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MeTube: Political Advertising, Election Campaigns, and YouTube

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ouTube provides a new channel for campaigns to broadcast their messages to citizens. How is it affecting the nature of campaigning? This paper examines 3,118 YouTube videos uploaded in various campaigns in 12 countries, examining the tone, content, and popularity of each video. The primary finding is

that YouTube campaign videos are more positive than ads aired on television, but that the size of the difference between the two mediums varied greatly between countries. YouTube videos are more positive than TV advertisements because they are more narrowly targeted to the highly informed, highly motivated, usually supportive people who view a candidate's online videos. Informing and inspiring supporters is a task well suited to YouTube videos.



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Attacking an opponent, however, is more effectively done on TV, because weak supporters of a candidate's opponent – the usual target for negative advertising – are more likely to watch the candidate's TV spot than to watch the candidate's YouTube video. This bifurcation between a sunny YouTube presence and a mean-spirited television ad campaign is stronger in US-style winner-take-all elections than in European-style proportional elections, and has major consequences for the character of campaigning and how candidates are seen by voters.



Rob Salmond is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Michigan. YouTube was launched in 2005, bringing the ability to freely share video content online to everyone. In six short years, it has become the third most popular website in the world, behind only Google and Facebook. One estimate suggests that over 30 percent of the world's internet users on any given day visit YouTube.¹ As of early 2010, 24 hours of new video content is uploaded to YouTube every minute, and the site serves over two billion video views per day. YouTube's popularity continues to grow exponentially: its reach increased from one billion views per day to two billion in only seven months.

YouTube's impact on the community has been wide reaching, causing governments and firms to rethink their approaches to intellectual property protection, reconsider free speech and censorship issues more generally, reconceive advertising strategies, and become subject to an entirely new, highly creative form of public criticism and ridicule.

YouTube has also had a marked impact on election campaigns. Some cite the 2006 midterms in the U.S. as the first YouTube election, recalling incidents such as Sen. George Allen's "macaca" moment, uploaded to YouTube by his opponent Jim Webb's campaign, an act that unleashed a firestorm of criticism of Allen and helped propel Webb to an unlikely victory.² But it was the U.S. election in 2008 that truly cemented YouTube's major new role in democratic politics, featuring popular videos from candidates and members of the public alike, such as Obama Girl's "I've Got a Crush on Obama" (over 20 million views), Hugh Atkin's "BarackRoll" series (over 7 million views), and Barack Obama's dancing appearance on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" (over 10 million views) and primary campaign speech on racial issues (over 6 million views).

Information about YouTube videos has the potential to allow political scientists to better answer many important questions, including questions about the impact of electoral systems on political culture and the determinants of party strategy in a multi-party environment. In this paper, however, I concentrate primarily on documenting the tonal differences in modern election campaigns. I seek to explain negativity in official election advertising, and do so concentrating on two sources of the variation in tone. The first is the difference between a YouTube-based video campaign and those video advertisements also aired on television. The second is the context in which a campaign finds itself, both in terms of the rules of the game and in terms of the campaign's own performance.

This study relies on detailed analysis of 3,118 YouTube videos uploaded during election campaigns by 72 parties across 12 countries.³ All told, these videos were viewed almost 44 million times. The study uses two types of information for each video: content and popularity. A team of research assistants⁴ coded each video's content for, among other things, its tone, emotional appeals, and subject focus. A set of computer scripts also recorded each video's popularity every day during the country's election campaign.

