chapter 5

# Television Advertising in House, Senate, and Presidential Races

In the previous chapters, political advertisements in the 2000 elections have been analyzed according to the different *content of ads* (use of magic words, thematic focus, mention of candidate, etc.) and different *types of advertisers* (candidates, party committees, and groups). This chapter examines how ads varied across different races—House, Senate, and presidential—as well as how factors such as incumbency and competitiveness came into play in those contests.

## OVERVIEW

The overall amount of money spent on television ad buys in the battle for the presidency, the Senate, and the House (excluding genuine issue ads) was $578,147,606, and this money was spent nearly equally across the three types of races. About 36.6% was spent on the presidential election, 36.9% on the Senate elections, and 27.5% on the House elections. In terms of absolute numbers of spots, 38.7% of the ads targeted the presidential race, 30.6% of the ads targeted the Senate races, and 30.6% of the ads targeted House elections.

With the Republican Party determined to hold on to its majorities in both the House and the Senate, and the Democratic Party similarly focused on picking up enough seats to reclaim their majority status, both parties clearly recognized the importance of winning key Senate and House races. As such, the political players were greatly concerned with the House and Senate elections, to say nothing of the presidential election.

## CONTROLLING THE DEBATE ON THE AIR

Taking all ads and ad sponsors together, candidates were responsible for the majority of political television ads aired in the 2000 federal races. Party committees ran second and independent groups third. Parties ran no ads in the primary elections, but were crucial players in the general elections at each level—House, Senate and presidential. However, the ability of candidates to air the vast majority of ads in their race, and thus control the debate on the airwaves, varied widely across different offices.

The ad war for the presidency was fought not just by the candidates but by their parties and by interest groups. As noted in Chapter Four, candidates were the sponsors of the majority of ads in the presidential primary and general elections combined, but only barely. In the presidential race, candidate spending amounted to 52.3% of the total, while party spending amounted to 39.6% of the total and groups accounted for 8.1%.

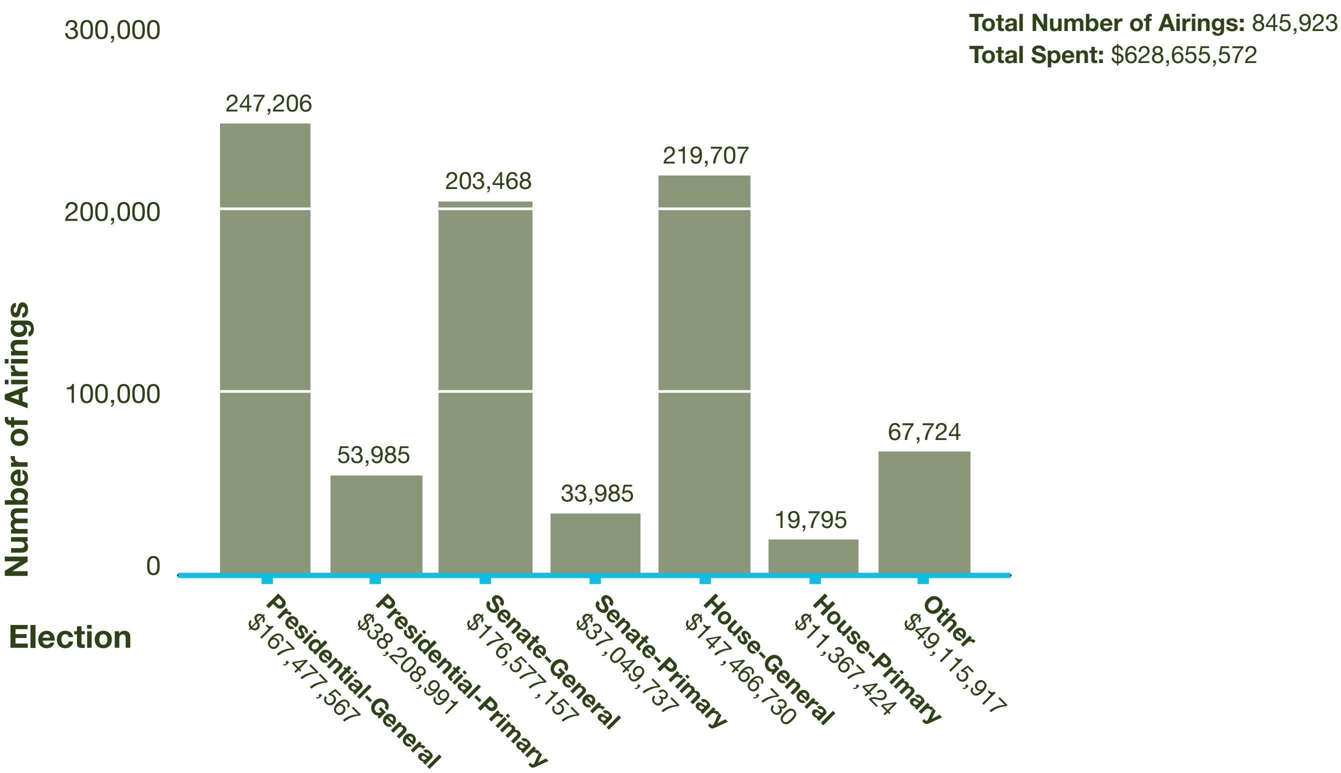



*Figure 5-1. Magnitude of Television Advertising in Federal Elections, 2000 Calendar Year*

