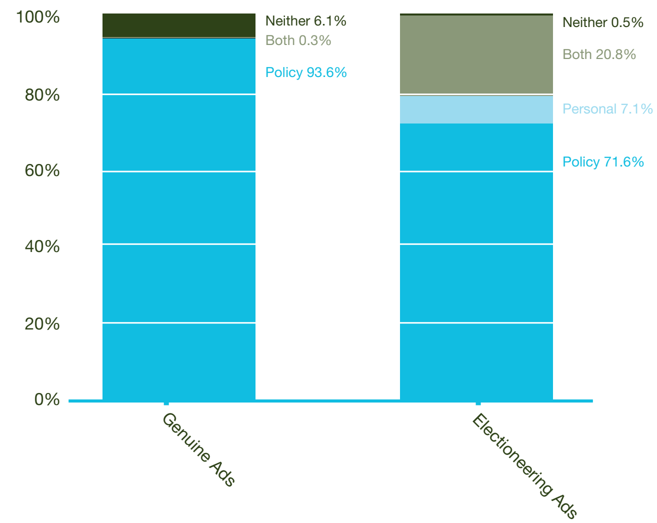

Figure 4-9. Proportion of Issue Ads That Are Policy-Focused

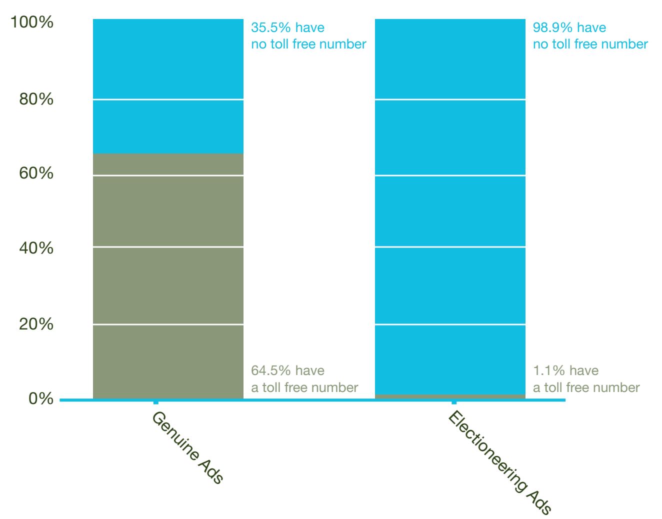

Figure 4-8. Proportion of Issue Ads Giving Toll-Free Phone Numbers

depicting a candidate by name, voice, or appearance in the advertisement, while the exact opposite is true of electioneering issue ads: almost all electioneering issue ads depict a candidate in one form or another (*see* Figure 4-6). Nearly all of the electioneering issue ads do not merely depict a candidate, but instead feature the candidate as the central focus of the ad.

Accordingly, the electioneering issue ads are wrought with various descriptions of the candidate or candidates (*see* Figure 4-7). The electioneering issue ads are liberally sprinkled with such terms as "career politician," "hypocrite," "friend of Bill Clinton" or some other description designed to improve or tarnish the image of the candidate being discussed. Genuine issue ads rarely, if ever, contain any adjectives describing a candidate. The favorite characterization of candidates in electioneering issue ads sponsored by Democrats is "friend of special interests" (referring to Republican opponents). The favorite characterization of candidates in electioneering issue ads sponsored by Republicans is "taxing (or some version of supporting taxes)" (referring to Democratic opponents).
Genuine and electioneering issue ads differ also with respect to the information provided to viewers and the action urged of them. While both types of issue ads frequently encourage viewers to call or write to someone to express their viewpoints, genuine issue ads usually provide a toll-free phone number (*see* Figure 4-8). Electioneering issue ads will frequently provide a regular telephone number or address, but rarely offer to fund the call by providing a toll-free phone number. The sponsors of genuine issue ads sincerely want viewers to get involved and will often pay for the means to do so. Sponsors of electioneering issue ads merely want to affect viewers' impressions of candidates. Even though these ads frequently encourage viewers to call the candidates and "tell them you do not like what they are doing," the objective of electioneering issue ads is to influence viewers' votes, not to encourage contact between viewers and candidates.

