

Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail: Political Advertising in the 2015 Election



Jonathan Rose

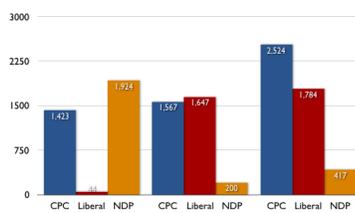
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Jonathan Rose teaches political communication and Canadian politics at Queen's. He has written on the role of advertising both in elections by political parties and between elections by government. Since 2004, Jonathan has been a member of the Ontario Auditor General's Advertising Review panel that reviews Ontario government advertising. His recent publications include "Television Advertising and its Impact on Campaigning and Elections" (co-written with Tim Abray), *Journal of Parliamentary and Political Law* (Spring 2015) and *When Citizens' Decide: Lessons From Citizens' Assemblies*, co-written with André Blais, R. Kenneth Carty, Patrick Fournier and Henk van der Kolk (Oxford University Press, 2011).

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The 2015 Canadian election will be remembered for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the role played by advertising. While we won't know for some time how much the parties spent on the campaign or advertising, the die was cast well before the election was called. Party election advertising is a continuation of non-election advertising and we can see that the three national political parties spent increasing amounts over the last three years (see Chart 1).

Chart 1:
Party advertising in non-election years (in thousands of dollars)

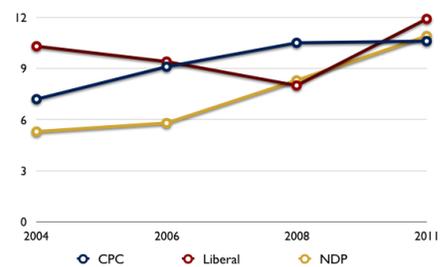


Source: Elections Canada: Statements of Assets & Liabilities and Statements of Revenue and Expenses

Political parties begin advertising well before the election is called. This is readily apparent in each of the last three years. (The seemingly anomalous Liberal and NDP amounts in 2012 can be explained by the fact that the Liberals had no money after the 2011 election and that the NDP chose Thomas Mulcair as leader in 2012 and were eager to have him not framed in the same way as the [Conservatives framed Stéphane Dion](#). This pre-election period is significant as it allows parties to begin priming voters on themes that they deem important. For the Conservatives, the Just not ready ads began; for the Liberals, it was about change and hope; and for the NDP it was around judgment and experience. [Pre-writ tests showed](#) that while the Conservatives spent more on advertising in this period, it was the NDP that was more effective.

While parties spend money on advertising leading up to an election, over the four contests prior to 2015, they increased their advertising buys during the official campaign period. Chart 2 shows that there has been an upward trend devoting resources to advertising. The growth was greatest for the NDP and the Conservatives.

Chart 2:
Election Ad Spending in dollars (millions)



It is not just the amount spent that is noticeable, but the growing importance of advertising in the parties' overall expenditures. In the last three elections, all parties but the NDP devoted at least 50% of their campaign budget to advertising. If the three parties spent their allowable limit of \$50 million in the 2015 election, and they follow the previous pattern of devoting at least 50% to advertising, then we can assume that they spent more than \$25 million in this election on advertising—a considerable jump from the previous campaigns.

It's clear that political parties believe in advertising. They use it before an election to prime and during an election to reinforce their message. Like all campaigns, this one was marked by negative advertising as well as upbeat, positive ads. Many scholars believe that negative advertising works because it motivates voters and is easily recalled. For these scholars, while advertising may not be good for

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democracy, it is a strong motivator for voting (Geer 2006). Ads are persuasive if they resonate; they resonate if they make strong emotional appeals, which are usually negative. Anger and fear are stronger motivators than positive emotions, such as enthusiasm, pride, and compassion. The 2015 campaign was notable because most of the negative ads were by the Conservatives and played on instilling fear that an untested new leader, Justin Trudeau, was not worth the risk. The most honest thing one can say about ads of all sorts is that some work, some of the time, on some people, and that advertising effect is short term if at all. The Conservative ads this election were marked by messages that resonated with voters as “anxious” or “angry” over “hopeful” according to [Innovative Research](#). The other parties mostly ran positive ads that played on “hopeful” over the negative emotions of “anxious” or “angry.”

The advertising legacy of this campaign will be not only the amount of money spent by parties but also some violations of the norms around campaign advertising. One of the cardinal rules of advertising is not to reply to negative attacks. So when the Conservatives ran its “[just not ready](#)” ad, the

traditional view is that the Liberals should have ignored it. The Liberals did not and its “[ready](#)” ad, which responded directly to the Conservative’s negative ad, was one of the most successful and persuasive ads in the election according to Innovative Research. Another novelty of this campaign was the reliance on radio by all three parties in the last week of the campaign. This was done to mobilize their supporters to vote. The Conservatives did something no party has ever done and had a series of new radio ads each day at the end of the campaign. Each one ended with “I’m Stephen Harper. Let’s talk tomorrow.” This unprecedented campaign speaks to the importance the Conservatives put on mobilizing their vote as well as the resources that they had devoted for the last week of the campaign.

In conclusion, though Canada’s political parties likely spent more on advertising during this election than any other one in Canadian history, the ad campaign began well before the election got underway. The election ads tell us much about the triumph of positive over negative ads, the wisdom of responding to those attacks, and perhaps, a revival of radio as a persuasive medium.