Tone

Campaigners for high office tend to be more negative on TV than on YouTube, both in the U.S. and in other democracies. In the 2008 presidential campaign, the Obama



campaign's YouTube videos that also likely appeared on TV⁵ were mostly attack ads against John McCain (56 percent), whereas the YouTube-only ads were mostly positive ads about Obama (73 percent). The McCain campaign was more negative in tone overall, and this tendency was substantially starker in the YouTube-and-TV videos (68 percent negative) than in the YouTube-only videos (52 percent negative). While the campaigns outside the U.S. were more positively framed overall, the same differences between TV and internet campaigning emerge, with double the negative ads appearing on TV as compared to the videos appearing only on YouTube.⁶

Even among the negative ads, there is a difference in tone on YouTube. Among the YouTube only videos I examined, 78 percent attacked an opponent purely on the basis of their positions on issues. The remaining 22 percent introduced a significant element of character attack in addition to any policy-based criticism. On TV, however, the proportion of attack ads featuring character-based attacks jumped from 22 percent to over 38 percent.

Negative ads on TV also appear to have more emotional appeals than do negative ads appearing only on YouTube. The strength of all emotional appeals is around 10 percent higher among the TV-based negative ads, a statistically significant difference. That small difference in the overall appeals, however, masks a sharper divide in one particular emotional appeal – the appeal to fear. While there is no important difference between TV and YouTube-only videos in terms of how much anger they cued in viewers, there is a large difference in how much fear the ads aim to create. Over half of the TV attack advertisements I examined contained strong fear appeals, compared to less than a quarter of the YouTube-only negative ads. And while 41 percent of the YouTube-only attack videos contained no fear appeal at all, only 16 percent of the negative TV ads did the same. Fear and anger are very different. An appeal to anger is often about events that have already happened, and will frequently require statements of (alleged) fact to cue the anger. Fear, on the other hand, is more prospective. It is about tomorrow rather than yesterday. As a result, ads cueing fear can be more speculative. In addition, some psychologists have found that fear, more than any other emotion, is the prime motivating feeling in human affairs.⁷

Why should these two forms of video campaign differ? Both forms of advertisement use the same technology and are available to the public-at-large. Indeed, there is even a financial incentive to run identical campaigns across the two mediums in that the additional production costs of YouTube videos are zero under that strategy.

In fact, there are two important sources of difference between the two mediums: audience and broadcast cost. These differences have significant implications for the tone of the two video campaigns.

Audience

Watching a YouTube advertisement requires purposive action, minimally to make the decision to click on a link sent by a friend, or in other cases spending time searching



for political content online. These are active decisions, and are often costly in terms of time. Watching a TV advertisement is more passive. It requires only a failure to leave the room or change the channel when an advertisement appears on screen. As a consequence, YouTube videos tend to be seen by a different audience than are TV advertisements.

Specifically, the audience for YouTube advertisements is younger, richer, more educated, more politically interested, and more partisan than the population at large. This tendency has been confirmed in studies about online video specifically and online political engagement more generally. Writing in 2003 about political websites as a whole, Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis found:

"...the audience of any particular campaign Web site is likely to be overwhelmingly composed of knowledgeable, interested, partisan supporters of the candidate."⁸

Studying web engagement in the British election in 2005, Pippa Norris and John Curtice discovered:

"...few people usually use resources such as party and candidate websites and the minority that do so are often already the most engaged citizens. As a result, political websites often 'preach to the converted' rather than expanding the pool of engaged citizens."⁹

And in 2008, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey of the American population asking about their engagement with politics online.¹⁰ Their data show that the group of people who engaged in some form with online political videos (whether they were campaign commercials, debates, or candidate interviews) was:

- Seven to nine years younger, on average, than the population at large;
- Around 50 percent likely to report an income above \$50,000 (the sample average was 37 percent);
- Around 0.6 points higher in educational achievement than the general population on a seven point scale ranging from no formal education through to PhD;
- Around half as likely as the general population to report low levels of political interest;
- Around half as likely as the general population to report partisan indecision.

All of these differences are statistically significant. And in other countries, the differences are likely even more stark, because the U.S. has a much higher reported use of the internet for political purposes than do most other democracies. (In my own dataset, 38 million of the 44 million video views in my sample came from the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign even though the U.S. population accounts for 39 percent of the total population of the countries in the sample.)

