

Targeting Voters on Television

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Prepared for delivery at the 2010 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association.
Concordia University, Montreal, June 1-3.

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Perhaps the most widely noted trend in television in many countries in recent years is the fragmentation of the audience. Regardless of its social consequences, fragmentation is a boon to commercial advertisers who aim to reach a specialized audience—golfers on the Golf Channel, gardeners on Home & Garden TV, gourmets on the Food Network. To the extent that television viewers similarly sort themselves into politically distinctive groups, political advertisers ought to find fragmentation advantageous in the same way. Moreover, just as horizontally integrated firms can advertise golf clubs on one channel and food processors on another, fragmentation may allow political campaigns to deliver messages tailored to particular audiences on television much as they do through other microtargeted means.

Our question in this paper is: do they? Do political campaigns exploit the fragmentation of the television audience to focus on some voters but not others and to convey different messages to different segments of the voters on which they do focus? In this paper we begin to take up this question, here focusing on advertising that appeared on cable television, for reasons we will explain.

Sources of Data

The data for this research are of several types and come from several sources. All pertain to political advertising that appeared during the 2006 campaign in the Philadelphia media market.

Data on when and where advertising was aired—and at what cost—we have gathered from the “political files” the Federal Communications Commission requires television stations to maintain for public inspection. Our team obtained the records on political advertising from the Philadelphia affiliates of the major national broadcast networks—WPVI/ABC, WCAU/NBC, KYW/CBS, and WTXF/Fox—as well as from Comcast, the cable television provider in the metropolitan area. It is on this last collection of outlets, cable television, that we focus in this paper. We collected information about television advertising in the five high-level, competitive races in the Philadelphia media market in 2006:

U.S. Senate

Rick Santorum (R)
Bob Casey (D)

Pennsylvania Governor

Lynn Swann (R)
Ed Rendell (D)

U.S. House, PA-6

Jim Gerlach (R)
Lois Murphy (D)

U.S. House, PA-7

Curt Weldon (R)
Joe Sestak (D)

U.S. House, PA-8

Mike Fitzpatrick (R)
Patrick Murphy (D)

We also gathered information about airtime purchased by political parties and by interest groups in those races:

U.S. Senate

National Republican Senatorial Committee (sponsored jointly with Santorum)
Pennsylvania Democratic Party (sponsored jointly with Casey)
American Taxpayers Alliance
Softer Voices
U.S. Chamber of Commerce

U.S. House

National Republican Congressional Committee
Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee
Republican National Committee (sponsored jointly with Weldon)
U.S. Chamber of Commerce

The records that were collected differ in format from station to station, but they all contain the same basic elements. The records are of two types: confirmation contracts and invoices. Confirmation contracts, negotiated with stations by advertising agencies on behalf of sponsors, list spots scheduled to air in the future. Each contract lists the total number of spots and the class of airtime purchased, the dates and programs for airing, and the price per spot. When changes are made to a confirmation contract before the scheduled spots begin to air, as frequently occurs, a new version of the contract is created.¹ For the analysis we report here we rely on the information available in the last version of each confirmation contract we retrieved. We obtained confirmation contracts from the 2006 political files of WPVI/ABC and WCAU/NBC.

An invoice is printed after the last day of a contract's schedule, detailing the spots specified in that contract that were actually aired. The invoice identifies each individual spot separately, listing the date, exact airtime, scheduled time slot, length, unit price, class of airtime, and a brief description of the ad aired. Invoices were collected for KYW/CBS, WPVI/ABC, WTXF/Fox and Comcast. Because the station records are available only on paper, all the information available for each spot specified in each contract (for WCAU/NBC) or invoice (for the other three stations) had to be entered into electronic spreadsheets.

We have supplemented these data, where possible, with data purchased from CMAG, the Campaign Media Analysis Group. We have used the CMAG data to confirm the times and dates on which

¹ Most of these changes appear to have been minor, and most were initiated by the stations, as their schedules changed, rather than by sponsors, as strategic imperatives changed.

ads have aired.² CMAG also has provided storyboards and scripts for many of the ads. These, combined with others we have obtained from various archives and from some of the campaigns themselves, have formed the basis for our content analysis of the ads, describing the issues, individuals, and groups the campaigns' advertising has featured.