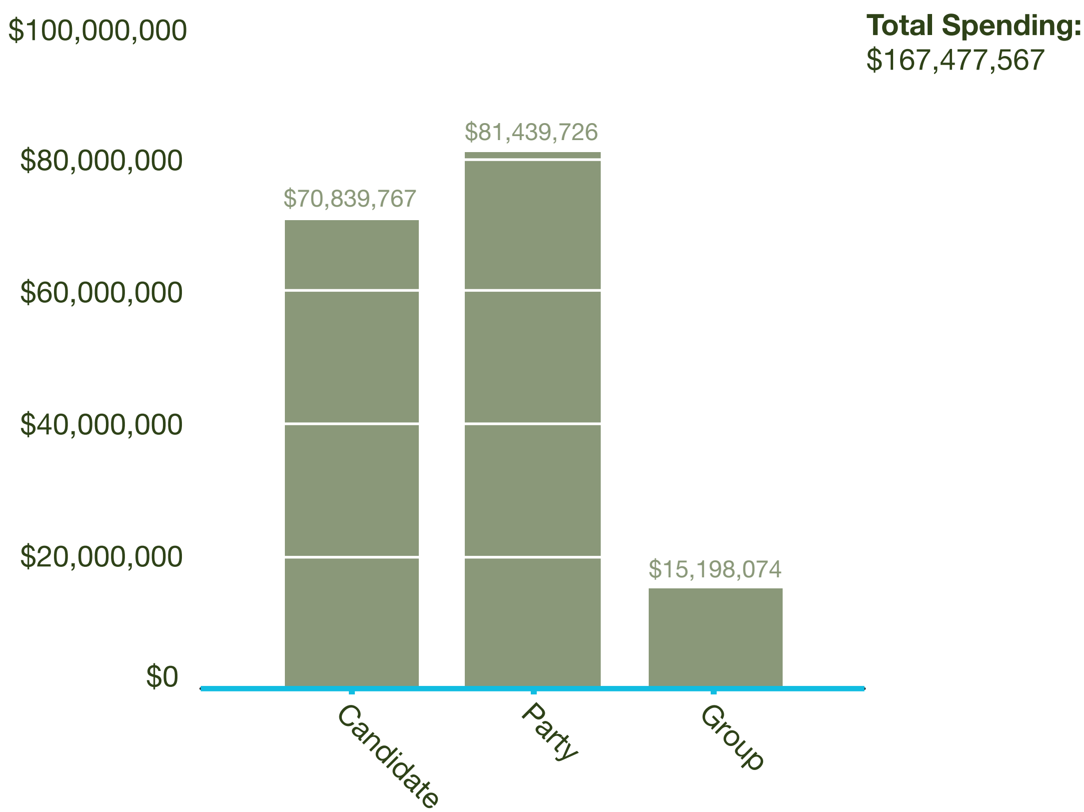



*Figure 5-2. Media Buys in the Presidential General Election by Candidates, Parties, and Groups*

| | | Number of Airings | Col % | Sum |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Presidential:** | Candidate | 153,662 | 51.0 | $107,502,904 |
| | Party | 123,360 | 41.0 | $81,439,726 |
| | Group | 24,169 | 8.0 | $16,743,928 |
| | Table Total | 301,191 | 100.0 | $205,686,558 |
| **Senate:** | Candidate | 169,391 | 71.3 | $165,241,482 |
| | Party | 53,052 | 22.3 | $37,531,627 |
| | Group | 15,010 | 6.3 | $10,853,785 |
| | Table Total | 237,453 | 100.0 | $213,626,894 |
| **House:** | Candidate | 144,632 | 60.7 | $90,993,439 |
| | Party | 53,468 | 22.4 | $43,107,957 |
| | Group | 40,366 | 16.9 | $24,732,758 |
| | Table Total | 238,466 | 100.0 | $158,834,154 |

*Figure 5-3. Advertising Spots and Spending in Presidential, Senate, and House Elections, by Advertiser*

Any picture of the presidential election would be incomplete if it did not include the major role soft money played in the presidential election of 2000. The bulk of soft money was raised and allocated by the national party committees to be spent primarily in support of or opposition to the presidential candidates. As discussed in Chapter Seven, with the influx of large soft money contributions from business interests, labor unions, and wealthy individuals, television spending by the major parties reached $162 million in 2000, more than $81 million of which was spent on advertising in the presidential general election alone.

For the first time in history, party spending surpassed candidate spending on ads in the presidential general election. Including in the totals spending by minor candidates and parties like the Reform Party, the Green party, and the Libertarian Party, candidates barely account for a majority of ads aired: 51% versus 41% by the parties and 8% by groups. But when the field is limited to the major party candidates—Bush and Gore—and the parties and groups who supported them, there is a very different picture. The candidates account for only 42% of the ad spending in their contest, compared to 49% by the parties and 9% by groups. In terms of dollars, the major parties spent $81 million in the presidential general election, while candidates spent $69 million. Thus, the party coffers, loaded with soft money, played an especially potent role in the Bush-Gore battle (*see* Figure 5-2).

This balance of spending could suggest that presidential candidates are losing control over their campaigns, or it could suggest that the candidates are relying more on the party to do their advertising. This second hypothesis is more credible, since even before President Clinton began directing the DNC advertising campaign outright in 1995 and 1996, candidates controlled the design and scope of party advertising campaigns beyond the extent to which they are permitted by law. Thus while the major candidates were outspent by their parties in the presidential ad war, it is reasonable to assume that many, if not most, of the party ads were done at the direction of the candidates.

Candidates dominated the airwaves to a far greater extent in the combined primary and general elections of Senate races, where they accounted for 77.4% of the spending and 71.3% of the airings. The scope of party and group spending was far smaller: parties accounted for 17.6% of the spending and 22.3% of the ads; groups accounted for just 5.1% of the spending and 6.3% of the airings. But even as the overall cost and magnitude of Senate ads increased from $103 million in the 1998 general elections to $213 million in the 2000 primaries and general elections, candidates saw their share of the total spending decrease. While they accounted for 77.4% of the spending in 2000, in 1998, Senate general election candidates accounted for 85% of the spending in their races. Parties accounted for 14.5% and groups just 0.5% in 1998.

Groups achieved their largest percentage of spending and airings in the combined primary and general House elections, where they accounted for 15.6% of the spending and 16.9% of the airings. This share was approximately the same as in 1998 when groups were responsible for 15% of the House general election spending and 14.5% of the airings. Groups spent just under $25 million in 2000, roughly comparable to their combined spending in the Senate and presidential races ($28 million). House candidates accounted for a slightly larger share of the airings than the presidential candidates did in their races, with House candidates paying for 57.3% of the ad spending, and garnering 60.7% of the airings (*see* Figure 5-3). But these figures represented a decrease from the 1998 general election, when House candidates accounted for 69% of the ad spending in their races and 72% of the airings.