While both types of issue ads make use of policy appeals to achieve their respective objectives, electioneering issue ads are significantly more inclined to emphasize personal traits of candidates or officeholders (*see* Figure 4-9). Genuine issue ads almost never make references to personal traits.

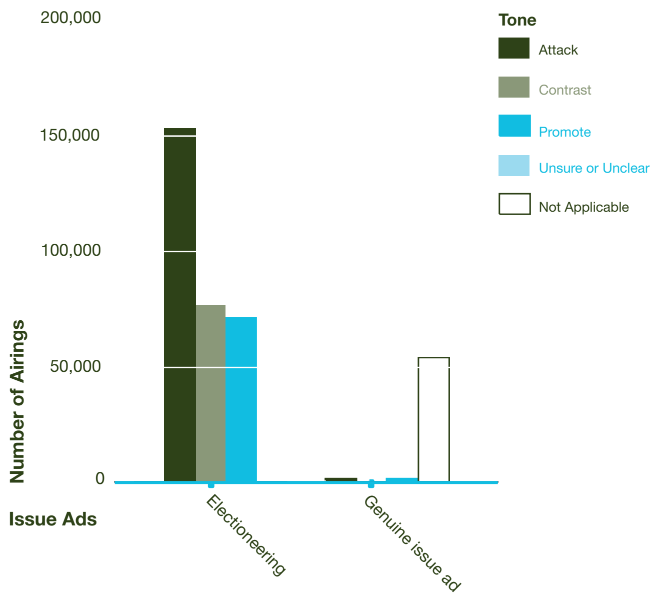

Figure 4-10. Tone of Electioneering Issue Ads vs. Genuine Issue Ads, Calendar Year 2000

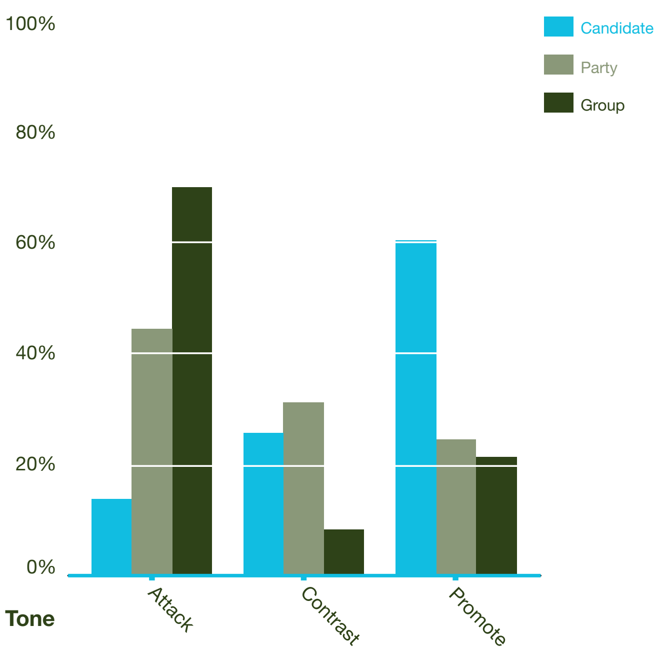

Figure 4-11. Percentage of Candidate Ads and Electioneering Issue Ads by Parties and Groups that Attack, Contrast, or Promote Candidates .

Finally, it is important to recognize the difference in tone between electioneering issue ads and genuine issue ads. Electioneering issue ads either promote, contrast, or attack candidates, and most often they attack candidates (*see* Figure 4-10). By far, most electioneering issue ads are negative in tone, attacking candidates for bad policy stances or impugning their characters. This kind of measure of the content of ads is hardly even applicable to genuine issue ads. It is rare for a genuine issue ad to make any reference, positive or negative, to a candidate.