Joined with data on the audiences that watch the various cable networks in the Philadelphia market, we have an extraordinarily rich collection of information about what messages were conveyed to whom.

Spending on Cable

The sheer volume of campaign advertising that appeared on cable in Philadelphia in 2006 is remarkable. As Table 1 shows, the campaigns we track purchased a total of 35,207 spots to air on Philadelphia cable between the primary on May 16 and the general election on November 7. On the market's broadcast stations during the same period, the campaigns aired fewer than half as many spots, 17,167. Of course, that difference reflects, at least in part, the lower cost of advertising on cable, which in turn reflects the smaller cable audience. The median price of the spots aired on the broadcast stations is \$1300, while the median cable price is just \$40. Nonetheless, these campaigns' spending on cable is impressive, surpassing \$3.5 million, 9 percent of the combined total.

The cable percentage of the total spent on airtime varied widely from campaign to campaign (Figure 1). The Santorum campaign was the cable leader, directing 35 percent of its budget—more than \$1.2 million—to cable. Both campaigns in the 6th Congressional district also spent heavily on cable—the Jim Gerlach campaign 33 percent, the Lois Murphy campaign 15 percent. In the 8th district race, Patrick Murphy spent 22 percent of his budget on cable. At the other extreme, Mike Fitzpatrick, Lynn Swann, and Curt Weldon among the Republicans and the Casey campaign among the Democrats all spent less than 5 percent of their budgets on cable, as did the NRCC. The DCCC spent 7 percent of its \$5.9 million advertising budget on cable.

The variations in the investments campaigns made in cable appear to reflect, in part at least, differences in philosophy among the consultants employed to purchase airtime. The contrast among Republican campaigns is especially striking. The two candidates who hired Brabender Cox to produce their advertisements and purchase their air time—Santorum and Gerlach—devoted more of their budgets to cable than any others, while the two Republicans whose airtime was purchased by SSG Media—Swann and Weldon—used almost no cable advertising. The pattern on the Democratic side is less clear. The campaigns that employed The Campaign Group—Governor Ed Rendell and Joe Sestak for US House—purchased a bit more cable advertising than the Casey campaign, which employed Murphy Putnam Shorr—but less than the other Murphy Putnam Shorr client, the Lois Murphy campaign.

² In previous work (Hagen and Kolodny 2008) we have established that the CMAG data provide an extraordinarily accurate portrait of when and where ads air, but not accurate estimates of the cost of the airtime.

Addressing Different Audiences

One virtue of cable television as a medium for reaching voters is that cable, at least according to some, is more cost-efficient than broadcast television for many purposes, political campaigns among them. The price of television advertising, whether cable or broadcast, reflects chiefly the number of people likely to see an ad aired on a given channel at a given time. The large audiences that watch broadcast television programs tend to be heterogeneous. An advertiser that buys airtime during a broadcast program pays, in effect, for the whole audience, even if the advertiser wishes to reach only a segment of the audience. The economics of cable television permits programming that attracts fewer viewers, audiences that tend to be more homogenous. On cable, the argument goes, an advertiser who wants to reach a particular segment can purchase the right to air ads on a cable network that attracts primarily that segment, thereby reducing the wasted expenditure. By creating more homogenous audiences, cable opens up another possibility: the capacity to deliver different messages to different people. Our purpose in this paper is to investigate whether the political campaigns, in practice, take advantage of the opportunity provided by cable to appeal to different types of voters in different ways.

To characterize the size and features of the audiences delivered by cable networks in the Philadelphia market, we rely on information we purchased from Scarborough Research, a market research firm that studies the media habits of American consumers. The audience statistics we employ are based on telephone interviews conducted between February 2006 and January 2007 with a random-digit dial sample of 4815 residents of the Philadelphia market who reported being registered to vote, and on seven-day television diaries completed by the same respondents.

These data provide us with an estimate of the percentage of the audience for each network on Philadelphia's Comcast cable system who are, for example, women. Figure 2 shows the ten networks with the most disparate audiences in terms of gender. The five with audiences in which men outnumber women by the widest margin include one that carries business news around the clock, two devoted to sports, one devoted exclusively to motor sports, and one with a logo that includes the tag line "Get More Action." Men make up between 66 and 79 percent of the five audiences. At the other end of the spectrum are Lifetime (which calls itself "Television for Women"), the ABC Family Channel, one network devoted to homemaking and gardening, another called Food, and Black Entertainment Television. The audiences for these five are 63 to 69 percent women. An advertiser could not reach only men or only women by purchasing airtime on any of these networks, but one could reach them much more efficiently than by purchasing airtime on a network with an audience evenly split between men and women.