In terms of group advertisements, overall television advertising by groups in the 2000 elections showed little partisan favoritism. Aggregate group spending was roughly comparable for Democratic and Republican candidates in all races combined. However, when broken down by level of office, group spending showed a heavy Democratic tilt in the presidential race, and moderate favoritism for Republicans in both the House and Senate races. Remarkably, the Democratic bias among group advertising in the presidential race amounted to more than $3 spent for Democrats for every $1 spent for Republicans (*see* Figure 5-4).

Apparently, much of these partisan discrepancies in group support between level of offices can be attributed to the respective financial resources of the other players in the election—specifically, the candidates and parties. Most Republican-leaning group spending was done in the primary election, helping Bush overcome the challenge from John McCain. Once Bush received the nomination, group support for Republican candidates shifted to the congressional races. Both the Bush campaign and the Republican Party significantly outspent their rivals in the presidential general election—58.6% Republican to 41.4% Democratic for candidates, and 56.4% Republican to 43.6% Democratic for parties. Meanwhile, Democratic candidates and parties outspent their rivals in both the House and Senate general elections by roughly the same proportions. Accordingly, in what appears to have been a tacit understanding among candidates, parties, and groups—if not outright illegal coordination—group spending followed the shortfall of their favored party.

Democratic-leaning groups spent most in the presidential election; Republican-leaning groups spent more in the House and Senate elections. And both Democratic-leaning and Republican-leaning groups targeted the bulk of their television advertising in the most competitive states or districts.

The presidential primaries accounted for the majority of the ads in the 2000 federal primaries. Political players televised 53,985 spots for and against presidential primary candidates, while 33,985 were aired in the Senate primaries, and only 19,759 aired in the House primaries. The size of the presidential primary advertising reflects the fact that the presidential primary season is far longer than most congressional primary campaigns and the fact that television advertising is virtually indispensable to presidential primary candidates seeking to build name recognition and raise contributions.[1]

The numbers also indicate that television advertising in congressional primaries may not be considered cost-effective in some districts. Moreover, the actual number of contested congressional primaries has receded dramatically over the past 40 years. As one analyst noted in a 1995 essay, "between 1946 and 1952, fully 15 incumbent Senators lost their reelection runs in party primaries; between 1988 and 1994, only one incumbent Senator (Democrat Alan Dixon of Illinois) lost in a primary. In House races, there were 48 primary re-election losses between 1946-52, and about half that many, 25, between 1988-94."[2] In 2000, just two House incumbents lost in their party's primary.

## THE 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The historic 2000 presidential election was high drama for many months. Voters witnessed contentious and exciting primaries in early 2000 followed by an extremely tight race in the general election. Television advertising in both the primaries and the general election was significant, both in terms of magnitude and in cost. Importantly, the unique features of the primary season and general election battle for electoral votes determined where and when ads were aired.

In any presidential election, the outcome largely depends on a handful of hotly contested states. During the primary season, specific states such as Iowa and New Hampshire are the focus of enormous attention as primary candidates attempt to win early victories and build momentum. Since candidates must show strength early in the primary season in order to have a chance at the nomination, winning one or two key states becomes the focus of each candidate's campaign.

Similarly, the general election is fought in a small number of states which each side believes it has a competitive chance of winning. Most Americans reside in states that are already assumed to be casting their electoral votes for one candidate or the other, and thus these states are not the focus of advertising campaigns by the candidates of either major party. The spending and airings figures from the 2000 race reflect the important role these tossup states played in the general election.

Consistent with the findings for all federal elections, the candidates, parties, and groups involved in the presidential election of 2000 rarely made use of magic words that unquestionably subject the sponsors to campaign finance regulations. Only 10% of all advertisements sponsored by the presidential candidates explicitly told viewers to "vote for" or "vote against" the candidate or used other synonyms. Just 1.9% of party-sponsored ads in the presidential elections used magic words, and virtually no group-sponsored ad affecting the presidential race included magic words.

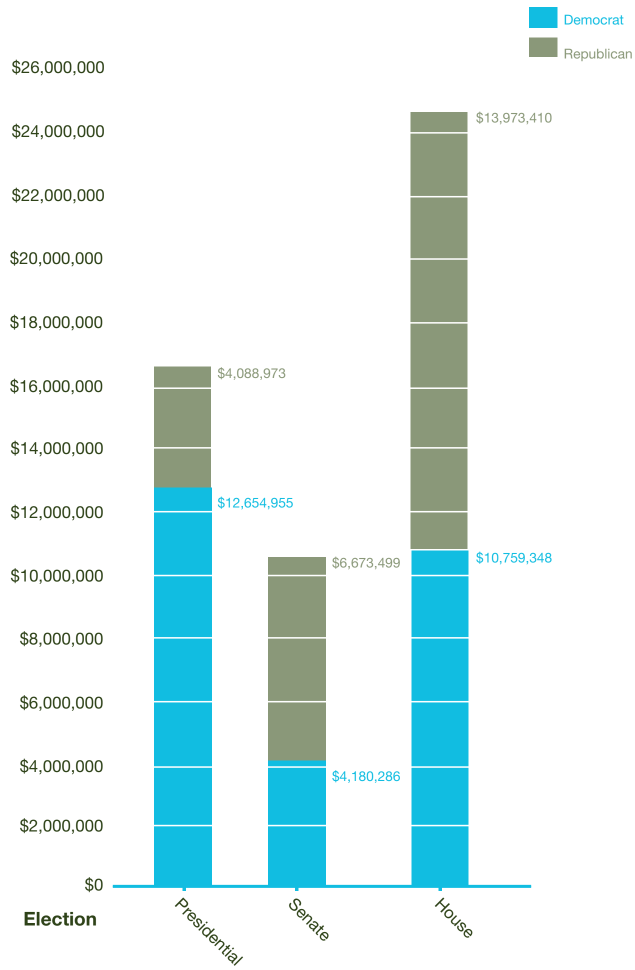
This pattern stands in stark contrast to the messages conveyed by these ads. According to the coders, every single party-sponsored ad in the presidential race and all but 0.1% of group-sponsored ads were electioneering ads (*see* Figure 5-5).