Indeed, the Norris and Curtice study quoted above proposes that the internet is not mainly a tool for politicians to communicate directly with voters, even though voters are free to peruse campaign websites if they wish. Instead, they argue, the internet serves as a tool for campaigns to inform other members of the broad political elite, including journalists, commentators, activists, and opinion leaders. It is those other people who handle the task of delivering the messages to less engaged voters with whom they happen to share a social connection, perhaps through church or sport or work. For Norris and Curtice, who are drawing on a long tradition in public opinion research¹¹, campaign internet communications are typically communications between political insiders, not between insiders and outsiders. For all the increase in the U.S. in viewing political internet communications, including YouTube videos, the Pew data suggest this two-step process remains in operation Stateside as well.

The reason this difference in audience is important to advertising tone is that attack advertisements are more aimed at some people than at others. Specifically, attack advertising's primary goal is to convince a person with low political engagement *not* to support the candidate with whom they previously had weak ties. It targets weak partisans rather than strong partisans because targeting strong partisans is very difficult and because succeeding with only weak partisans is almost always enough to win the election. If the attack advertisement also draws the voter to support the candidate making the attack advertisement, then that is an added bonus. Such low-information, weakly partisan people abound in the population, but they do not tend to frequent political YouTube channels, especially YouTube channels sponsored by a candidate they do not prefer. In short, attack advertising is less effective on YouTube because the target audience is largely absent.¹²

Broadcast Cost

The young, educated, engaged population that is interested in a candidate's YouTube videos is often looking for something other than messages about why the candidate's opponent is a bad person. For example, the Pew data discussed above also shows that those people who report high levels of political interest are around three times more likely to report either reading a candidate's campaign speech or reading a campaign's policy paper than are people reporting lower levels of political interest. In addition to speeches and policy papers, high interest activists may also be seeking information about opportunities to network with copartisans or become more involved in the campaign. YouTube provides an avenue for campaigns to provide these materials to its copartisans and activists at very low cost.

Running long-form political infomercials on television is not unheard of. Both Barack Obama and Ross Perot have purchased 30-minute blocks of national airtime during their 2008 and 1992 presidential campaigns, respectively. But such a strategy is enormously expensive. One estimate suggested Mr. Obama's infomercial cost \$4 million to \$5 million to air. With YouTube, it is now possible to provide detailed video information to activist copartisans and other members of the political elite for a broadcast cost of \$0. Further, this technique for quenching the thirst for detail of copartisans and commentators does not rely on them being available to watch in a particular timeslot.

The comparative data confirm this tendency in YouTube videos. The average length of each YouTube video, even including all the uploaded TV ads, is more than five minutes both across all the countries and within the U.S. Several hundred of the videos are over 10 minutes in length, often consisting of extended clips from candidate speeches. TV ads, of course, are far shorter. YouTube provides a substantially more cost effective means of providing detailed information to those who seek it than does TV.

The relative length of the videos across the two mediums also goes a long way toward explaining the different focuses of the attack videos. TV attack videos, often limited to 60, 30, or even 15 seconds in length, have to make a general point quickly. This requirement often lends itself to emotive cues which can be created almost instantly in a video (e.g., grainy black and white photo of opposing candidate shaking hands with Saddam Hussein while horror movie music plays), as opposed to cognitive, fact-based cues which take more of the video to develop (e.g., narrator informing the audience about the Iran / Iraq war in the 1980s and about American dealings with the Iraqi regime during that time, some conducted by the opposing candidate). This resource-based constraint forms an important partial explanation for the differing emotional content of YouTube-only videos and TV ads.

Campaign Performance

In addition to the media-based differences between YouTube and TV that influence a campaign's tone, these data also allow us to examine which contextual factors play a role in influencing the level of negativity in election campaigns. One such factor that has been studied extensively in previous work on U.S. campaigns is overall performance. Campaigns that are performing well have a sunnier disposition than campaigns performing poorly.¹³ That can lead to a charge that attack advertising is a weapon of last resort; a leg up for losers. That claim is overstated. Barack Obama's highly successful campaign, waged in a context of opinion polls consistently pointing toward his victory, was nonetheless very negative. Over half of his TV advertisements were attack ads. Attack advertising is not solely a strategy for prospectively sore losers, but earlier American work shows that it is used more often by campaigns in trouble.