The Scarborough paper questionnaire also included a question about partisanship:

Regardless of how you may have voted in the past, do you consider yourself a...
(Check only one.)

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Democrat | <input type="checkbox"/> Independent, but I feel closer to Democrat |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Republican | <input type="checkbox"/> Independent, but I feel closer to Republican |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Independent | <input type="checkbox"/> None of these |

Figure 3 shows the Democratic share (not including "leaners") of the Philadelphia cable audiences with the most and least Democratic viewers. It comes as no surprise to find that the Black Entertainment

Network has, by a wide margin, the most Democratic audience; two thirds of the viewers are Democrats. The partisanship of network audiences is related to gender as well as to race, of course: nearly half of Lifetime viewers are Democrats and just 30 percent of CNBC viewers are Democrats. The Fox News audience is likewise just 30 percent Democrats, and the audiences of AMC, the Learning Channel, and the History Channel have audiences with nearly as few Democrats. The audiences for cable networks, it seems, do differ in their partisan composition. It is also worth noting, however, that the range of the variation across networks in partisanship in general is not as great as the variation in gender. BET does offer an extremely Democratic audience, but one that is limited in size. (According to the Scarborough data, BET is watched by just 8 percent of registered voters in the region.) BET aside, however, the difference between the most Democratic and the least Democratic audiences are 15 to 20 percentage points, while the differences between the most female and the most male audiences are 35 to 40 points. There may be some advantage, economically and strategically, to using different cable networks to reach Democrats and Republicans, but the advantages would seem to be somewhat limited.

Perhaps for this reason, only faint patterns characterize the partisan composition of the audiences targets by the 2006 campaigns in Philadelphia. Figure 4 shows the percentage of each sponsors cable budget that went to the networks with the most Democratic audiences, the most Republican audiences, and audiences that are more or less evenly split. For the most part, sponsors spent more on networks with audiences that skew toward the sponsor's party, although the difference is not large. That observation, moreover, is a less apt description of the Republicans than of the Democrats, perhaps because Democratic voters outnumber Republican voters in the region. The Democratic candidate for governor and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee allocated none of their budgets to networks with Republican-inclined audiences, while the Republican gubernatorial candidate spent 21 percent of his budget on networks with more Democratic audiences, and 24 percent of the National Republican Congressional Committee's budget went to networks with Democratic audiences in support of Republican House candidates. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce spent less than any other of the sponsors airing campaign ads in Philadelphia in 2006 on networks without a distinct partisan character, and the Chamber nonetheless spent 45 percent on those networks. If the opportunities for addressing homogenously Democratic and Republican audiences are limited, even on cable, so too are the campaigns' inclinations to pursue those opportunities.

Attack, Advocacy, and Audience

It seems reasonable to expect that, when campaigns do take advantage of an opportunity to address Democrats and Republicans separately, they might deliver different messages to the two groups. The strategic imperatives may not be altogether clear. A campaign might be inclined to use an opportunity to address fellow partisans to denigrate the opposition and an opportunity to address the opposing party to promote one's own candidate. The opposite strategy might also be appealing, especially among campaigners who believe, as some do, that attack advertising depresses turnout. Whatever the hypothesis, we investigate the facts with regard to Philadelphia campaigns in 2006 by merging with our data on audience composition with our coding of the ads the campaigns aired.

In our coding, we distinguish among three types of ads, based not on tone or topic, but simply on which candidates are mentioned. An advocacy ad in our scheme mentions only the candidate

avored by the sponsor, whether the candidate himself or herself, a party, or another organization. An attack ad mentions only the opponent; such ads are invariably critical of the opponent, of course, although they can vary a great deal in their intensity, validity, and sense of propriety. A comparative ad mentions both candidates. Much more sophisticated coding strategies certainly are possible, but this is at least one that can be implemented reliably, and it seems to capture in a straightforward way the dimension in which we are interested. Figure 5 shows how sponsors allocated their cable television budgets among the three types in Philadelphia in 2006.