## THE PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY SEASON

In the Democratic presidential primary, the most serious opposition to Vice President Al Gore for the Democratic nomination came from former Senator Bill Bradley. Bradley's campaign was an insurgent campaign against the sitting Vice-President and was in need of one significant victory in order to gain traction. Having played for the New York Knicks and served as Senator from New Jersey for three terms, Bradley spent heavily in New York, as well as California where he believed he could surprise Gore. The Bradley campaign also spent heavily in Massachusetts, a typical move for campaigns that wish to

1. Although the television advertising database begins January 1, 2000, and thus does not capture all advertising relevant to the primary elections, primary advertising usually does not occur until the beginning of the calendar year. This suggests that the presidential primaries may account for an even larger percentage of the total primary airings, as only presidential candidates—anticipating the January 24 Iowa caucus—would seem to have reason to air ads before January 1.

2. Ron Faucheux, "Follow the Money: Incumbents May Walk, But It's Cash that Talks," *Campaigns and Elections* (June 1995), at 26.



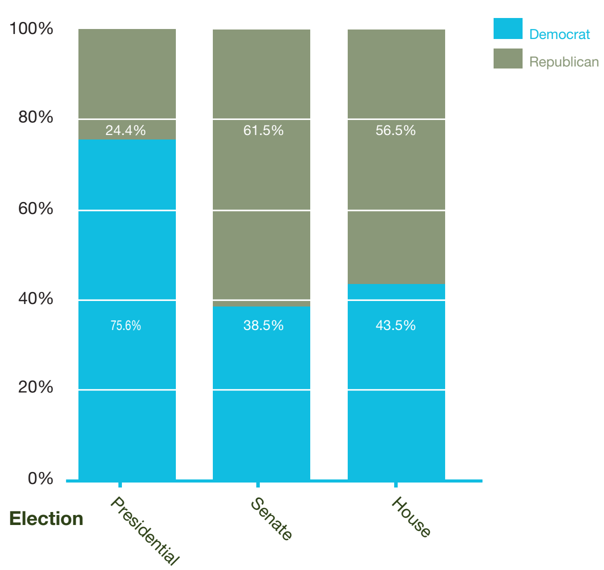




*Figure 5-4. Group Spending on Political Ads, by Level of Office and Partisan Leanings (Top chart by dollar amount, Bottom chart by percent)*

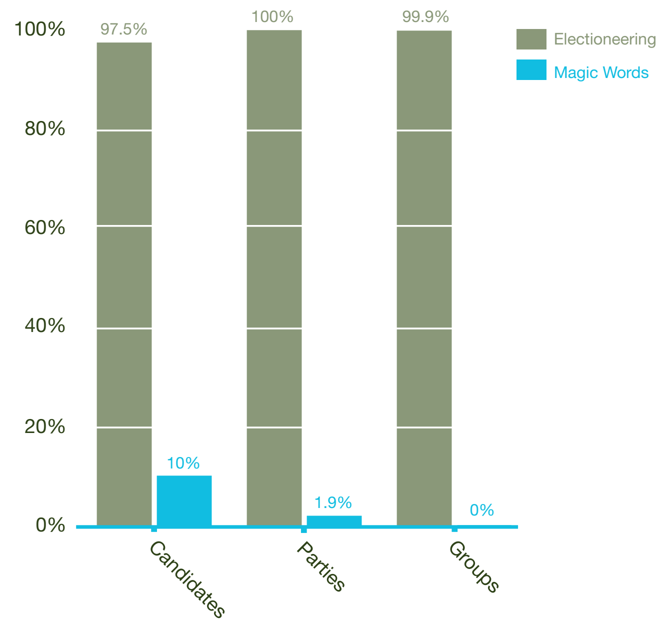



*Figure 5-5. Proportion of Electioneering Ads in the Presidential Race vs. Ads Which Used Magic Words*

broadcast ads into lower New Hampshire, the site of the nation's earliest primary. Gore also spent heavily in these three states, and as such 83% of the Democratic presidential primary candidates' total $15 million expenditures for television spots were spent in these three states. Though Bradley outspent Gore $1.8 million to $1.4 million in the Boston media market, Bradley failed to win in New Hampshire and dropped out of the race five weeks later.

McCain's stunning 19-point defeat of Bush in the New Hampshire primary turned the Republican nomination into what seemed to be a seesaw battle. Bush had accumulated a large warchest that was exceeded only by that of millionaire Steve Forbes, who had virtually unlimited personal funds to spend on ads. The Republican primary candidates made significant expenditures for television spots in at least eight states, including McCain's home state of Arizona. Other states topping the Republican candidates' spending list included California, Massachusetts (again, to reach New Hampshire's southern tier), Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia, and Washington. Roughly 87% of the Republican candidates' total $23 million in television expenditures was made in these states.

Unlike that of the Democrats, the Republican primary election attracted substantial spending on television ads by special interest groups—almost all of which favored the candidacy of George W. Bush. Collectively, group spending in the Republican primary amounted to nearly $1.5 million, compared to less than $70,000 in the Democratic

| | | Sum: | Col Sum %: | Sum: | Col Sum %: |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Democrat** | | **Republican** | |
| Candidate | | $3,919,833 | 41.9 | $7,348,232 | 52.2 |
| Party | | $3,374,080 | 36.1 | $6,433,810 | 45.7 |
| Group | | $2,054,778 | 22.0 | $299,217 | 2.1 |
| Table Total | | $9,348,691 | 100.0 | $14,081,259 | 100.0 |
| | | **Jacksonville** | | **Miami** | |
| Candidate | Democrat | $97,090 | 7.6 | $1,460,882 | 15.6 |
| | Republican | $634,244 | 49.4 | $3,571,773 | 38.2 |
| Party | Democrat | $31,267 | 2.4 | $605,471 | 6.5 |
| | Republican | $480,814 | 37.5 | $2,648,670 | 28.3 |
| Group | Democrat | $24,810 | 1.9 | $1,061,496 | 11.4 |
| | Republican | $14,855 | 1.2 | . | . |
| Table Total | | $1,283,080 | 100.0 | $9,348,292 | 100.0 |
| | | **Mobile** | | **Orlando** | |
| Candidate | Democrat | $249,385 | 20.9 | $705,556 | 18.3 |
| | Republican | $459,528 | 38.5 | $917,722 | 23.8 |
| Party | Democrat | $106,093 | 8.9 | $829,388 | 21.5 |
| | Republican | $380,039 | 31.8 | $964,684 | 25.0 |
| Group | Democrat | . | . | $397,743 | 10.3 |
| | Republican | . | . | $36,178 | 0.9 |
| Table Total | | $1,195,045 | 100.0 | $3,851,271 | 100.0 |
| | | **Tampa** | | **W. Palm Beach** | |
| Candidate | Democrat | $1,068,564 | 19.5 | $587,741 | 16.9 |
| | Republican | $1,315,465 | 24.0 | $909,028 | 26.2 |
| Party | Democrat | $1,250,403 | 22.8 | $657,551 | 18.9 |
| | Republican | $1,503,493 | 27.5 | $836,149 | 24.1 |
| Group | Democrat | $139,249 | 2.5 | $431,480 | 12.4 |
| | Republican | $198,228 | 3.6 | $49,956 | 1.4 |
| Table Total | | $5,475,402 | 100.0 | $3,471,905 | 100.0 |