TONE OF ELECTIONEERING ISSUE ADS AND ALL POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENTS

The negative tone of electioneering issue ads not only distinguishes them from genuine issue ads, it also distinguishes them from all other forms of campaign advertising. Electioneering issue ads are decisively more negative and attack-oriented than candidate ads and party ads using magic words. Candidate ads—and to a lesser extent party ads using magic words—are more inclined than group-sponsored electioneering issue ads to promote candidates or to compare and contrast candidates on issues (*see* Figure 4-11). Conversely, electioneering issue ads sponsored by parties and groups tend to attack candidates and attempt to denigrate their character. These ads do not discuss substantive issues and frequently focus on the personal histories of candidates. And as Election Day nears, electioneering issue ads by both parties and groups become increasingly personal and negative in tone.

LENGTH OF ADS

While issue ads by parties and groups can easily be separated into two categories and ads by all sponsors were very diverse in terms of content, nearly all of the ads in the 2000 elections shared one noteworthy attribute: length. Despite differences in tone, timing, sponsor, and topics presented, more than 90% of the ads in the 2000 election were 30 seconds long (*see* Figure 4-12). There was a slight variation within the category of genuine issue ads, in which 88.5% were aired in 30-second spots. Nearly 10% of genuine issue ads were aired in 60-second spots, three times more than any other type of political advertisement. Only one ad—a presidential primary ad sponsored by Bill Bradley—aired longer than 60 seconds.
The length of a political advertisement appears to be related to its content. Ads that are 10-seconds, 15-seconds, or 20-seconds in length are unlikely to be narrated by a candidate. But slightly more than 30% of 30-second