The mix of ads varied widely from sponsor to sponsor. The Casey, Rendell, and Lois Murphy campaigns employed all three types of advertising. Many of the remainder sponsored advertising of only one type, but they did not all sponsor the same type. One House candidate and one party's Congressional campaign committee sponsored only attack ads. Two candidates and both interest groups sponsored only advocacy ads. Those sponsors obviously did not target particular audiences with ads of particular types; all their ads were of the same type.

Figure 6 shows, for those sponsors who did pay for ads of more than one type to be broadcast, how the mix when the audience was heavily Democratic differed from the mix when the audience was heavily Republican and when the audience was more or less evenly split. Here, attack and comparative ads have been combined, so the figure shows the percentage of cable ad spending devoted by each sponsor to deliver to each audience ads that mentioned the opponent.

Simply put, no general pattern is obvious. The Casey Senate campaign followed one strategy that seems plausible on its face, conveying to Republican audiences attack and comparative ads almost exclusively while focusing on their opponent much less frequently with more Democratic audiences. Lois Murphy's campaign did much the same, though the differences are less dramatic. But the Sestak campaign did just the reverse, sponsoring mainly ads talking about their opponent on networks with Democratic audiences and few ads about their opponent for Republican audiences. The other three campaigns delivered much the same mix of ads to all three audiences. If it seems plausible that campaigners might direct different combinations of ad types to sympathetic and skeptical audiences, it is clear that these campaigners did not agree on how the mix should vary—or whether it should vary at all.

Audience and Agenda

Campaigns might be disposed to tailor the topic of discussion to the character of the audience. We coded the issues addressed in each ad aired in Philadelphia in 2006. Here we focus on ads aired by the Senate campaigns on networks with disparate audiences. Figure 7 shows the issues addressed in differing degrees in ads sponsored by the Casey campaign on the Cable News Network and the Lifetime network.

The differences are large. More than half of what the Casey campaign spent on CNN went to air ads that mentioned the issues of jobs and trade, and between a quarter and a third delivered ads that mentioned the minimum wage and Social Security. A typical Casey ad on CNN is this one attacking Santorum:

Santorum: What I've tried to do is deliver. Not just talk, but deliver. *Announcer:* He's voted thirteen times against raising the minimum wage. Fourteen times to cut Medicare. He's voted for trade deals like CAFTA that send Pennsylvania jobs overseas. He's the leader in the Senate for privatizing Social Security. A ninety-eight percent voting record with George Bush. So what's behind all the talk? A record that hurts Pennsylvania.

Of these four issues mentioned frequently on CNN, only the issue of jobs was mentioned at all in the ads Casey sponsored on the Lifetime network, and it was mentioned less than half as frequently on Lifetime. Instead, more than half of the funds the Casey campaign spent on Lifetime mentioned birth control and children's issues. To attack Santorum on the Lifetime network, the Casey campaign typically deployed this ad:

Santorum: Although I don't think it works, I think it's harmful to women. I think it's harmful to society. *Announcer:* He would allow states to ban all forms of birth control, even for married couples. He voted against funding for child care and said, quote, 'Making people struggle a little bit isn't necessarily the worst thing.' He's the only member of Congress who intruded at Terry Schiavo's deathbed. A 98 percent voting record with George Bush. He shouldn't be speaking for Pennsylvania.

If the content of the advertising the Casey campaign sponsored on the two networks differs markedly, the consideration that motivates the difference is not altogether clear. For the CNN and Lifetime audiences differ on both of the dimensions we have taken up here. In 2006 in Philadelphia, 49 percent of the Lifetime audience were Democrats, compared to 38 percent of the CNN audience. Even more striking, 69 percent of the Lifetime audience were women, compared to 43 percent of the CNN audience. Does the difference in the content of the Casey advertising on the two networks reflect the difference in the partisanship or the difference in the gender composition of the two?

To investigate further, we turn to Casey's opponent. The Santorum campaign, with its much larger investment in cable advertising in 2006, aired ads not only on CNN and Lifetime, but also on two other networks that give us additional analytic purchase on the question at hand, Fox News and HGTV. The Fox News audience in Philadelphia has about the same gender profile as CNN—47 percent of the Fox News audience is women—but it is considerably more Republican—by 40 percent to 24 percent. The HGTV audience, on the other hand, has much the same gender profile as Lifetime—63 percent are women—but it is considerably less Democratic—by 38 to 49 percent. We have, in effect, networks in all four cells of the two-by-two table.

