

Political Advertising

What Donors Need to Know

American elections are more expensive than ever in history, and a main driver of that price tag is ad spending. Out of the record-setting \$14 billion spent on elections in 2020, an estimated \$8.5 billion of it went to TV, radio and digital ads. Campaigns, committees and outside groups flood the airwaves and digital platforms with millions of ads every year in the hopes of swaying voters.

But the ever-evolving media landscape has completely transformed the conventional wisdom about political advertising—and, perhaps, weakened its immediate potency. With so much content competing for people’s attention, a single ad is far less likely to sway a voter than it used to. In 2020, there were 18 media markets where campaigns spent at least \$100 million on political ads, according to Ad Impact's analysis of the recent cycle, indicating just how competitive the battle for voters' attention has become. This means savvy political organizations need to approach advertising from a holistic lens, spending over a longer period of time to create a narrative for voters that will cut through the noise.

Blue Tent talked with political advertising experts to better understand the industry practices of political advertising to provide better context to our organization reports. Keep these perspectives in mind as you evaluate which group to give your donations.

TV Is Still Important—But In a Different Way

Political advertising used to be much more simple. Campaigns would purchase ads on “linear television” (the traditional type of TV, these days referring to broadcast and cable) and that spot would reach a significant number of eyeballs. Played at the right time and on the right networks, campaigns could reach many voters with TV alone. The old conventional wisdom dictated only, or mostly, spending on TV ads in the last six weeks before Election Day, when voters are most likely to be paying attention to the race. Early-in-the-year TV spots were considered a waste, the thinking went, since voters wouldn’t remember a political ad when not thinking about elections.

Spending on traditional media (TV and radio) still dominates ad spending over digital, but its uses and efficacy have changed dramatically in recent years. Americans’ time spent with traditional media has decreased as time with digital media has skyrocketed—a trend that increased dramatically during the pandemic. TV is by no means obsolete:

but when funds are already stretched thin, it's all too easy for long-term concerns to get back-burnered in the face of immediate needs. Dedicated capacity-building support can make a huge difference in enabling a nonprofit to invest in the equipment, training and planning that will allow it to effectively fulfill its mission now and in the future.

Capacity-building support can come in the form of a grant or gift of money. Some funders also offer capacity-building support in the form of organizing convenings or trainings for their grantee partners, such as a networking or professional development event for multiple grantees working in the same field.

You may also want to check out:

- GOS vs project support
- What is general operating support?
- What is program (or project) support?
- What is multiyear funding?