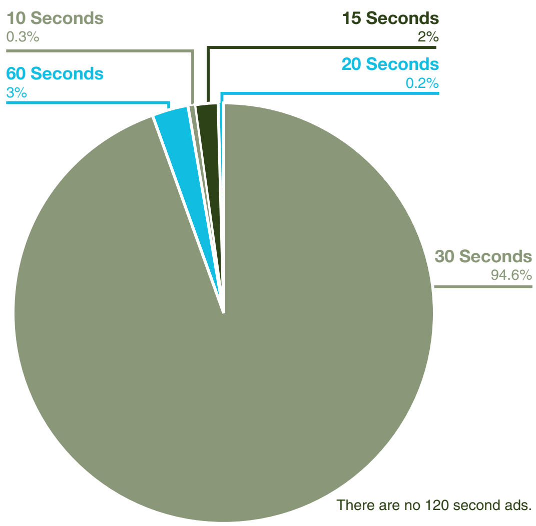

Figure 4-12. Length of All Televised Political Advertisements, in Seconds

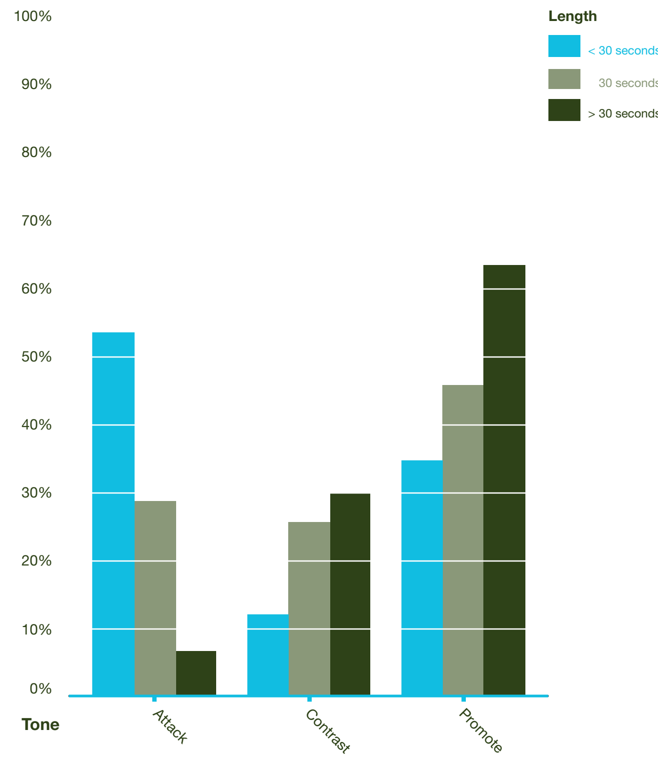

Figure 4-14. Tone of Political Ads, by Length

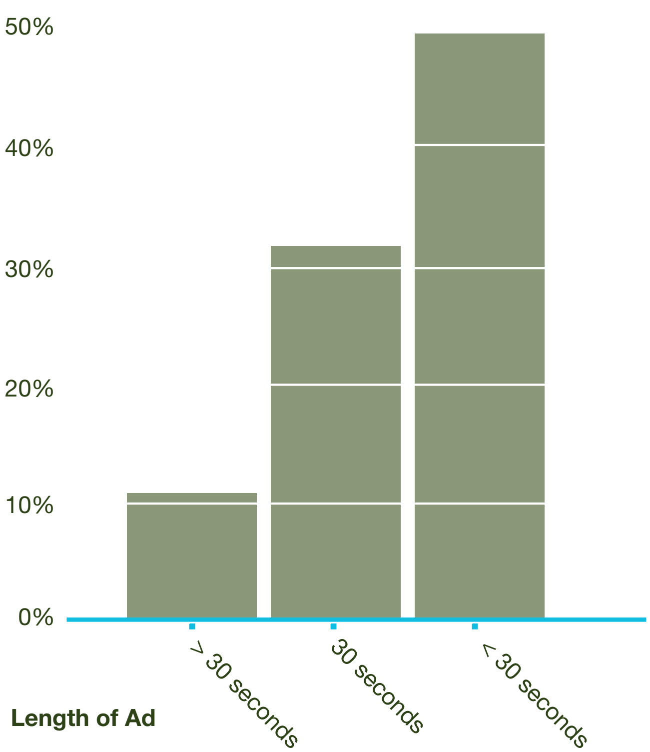

Figure 4-13. Proportion of Ads Narrated by Candidate

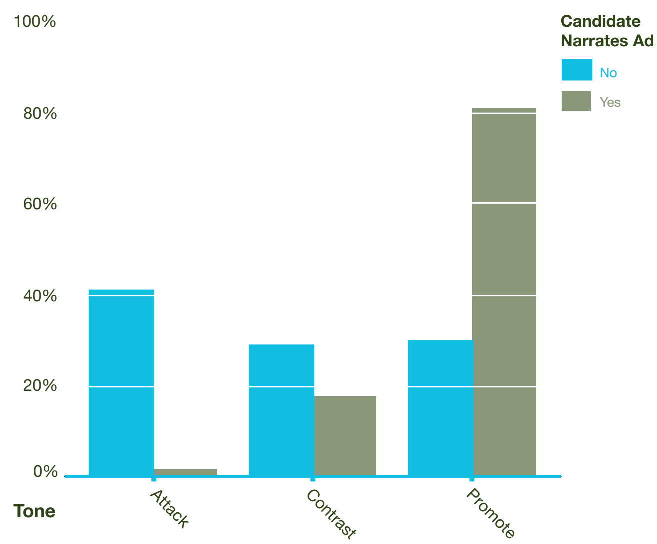

Figure 4-15. Tone of Ads in Which the Candidate Narrates

	Theme	% of Ads
Candidates	Health care	14.4%
	Education	12.8%
	Background	12.3%
	Social security	8.9%
	Taxes	8.9%
Parties	Health care	17.9%
	Social security	15.3%
	Education	14.2%
	Political record	6.8%
	Environment	6.3%
Groups	Health care	31.5%
	Medicare	19.6%
	Abortion	6.5%
	Environment	6.4%
	Education	6.2%
Democrats	Health care	22.1%
	Background	9.6%
	Education	8.6%
	Political record	8.0%
	Taxes	6.5%
Republicans	Education	16.5%
	Social security	13.6%
	Health care	12.9%
	Taxes	9.7%
	Background	8.8%
Electioneering Ads	Health care	17.5%
	Education	12.7%
	Social security	10.0%
	Background	9.2%
	Taxes	8.3%
Genuine Issue Ads	Health care	25.8%
	Medicare	25.5%
	Trade/NAFTA	8.8%
	Environment	7.3%
	Political record	6.3%

Figure 4-16. Most Frequent Themes of Ads

ads are narrated by the candidate (*see* Figure 4-13). In the same vein, ads that are longer than 30 seconds and which feature a candidate or his or her voice are more likely to be positive in tone and to promote the candidate's qualities. The 120-second Bill Bradley ad, for example, presented Bradley's biographical information, from his family to his lifestyle, without ever referencing any other candidate. Ads that are shorter than 30 seconds, on the other hand, are far more likely to be ads attacking other candidates. Evidently, campaign strategists do not want attacks leveled with the candidate's own voice. Once again, the tone of 30-second spots falls somewhere in between the shorter and longer ads (*see* Figures 4-14 and 4-15). About 44% of 30-second spots are attack ads, 28% contrasting and 28% positive.

THEMES OF ADS