What we find is that the focus of the Santorum campaign's advertising on the two networks with audiences evenly split between men and women—CNN and Fox News—differed substantially from the focus on the two networks watched by many more women than men—Lifetime and HGTV. Between 15 and 20 percent of the Santorum ads that appeared on CNN and Fox News featured discussion of leadership or endorsements, topics on which Santorum ads on HGTV and Lifetime did not touch at all. One ad supported with a large budget on the networks with the more male audience but not at all on the ones with the more female audience was this one, in which Rudy Giuliani was the sole speaker:

We face a lot of issues. The economy, our society, our values, and everything else. But the single more important one that we face is our defense. Senator Santorum has been one of the people

who understands that the best and has been a leader in the fight against terrorism, the war against terrorism, and the safety and security that's needed at home so that we can deal with that. That security is reflected by the men and women that are in a firehouse like this, and Senator Santorum has been a stalwart defender of our first responders, making sure they get the resources they need, the training they need. When he tells you what he thinks, you know it is coming from his mind and his heart and his conscience, and not just something that you want to hear. To me, that's what really makes him a leader. That's the kind of Senator that you have here in Pennsylvania. That's the kind of leadership that we need.

The two networks with watched by more women, on the other hand, featured twice as much discussion of the issues of energy and immigration as the two news networks, and markedly more discussion of environmental issues and jobs, as well. This ad, in which Santorum was the speaker and the video juxtaposed images of green fields and bearded men burning American flags, had a large budget on Lifetime and HGTV:

We know there are people in the world who don't like America. Often it's the same people we depend on for oil. That's the reason I fought so hard to secure a hundred million dollars to build America's first waste-coal to ultra-clean liquid fuels plant. Located in Pennsylvania, this facility will create jobs, provide less costly energy, and clean up our environment. Most of all, it will make us less dependent on...them.

The percentage of the Santorum budget on CNN and Fox News that supported ads mentioning the issues of energy and the environment was half the percentage on Lifetime and HGTV.

By comparison, differences between the ads on the women's network with the larger and the smaller Democratic audience were tiny. Although Democrats made up a much larger fraction of the audience for Lifetime as for HGTV, nearly identical percentages of the Santorum budget supported ads focusing on energy and the environment on the two networks. Much the same is true with regard to leadership, endorsements, and terrorism on the news networks, despite the difference in the partisan composition of their audiences. It appears that the Santorum campaign, at least in the Philadelphia media market, took more care to deliver different messages to men and women than to Democrats and Republicans.

Conclusion

This paper obviously just scratches the surface of the data we have assembled to explore the questions we have laid out, even for cable television alone. And because we also have comparable data on ads aired on Philadelphia's broadcast television stations for the same period by the same campaigns, we can explore similarities and differences in the advertising strategies employed in the two types of outlets. In the end, we also will ask how the differences that result from customization stack up, from the viewer's point of view. How different can a campaign look to voters watching different cable networks? Our answers will shed new light, we believe, on a critical element in the connection between citizens and democratic government.

Table 1
 Campaign Spending, Price, and Spots
 On Broadcast and Cable Television,
 Philadelphia 2006

	<u>Broadcast</u>	<u>Cable</u>
Total spending	\$37,559,800	\$3,567,709
Median price	\$1,300	\$40
Number of spots	17,167	35,207

Figure 1
 Cable Share of Spending on
 Television Advertising, By Sponsor



Figure 2
Women's Share of Cable Television Audience,
Selected Networks, Philadelphia Market