This pattern is also true across the advanced democracies. The YouTube data show that those campaigns that go on to win the election¹⁴ tend to produce YouTube videos that are more positive in tone than do campaigns ultimately destined to lose. The average difference in tone is around half a point on a five-point scale, which is statistically significant, and remains significant in multilevel, multivariate regression analysis.

One interpretation of this correlation would note that the negative advertising



predates the campaign loss, and argue that therefore the loss cannot be causing the advertising decision. Indeed, the advertising decisions may be causally contributing to the eventual loss. Such a critique is misguided, however, because in most cases the politicians are well aware of the likely outcome of an election before the campaign advertising even starts.¹⁵ John McCain, for example, would have been acutely aware that running as a Republican following two terms of Republican leadership in a context of an anemic economy was not helpful to his chances, and would also have been aware of the polling gap between himself and Barack Obama, which hovered around five percentage points through much of summer 2008. Gordon Brown would have had the same knowledge leading into the 2010 British election, as would John Howard in the 2007 Australian election, and many others besides. Candidates make their advertising decisions based on where they believe they stand going into the campaign. Most of the time, their competitive position at the beginning of the campaign is the same as their competitive position at the end.

Further evidence of this process of position-based advertising strategy can be found by looking at how campaigns change their advertising during the course of the campaign. The data show that campaigns about to win tend to become significantly more positive as the campaign unfolds, while those campaigns staring down the barrel of a loss become significantly more negative. By the end of the campaign, the average gap in tone between winners and losers is over 0.8 points on the five-point scale. This shows that as uncertainty in the campaign dissipates and the impending result becomes clearer, upcoming winners and losers revert to type – winners smile preemptively; losers sulk in advance.

Election Rules

In times past, any discussion of the role of electoral rules as an influence over politics was of only academic interest to political practitioners in the U.S. But with some American cities, notably San Francisco and surrounding incorporations, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and Portland (ME) making the first small steps away from simple plurality-winner-take-all elections, it is becoming relevant in a practical sense to ask what elections look like as polities move in the direction of election systems rewarding cooperation between rival political movements around polling day.¹⁶

Information from the observed YouTube campaigning is clear on this question: the more proportional electoral systems tend to induce more positive election advertising, while the American- or British-style single member district elections tend to be more negative. As before, this difference is statistically significant and robust to multilevel, multivariate analysis. Almost one in four YouTube videos in Americanstyle election systems are attack ads, compared with one in six videos in proportional representation systems. For TV ads the difference is even more stark: one in two TV ads in American-style elections are negative, compared with one in three ads under proportional representation rules.

The explanation for this pattern is relatively straightforward. Election systems



that require a greater degree of interparty cooperation and coalition building induce greater mutual respect and admiration, and less mutual denigration. Today's antagonist can sometimes be tomorrow's lifeline. Those incentives are reflected in advertising decisions. In systems where politicians can be quasi certain that the enemy today will also be the enemy in 30 years time, they are freer to engage in attack advertising without worrying about its impact on future negotiations.

This correlation, which has been impossible to discover in most previous studies on this topic because of their single country research designs, suggests that those cities moving away from simple plurality winner rules in their elections are likely to see a somewhat more positive tone than we observe in typical American elections.

Studying YouTube is helpful for documenting the dynamics of a new medium for political advertising, and for understanding the contrasts between this Web 2.0 video delivery system and its more traditional broadcast antecedents. As this paper has shown, a YouTube campaign is much more than a TV campaign uploaded to the internet. But studying YouTube is also helpful for understanding existing important questions about election campaigns, some of which we have found difficult to study until now. Thus YouTube is a technological innovation in two ways: it is itself a new and different way to use technology to communicate; but it is also a new and different window through which to view familiar aspects of the political world.