Perhaps the most striking thematic aspect of political advertising in 2000 was the difference between candidate, party, and group electioneering ads versus genuine issue ads. While the frequency of electioneering ads followed the normal pattern of highlighting health care, education, and social security, the issue of Medicare played prominently among genuine issue ads—an issue that was not specifically identified in most candidate and party ads. Trade and the environment also were frequent themes among genuine issue ads, although they were very infrequent in electioneering advertisements of all sorts (*see* Figure 4-16). Thus, just as tone, timing, and the presence of a candidate on screen separate genuine issue ads from electioneering issue ads, the themes presented often separate them as well.

Overall, ads by Democratic sponsors (i.e. candidates, parties, and groups) most frequently addressed the issue of health care, while the Republican sponsors' favorite issue was education. Surprisingly, the issue of taxes played somewhat infrequently among both parties. In the aggregate, among all ads sponsored by candidates, party committees, and groups, the issue of health care dominated. Education and social security also were strong themes in political advertisements.

RACIAL DIVERSITY IN CAMPAIGN ADS

With the exception of Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, who only aired 200 spots, sponsors tended to show very little racial diversity in the ads purchased.[2] Of all the ads aired by Democratic candidates, the Democratic Party, and pro-Democrat groups, only 8.4% of the ads featured multi-racial or multi-ethnic individuals. Ads by Republican candidates, the Republican Party, and pro-Republican groups were almost twice as likely to have racially diverse persons featured in the ads, to the tune of 15.5% of all such ads. None of the ads sponsored by members of the Reform Party or Libertarian Party showed racial diversity (*see* Figure 4-17).

Racial diversity in political advertisements, or lack thereof, fluctuated substantially from state to state. Nationwide, only 12.2% of all ads featured racially diverse persons. Only in California and New Mexico did more than 20% of all ads reflect racial diversity. More than 15% of ads aired in Alabama, Iowa, Kentucky, New York, Oregon, and Texas depicted racially diverse images. None of the ads in Idaho or Mississippi contained racially diverse persons.