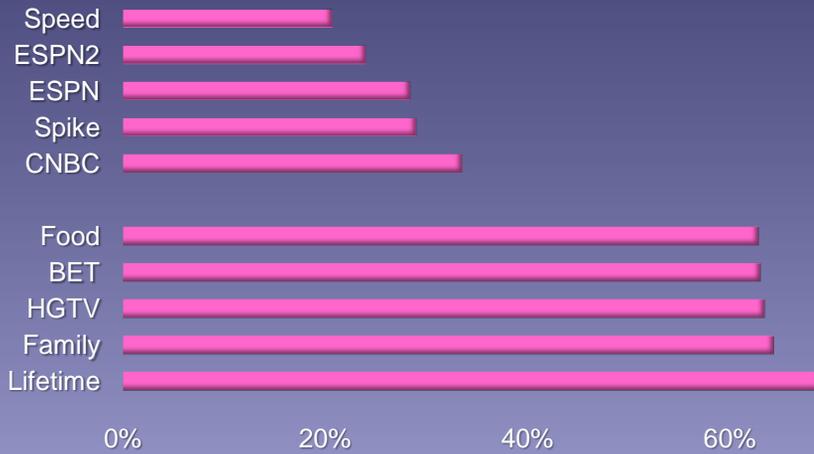


Figure 3
Democrats' Share of Philadelphia Cable
Television Audience, Selected Networks

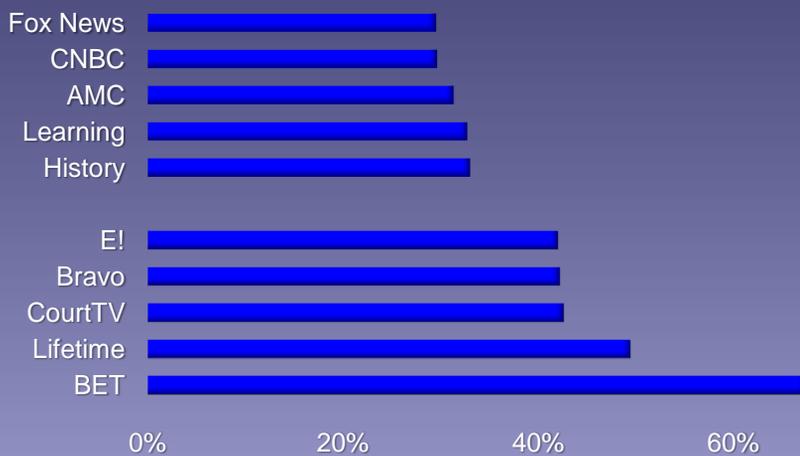


Figure 4
Partisan Allocation of Advertising Budgets,
by Sponsor

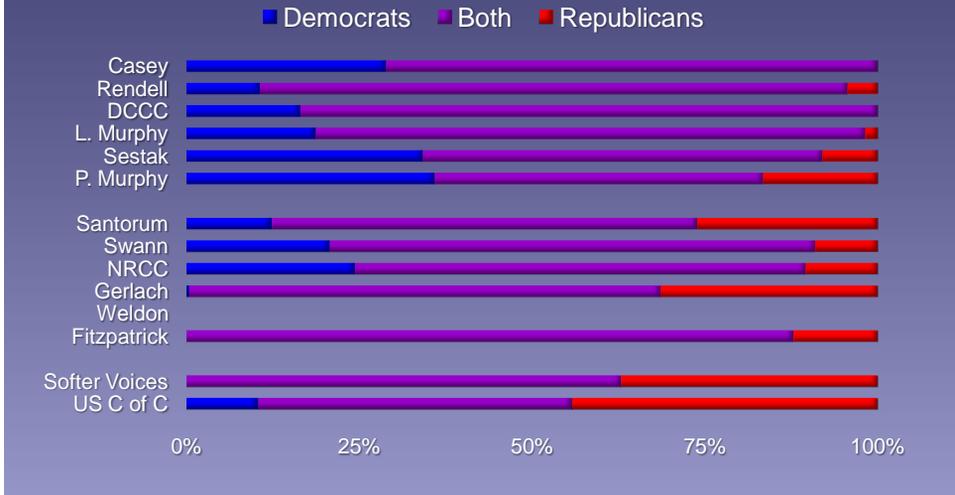


Figure 5
Type of Campaign Advertising, by Sponsor,
Cable Television, Philadelphia Market, 2006