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Endnotes

¹ Alexa.com (accessed October 17, 2011)

² Winograd, Morley, and Michael D Hais. 2008. *Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, pp 134-135.

³ The elections in the analysis are (Lower House unless noted): Australia 2007, 2010, Canada 2008, Germany 2009, Italy 2008, Japan 2009, Netherlands 2010, New Zealand 2008, Norway 2009, Spain 2009, Sweden 2010, UK 2010, USA 2008 (Presidential).

⁴ I would like to thank Matias Bargsted, Timm Betz, Gina Buiocchi, Anthony Burton, Tom Coleman, Josh David, Nate Gire, Cassie Grafstrom, Sang-Jung Han, Ben McCoy, Annemarie Walter, Billy Warden, and Ashley Wiers for their tireless, dedicated, and most importantly multilingual research assistance.

⁵ To perform these analyses I split the sample of YouTube videos into two categories: those that were the same length as standard form TV advertisements, with a 1 second tolerance either side; and those that were not. Different coding rules applied in the UK, where Party Election Broadcasters have a different format. To the extent that this technique for splitting the data is imperfect, it will tend to understate rather than overstate the difference between the two mediums.

⁶ Ads were coded along a five-point scale, running from exclusively positive material to exclusively negative attack material. The two most positive and two most negative categories are collapsed here to give the broader estimates of positive / negative campaigning.

⁷ Lazarus, Richard S. 1991. *Emotion and Adaptation*. New York: Oxford University Press, p234.

⁸ Bimber, Bruce, and Richard Davis. 2003. *Campaigning Online: The Internet and US Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁹ Norris, Pippa, and John Curtice. 2008. "Getting the Message Out: A Two-Step Model of the Role of the Internet in Campaign Communication Flows During the 2005 British General Election." *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* (4:4), pp 3-13.

¹⁰ Pew Research Center. 2008. "The Internet and the 2008 Election." Report and data available at: http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2008/The-Internet-and-the-2008-Election.aspx

¹¹ See for example Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹² This discussion focuses on the *intended* effect of negative ads, not on whether the ads do, in fact, achieve their objectives. There is much academic debate around this second question, and canvassing it is unnecessary here.



¹³ See for example: Skaperdas, Stergios, and Bernard Grofman. 1995. "Modeling Negative Campaigning." *American Political Science Review* (89:1), pp 49-61; Damore, David F. 2002.
"Candidate Strategy and the Decision to Go Negative." *Political Research Quarterly* (55:3), pp 669⁽²⁵⁾ Declarate Lynch Martin L Wife and Michael Packing 2000. "Compariso Compariso for the second s

685; Druckman, James N., Martin J. Kifer, and Michael Parkin. 2009. "Campaign Communications in US Congressional Elections." *American Political Science Review* (103:3), pp 343-366.

¹⁴ I define "winning the election" as gaining representation in the post-election Cabinet, a yardstick common to U.S.-style and proportional election systems.

¹⁵ Substantial scholarship has found an important link, for example, between pre-campaign economic conditions and eventual incumbent performance in the election. See for example Fiorina, Morris P. 1981. *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Lewis-Beck, Michael S. 1990. *Economics and Elections* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Duch, Raymond M. and Randolph T Stephenson. 2008. *The Economic Vote*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁶ To be sure, those cities that have moved away from plurality rule have not moved very far. Their new voting system, the "instant runoff" or "preferential vote" or "ranked vote" system, is still an ultimately majoritarian way to elect a representative in a single-seat competition. But this system, unlike a typical American election, provides third party candidates a crucial, purposive role to play in the process – the role of Kingmaker or Queenmaker. Large parties sometimes court third party candidates for their public endorsement as the third party's second choice, and sometimes the third party can negotiate policy concessions in return. This back-and-forth, despite its infrequency and limited scope, nonetheless allows for much more negotiation and cooperation between rivals than American elections typically involve.