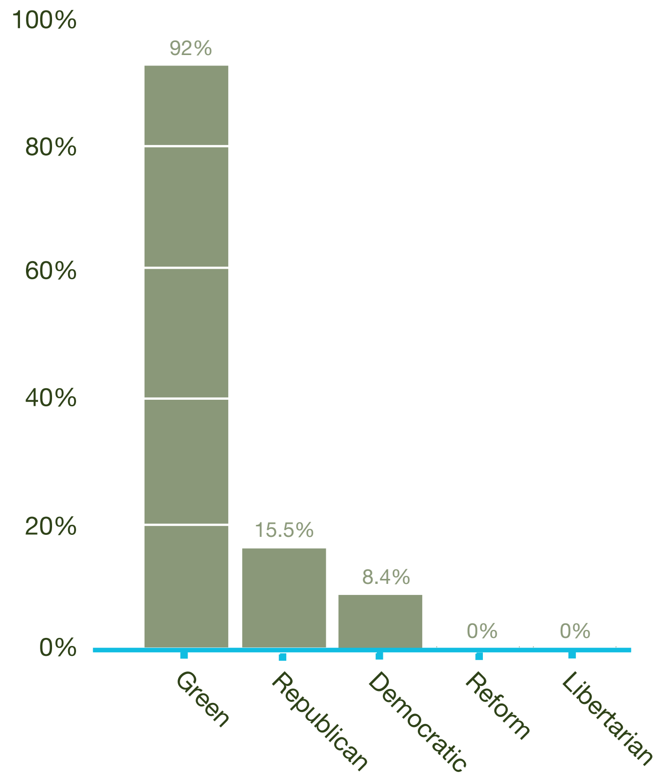

Figure 4-17. Ads Featuring Racial Diversity, by Party

PARTY DIFFERENCES

In terms of partisanship, overall activity by Democratic and Republican sponsors (candidates, parties, and groups) was balanced. Republican candidates were only slightly more likely to buy television time than Democratic candidates, while Democratic Party committees barely nudged out Republican Party committees in the quantity of advertising air time in the 2000 elections. A similar partisan balance is found among group-sponsored ads. Ads by groups that tended to lean Democratic were slightly more prevalent than ads by groups leaning Republican (*see* Figure 4-18).

In terms of just party-sponsored ads, the fact that the total number of ads by the Democratic Party in the congressional races exceeded the amount aired by the Republican Party was a significant change from 1998. Whereas in 2000 the Democratic Party accounted for 52% of all party ads in the congressional races and the Republican Party accounted for 48%, the Republican Party accounted for 64% of party ads in congressional races in 1998 compared to just 36% by the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party was able to equalize the Republican Party's ad barrage in just two years.

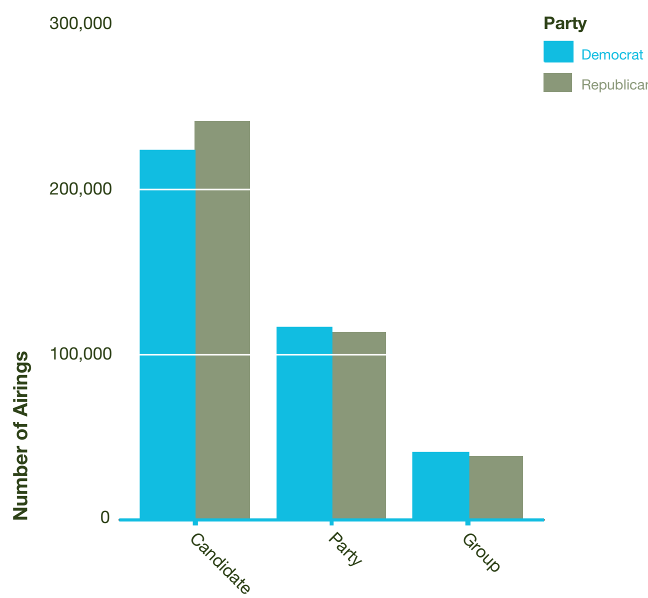

Figure 4-18. Airings of Ads, by Partisan Affiliation/ Leaning of Sponsor

2. Of Nader's 200 spots, 92% included persons who were racially diverse.