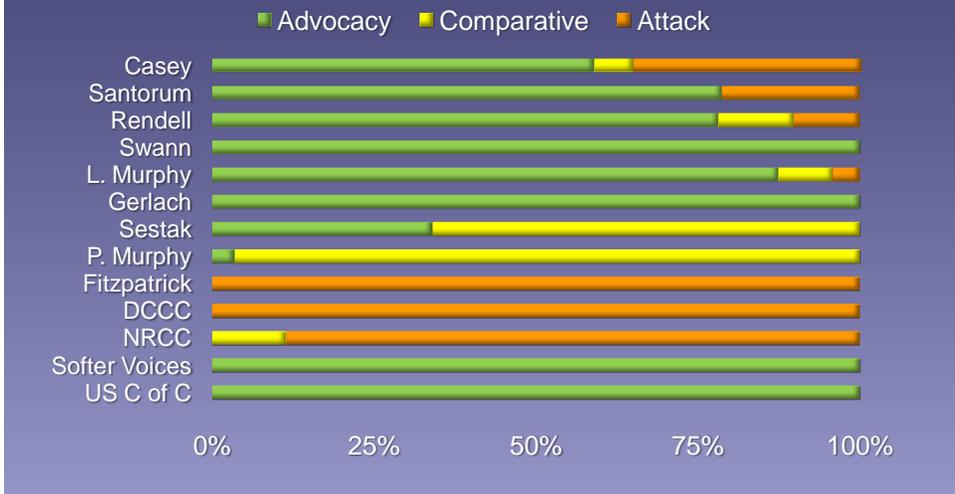


Figure 6
 Advertising Mentioning Opponent,
 by Sponsor and Partisanship of Audience

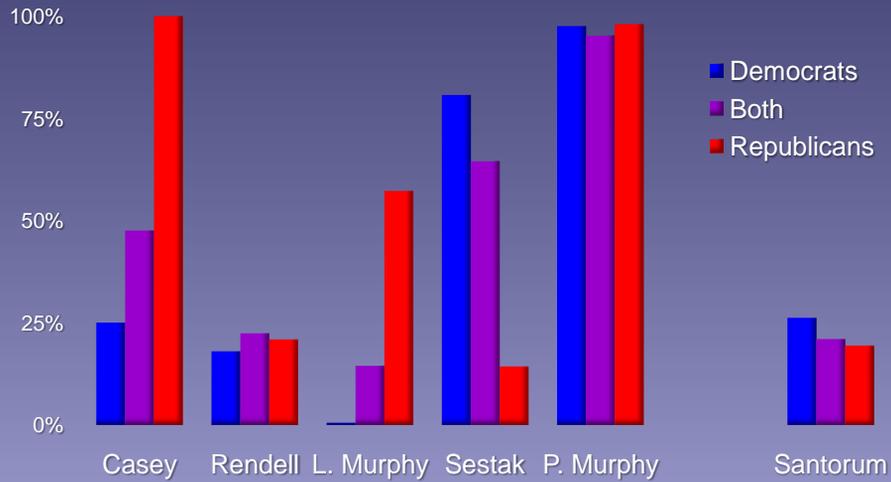


Figure 7
 Issue Focus of Ads on CNN and Lifetime,
 Casey Senate Campaign

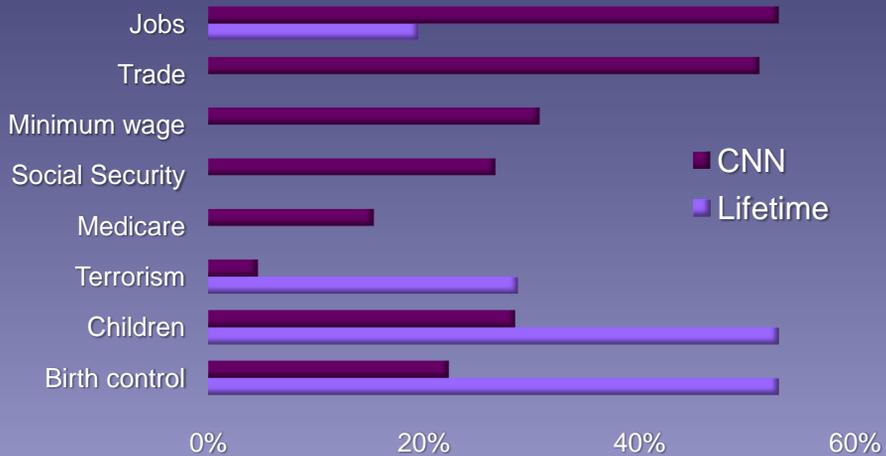


Figure 8
Issue Focus of Ads on Four Networks,
Santorum Senate Campaign