*Figure 5-6. Spending on Television Ads in Florida's Major Media Markets, Presidential General Election*

primary. One group-sponsored ad attacked Republican Steve Forbes for attacking other Republican candidates, while most of the other group-sponsored ads in the Republican primary were harshly negative in tone against John McCain, contributing to an air of hostility among the candidates. For example, one such ad, sponsored by Americans for Tax Reform, pictured John McCain, and then read: "The only Republican candidate approved by the liberal New York Times.... Senator John McCain, helping Democrats pass a campaign finance reform bill that would keep the Republican Party from fighting the liberal national media...." Another such ad, sponsored by Voters for Campaign Truth, ended with the statement: "John McCain, stop this bigoted attack on the Christian voters of South Carolina and America." In sum, anti-McCain group spending accounted for $1.35 million of the total $1.5 spent by groups in the Republican primary.

## THE PRESIDENTIAL GENERAL ELECTION

In what was one of the tightest general elections ever—and only the fourth presidential election since popular suffrage in which the winning candidate lost the popular vote[3]—the air war of the 2000 race took place primarily in 10 states: Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Wisconsin. Republican strategists included an eleventh state in that mix—California—despite the fact that California has typically been a Democratic stronghold.

The Bush campaign and the national Republican Party paid for nearly $12 million in television buys in California in the general election, nearly as much as they spent on television in Florida. Gore and the Democratic Party all but ignored Republican efforts in California, spending just $107,000 on television in that state. Instead they focused their efforts on the state of Florida, which in the final weeks appeared more and more like a tossup than a Republican stronghold. Gore easily won California with an 11-point margin, while Bush officially hung onto Florida with a razor-thin vote margin of 537 ballots—a vote margin that determined the outcome of the election.

The waste of Republican campaign dollars in California enabled Gore to outspend Bush in several other key states. Despite being outspent nationwide on television time by Bush and the Republican Party $86 million to $64 million, Gore and the Democratic Party bought more airtime in Iowa, Michigan, New Mexico, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin—each one an important swing state that Bush narrowly lost. But, in the end, the election hinged on Florida.

In Florida, the candidates, parties, and groups completely saturated the television airwaves, especially in the final weeks of the campaign and in the media markets key to each candidate's strategy. Combined Bush and Republican Party spending was nearly even with Gore and Democratic Party spending in the critical markets of West Palm Beach, Tampa-St. Petersburg, and Orlando. However, the Republican campaign was able to outspend the Democrats in the conservative media markets of Pensacola and Jacksonville, as well as in the crucially important Miami market. Overall, Bush and the Republican Party ultimately outspent Gore and the Democratic Party in Florida by more than $6 million (*see* Figure 5-6).

But Gore received significant ad assistance from independent groups in Florida. Planned Parenthood spent nearly $1.5 million on television spots criticizing George Bush's record on abortion, and the AFL-CIO and the Sierra Club also spent heavily on television ads attacking Bush. Across Florida, various groups spent more than $2 million for television spots on behalf of Gore's candidacy, and only about $300,000 in support of Bush. Altogether, however, combined television spending by Bush, the Republican Party, and sympathetic groups amounted to $4.7 million more than the combined spending by Gore, the Democratic Party and pro-Gore groups. Despite this spending advantage and other advantages Bush enjoyed in Florida, Bush officially won the state by only a few hundred votes, a tally whose validity many continue to question.

The special interest group spending which allowed Gore to remain competitive on the Florida airwaves also played a very significant role in buying air time in many other states. Group spending exceeded more than $15 million in the presidential contest alone, with group spending heavily favoring Gore over Bush by a factor of 5-to-1 in the general election. Most of the group spending for the Democratic presidential ticket came from a small handful of organizations. Planned Parenthood accounted for 42% of group spending for Gore, followed by the AFL-CIO, Handgun Control, and the Sierra Club. In terms of group spending, Bush was supported primarily by Americans for Job Security, a secretive organization associated with the insurance industry which accounted for 85% of Republican-leaning group spending in the presidential race.[4] More information on the presidential race is included in Appendix A.

3. The other three presidential elections in which the winning candidate lost the popular vote are: John Quincy Adams in 1824; Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876; and Benjamin Harrison in 1888.

