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Political Ads Might Not Change Your Vote- But They May Get You to the Polls

By William Steiger
UCF Forum columnist
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Florida voters were overwhelmed with political ads on their TVs, computers, mobile devices and phones in advance of the recent Florida primary. The television ads pushed traditional product commercials out of prime-time programming and dominated the commercial breaks. Fortunately, the commercials disappeared as quickly as they started...at least until they start up again for the general election.

If you voted, did you change your vote based on the ads?

The marketing of political candidates through advertising has been extensively studied for over 50 years and the research found inconsistent evidence of the efficacy of political advertising in changing someone's voting choice.

The commercials for candidates tend to promote "what's good about me" or "what's bad about my opponent." The positive ads showed relaxed candidates surrounded by smiling and enthusiastic people from a representative demographic background. The negative ads used unflattering photos or video and comments clearly taken out of context to portray "what's bad about" the opposing candidate. Some of the positive ads offered information on the candidate's position on various issues although the negative ads generally focused on a candidate's unethical or questionable behavior.

I didn't believe either one of the approaches although they do stir emotion in me, which is one of the purposes of the ads. Research has found that ads appeal to the emotions of voters, a practice that seems to subvert the rational decision-making on which democratic processes properly rest. This makes me feel manipulated, angry and

disappointed in the candidates and the process of marketing the candidates through commercials.

I follow politics because I view it as one of my responsibilities as a citizen. While I'm not a political expert, I feel I'm informed about issues and the candidates' position on the issues. It's what determines my vote.

But what about the voters who are uninformed. Does the "information" in the political ads influence them more than me? Research says that it does. So in these cases, the ads have a dual role: provide information and stimulate emotion to influence their voting behavior.

Political ads that trick people into acting contrary to their interests or on the basis of untruths should be criticized regardless of whether they make an appeal to emotion or logic.

There is mounting empirical evidence that emotions are tied to ebbs and flows of voter participation. In contrast to many aspects of public affairs, evidence to date suggests that emotion has a positive impact on getting citizens involved.

If the ads can get voters to the polls, I'm all for it.

If the information in the ads is truthful and helps them to make an informed choice in the absence of having any information, I'm all-in on that too.

Let's *all* get to the polls next time.

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