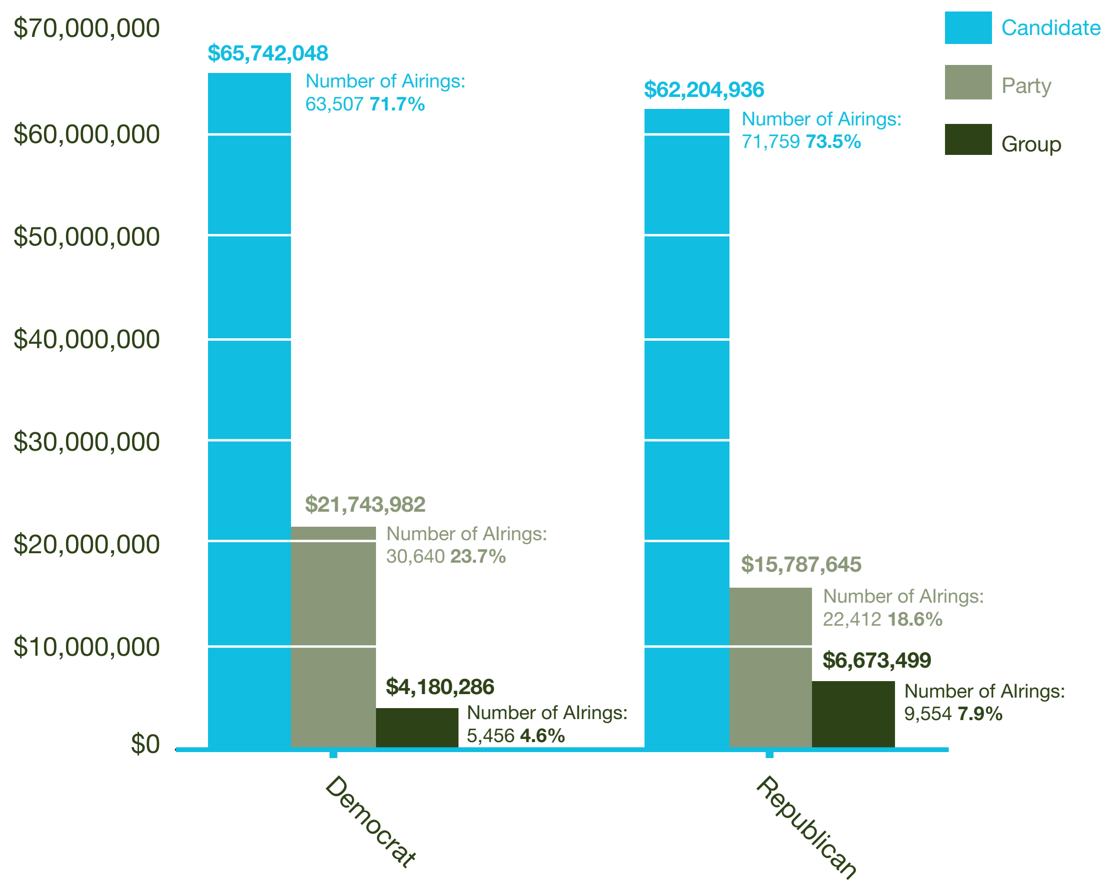



*Figure 5-7. Partisan Balance in Television Spending in the Senate General Election*

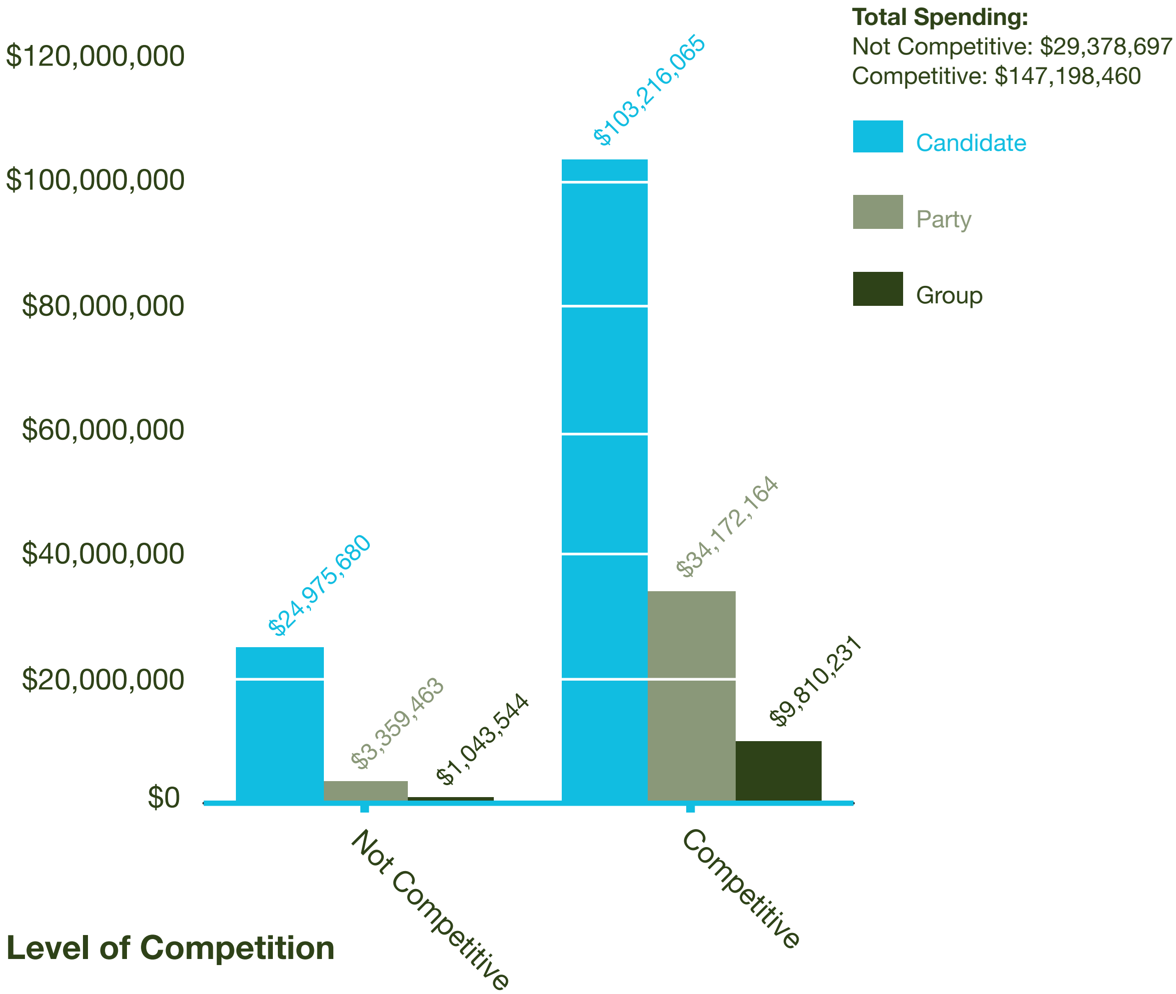
## THE 2000 SENATE ELECTIONS

With the Senate controlled by a slim Republican majority—54 seats were held by Republicans and 46 by Democrats—the stakes in the 34 Senate elections in 2000 were extremely high. Moreover, Republicans faced the uphill task of defending 19 seats compared to the Democrats' 15. As a result, Senate primaries and general elections saw large amounts of television advertising not just by the candidates but by their parties and interest groups. Detailed summaries of several Senate races are included in Appendix B.

## 1. SENATE PRIMARY ELECTIONS

The majority of the spending by candidates, parties, and groups in the 2000 Senate races took place during the general election. In fact, parties and groups ran no ads in any of the top 75 media markets targeting Senate primary campaigns. Slightly more than $37 million was spent on TV ads across the nation by Senate primary candidates—roughly 17% of the total spent on Senate races—but primary spending remained fairly limited in most states. Of the 34 Senate primaries taking place across the country, just 15 saw advertising on television. The Senate primaries in California, Pennsylvania and Washington saw less

4. The true identity of Americans for Job Security and the source of their funds has remained a mystery even to Republican officeholders who appeared in their television ads. Senator Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) and Nebraska Governor Mike Johanns, who appeared in one of the commercials, told the *Omaha World Herald* that they did not know who paid for the ads. The group has continued to date to conceal their contributors despite a new law requiring such Section 527 groups to disclose their funding sources. Editor, "Endorsement for Secrecy," *Political Finance & Lobby Reporter* (Apr. 11, 2001), at 1.




| | Not competitive | | Competitive | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Sum | Row Sum % | Sum | Row Sum % |
| Candidate | $24,975,680 | 19.5 | $103,216,065 | 80.5 |
| Party | $3,359,463 | 9.0 | $34,172,164 | 91.0 |
| Group | $1,043,554 | 9.6 | $9,810,231 | 90.4 |
| Table Total | $29,378,697 | 16.6 | $147,198,460 | 83.4 |

*Figure 5-8. Television Advertising in Competitive Senate General Elections, by Sponsor*

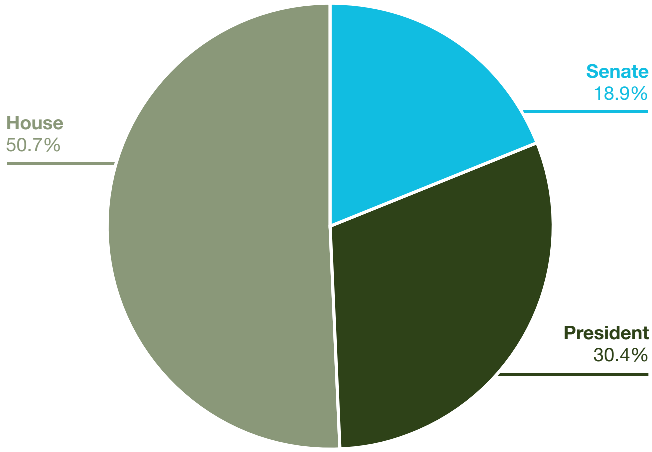



*Figure 5-9. Group Advertising in House, Senate, and Presidential Races*

than $2.7 million in ad spending respectively. Colorado, Florida, Maryland, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Tennessee each witnessed no more than $1.4 million, and most saw far less. Only the Minnesota and New Jersey primaries exceeded $5 million in television ad costs.

The bruising New Jersey Senate primary battle saw the Democratic candidates spend in excess of $17 million on television spots—amounting to 47% of all funds expended nationwide for advertising in the Senate primary season. The New Jersey spending spree was led by Wall Street multimillionaire Jon Corzine, who spent a record $35 million of his own money for all campaign activities to defeat former Governor Jim Florio for the Democratic nomination.[5] Corzine's spending total averaged out to about $300,000 a day, as opposed to Florio's total campaign expenditures of $2.5 million. Corzine ultimately won the primary election with 247,351 votes (and went on to win the general election), at a cost of $141.50 per primary vote compared to $13.89 per primary vote for Florio.[6]

In addition to Corzine, Mark Dayton of Minnesota pulled off a successful run in the primary and general elections financed largely by his own money. The Minnesota Democratic primary candidates combined spent $5.5 million on television spots, most of it coming from the personal wealth of department store heir Dayton and his trial lawyer opponent, Mike Ciresi. Both candidates had campaign budgets of almost $5 million each in the primary.

## 2. SENATE GENERAL ELECTIONS

The Senate general elections saw considerably more activity on the airwaves. Corzine and Dayton continued their massive buys of television time, and were joined by several other Senate candidates. Spending $176,577,157 on TV time nationwide, the general election campaign for the 34 U.S. Senate seats was even more costly than the presidential campaign. Candidates accounted for 72% of the spending, while parties accounted for 22% and groups just 6%. Republican candidates and Democratic candidates spent roughly the same on ads, $62 million to $65 million. But removing New Jersey from the equation leaves Democratic candidates trailing Republican candidates $50 million to $60 million in ad spending. The Democratic Party poured $21 million into the Senate races compared to $16 million by the Republican Party; pro-Democrat groups spent $4 million compared to $6.5 million by pro-Republican groups (*see* Figure 5-7).

As one might expect, the Senate races that analysts expected to be competitive attracted most of the spending on television advertising. Candidates raised and spent on average four times more on advertising in competitive than in non-competitive Senate elections.[7] Television spending by parties and interest groups was about 10 times higher in competitive than in non-competitive elections (*see* Figure 5-8).

## THE 2000 HOUSE ELECTIONS

The role of television advertising in House elections is distinct from that in Senate and presidential elections. Television advertising is often too expensive for House candidates, and compact districts often make television advertising inefficient. Thus the usefulness and practicality of TV ads often vary from district to district. While in the aggregate, House, Senate and presidential elections receive roughly the same amount of ad spending, this spending was not spread out evenly across all 435

5. David M. Halbfinger, "Deep Pockets: How Corzine Spent $35 Million on a Primary;" *New York Times* (Sept. 17, 2000), at 4.

6. Don Van Natta, "In Politics, It's Only Money: Yours or Theirs," *New York Times* (Jun. 11, 2001), at D4.

7. Competitive Senate general elections were expected in Delaware, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Virginia, and Washington.

House races. Only 39% of all House races in the 2000 elections saw some level of TV advertising.

In 2000, the Democratic Party hoped to continue its streak of picking up House seats, having gained nine seats in 1996 and five more in 1998. The Republican Party had the onerous task of protecting the 26 seats left open by Republican incumbents not running for re-election. The high stakes of the House elections made each close race of national importance. Profiles of closely-watched House races in California, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and New Jersey are located in Appendix B.

## 1. HOUSE PRIMARY ELECTIONS

In the House primary season, the absence of television advertising was stark. Just 12% of House primary races had any television advertising in 2000. While most of the ads were aired by candidates attempting to defeat an opponent, in a few primary races incumbents ran ads touting their accomplishments even though they were not seriously challenged from within their own party. Incumbents such as these anticipated a strong challenge in the general election and spent money on television time in the primary to bolster their standing.

Bolstering one's standing with early spending in preparation for a general election challenge was precisely the strategy of incumbent Rep. George Nethercutt, who was seeking re-election in Washington's 5th congressional district. Nethercutt ran a series of ads justifying his decision not to fulfill his self-imposed term limit pledge. One ad declared "...He did a heck of a job in Congress...He fought for term limits but they didn't pass...He's a good congressman."[8] A similar strategy was employed in California's 49th congressional district, where Rep. Brian Bilbray, completely unopposed in the primary, knew that his vote for the impeachment of President Clinton would become a major issue in a general election challenge. Bilbray spent $200,000 on TV before the general election even got under way. Bilbray lost in the general election to challenger Susan Davis.

Only one race involved significant television spending by an incumbent and a challenger from within the incumbent's own party: Utah's second congressional district pitting Republican incumbent Merrill Cook against Republican Derek Smith. Based more on personality clashes than ideology, Smith trounced Cook, who was dogged by allegations of a volatile temper and became one of only two congressional incumbents defeated in the primary season.[9]

## 2. HOUSE GENERAL ELECTIONS

The House general elections witnessed considerably more television advertising than the primaries, as spending by candidates, parties, and groups swelled to more than $147 million. Candidates combined spent about $80 million, followed by $43 million in television buys by the parties, and $24.5 million by independent groups. Surprisingly, the House elections drew more attention from special interest groups than any other type of election. Groups aired more than half of their total advertisments in House elections—more than what they aired in the presidential and Senate elections combined (*see* Figure 5-9).

Consistent with other types of races, television time in House general elections flowed to the hotly contested races. In the 2000 elections, about 10% of House races were considered competitive by election analysts. More than 74% of television advertisements aired within these 45 competitive races, and group spending tracked closely with competitiveness.[10] Groups focused their ad purchases, running ads in only 49 of the 435 House districts. Groups aired 77.4% of their ads in Republican-held districts, 9.1% in Democrat-held districts, and 13.4% in open races. Group spending tended to favor Republicans more than Democrats (56.4% to 43.6%). Pro-Democrat groups spent more on open seat races compared to pro-Republican groups, $3.5 million to $2 million. Where an incumbent was facing a challenger, group spending was fairly evenly divided between incumbents and challengers—$9.3 million versus $8.5 million—except when broken down

8. Nethercutt advertisement, "Nethercutt Heck of a Job," CMAG ad report, storyboard #1416, available at the Brennan Center. The ad aired 140 times between 9/14/00 and 9/18/00.

9. Immediately after the defeat, Cook then threatened to run a write-in campaign in the general election and to hinder Republican party leadership efforts in the House for the remainder of his term. Editor, "Cook Sets Conditions for Write-In Bid," *National Journal's House Race Hotline* (Jun. 30, 2001), at 1.

10. The 45 competitive general election House races include: Arizona's 4th; California's 15th; California's 20th; California's 27th; California's 36th; California's 49th; Connecticut's 2nd; Connecticut's 5th; Florida's 3rd; Florida's 8th; Florida's 12th; Florida's 22nd; Illinois' 10th; Illinois' 17th; Indiana's 8th; Kansas' 3rd; Kentucky's 2nd; Kentucky's 3rd; Kentucky's 6th; Michigan's 8th; Minnesota's 2nd; Minnesota's 4th; Minnesota's 6th; Missouri's 4th; Missouri's 6th; Nevada's 1st; New Hampshire's 2nd; New Jersey's 7th; New Jersey's 12th; New Mexico's 1st; New York's 2nd; North Carolina's 8th; North Carolina's 11th; Ohio's 12th; Oklahoma's 2nd; Pennsylvania's 4th; Pennsylvania's 10th; Pennsylvania's 13th; Texas' 25th; Utah's 2nd; Virginia's 2nd; Washington's 1st; Washington's 2nd; Washington's 5th; and West Virginia's 2nd.

by party. Group spending on behalf of Democrats heavily favored challengers over incumbents ($6.2 million versus $950,000), but group spending on behalf of Republicans heavily favored incumbents over challengers ($8.3 million versus $2.3 million). This can be largely attributed to the fact that the Republicans were in the majority and the Democrats were attempting to unseat as many incumbents as possible in their quest to re-take the House.

Party spending also tracked closely with competitiveness. The parties aired ads in only 48 House races, and while they spent $43 million on ads, a third of that spending ($14.4 million) was directed at just six House districts: New Jersey's 12th, California's 36th, New York's 2nd, Florida's 22nd, California's 27th, and Michigan's 8th. About 41% of party spending on House races went to open seat races, 35% to seats held by Republicans, and 24% to seats held by Democrats.

The concentration of party spending on competitive races makes sense from a strategic point of view, but casts doubt on whether the soft money which funds party ads actually serves the ostensible purpose of getting out the vote as opposed to attacking or promoting specific candidates. Only 6% of party ads aired in House races actually mentioned the party name, though these ads are in theory intended to pay for grassroots party-building. At the same time, 99% of all party ads aired in House races featured or mentioned a candidate for office. Indeed, coders found that 100% of the party ads had the purpose of generating support for or opposition to a specific candidate.

The data also cast doubt on a claim recently raised by certain members of Congress: that soft money is used by the Democratic Party to increase voter turnout for minority candidates. The data show that parties have made no great effort to support minority candidates *via television ads* in the top 75 media markets. Less than 7% of party ad spending in House elections went to races with minority candidates; 93% went to promote white candidates. Of the 42 races in which the Democratic Party aired television ads, just three included minority candidates, and none were amongst the top recipients of party help. This suggests that the main goal of party spending on advertising is to assist those candidates who are in competitive races, not to increase voter turnout nationally or in districts with candidates of color.