

Considerable controversy has arisen over the use in political campaigns of short, image-oriented television commercials. This study compared the effect of type (image and issue) and length (5 minute and 60 second) of political television commercials in terms of candidate evaluation, recall of commercial content, and likelihood of voting for the candidate. Issue commercials resulted in higher candidate evaluation while image commercials resulted in greater recall of content. Higher evaluation of the candidate was achieved by five-minute commercials, but no significant difference in content recall attributable to length was present. An interaction between type and length of commercials surfaced on the voting variable, and the 60-second issue commercial appeared to be slightly superior to other combinations.

POLITICAL TELEVISION COMMERCIALS An Experimental Study of Type and Length

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Since the advent of modern political campaigning with its emphasis on paid political advertising on television, considerable concern has been expressed by scholars and other observers about the use of television to project the image of a candidate, rather than to contribute to an informed view of the issues. Related to this controversy over

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image versus issue advertising is another controversy over the long versus the short commercial. The concern here has been that 30- and 60-second spots are too short to communicate any meaningful information to the voters.

These controversies owe their genesis to a belief in the classic democratic theory of voting behavior. Many observers and critics of the political system, consciously or subconsciously, subscribe to the belief that man is a highly rational being whose voting decisions are, or ought to be, the result of careful weighing of important public issues. This rational being, according to democratic ideals, ought to be interested in politics, acquire and discuss relevant information, and consider overall national as well as self-interests (Janowitz and Marvick, 1970; Berelson, 1966). However much this view differs from the voter identified by electoral behavior research, for theorists and believers of this kind, paid political advertising on television has frightening consequences for the democratic system. The reason for this concern lies, of course, in the fear that the public will be swayed by short commercials stressing the personality/image characteristics of a candidate.

While researchers have not often directly compared image commercials with issue commercials, some recent research has attempted to gauge the effectiveness of political commercials in a number of settings (Atkin, Bowen, Nayman, and Sheinkopf, 1973; Bowers, 1975; O'Keefe and Sheinkopf, 1974; Rothschild and Ray, 1974; Shaw and Bowers, 1973; Surlin and Gordon, 1976). Several studies have substantiated the view that political commercials do communicate issue information to voters (Atkin et al., 1973; McClure and Patterson, 1974). One experimental study attempted to determine if homeostatic theory (clear presentation of ideas) or image theory (ambiguous issue presentation by clear projection of personality attributes) is superior. Brownstein (1971) concluded that style of presentation of the message systemati-

cally influenced the degree of perceptual accuracy of candidate ideology and degree of favorability with which candidates were evaluated. Image was a better predictor than issues, but the latter was also a good predictor.

The relative merit of varying lengths of political commercials has also been a neglected research area. One marginally relevant study by Swanson (1973) found that retention loss for short commercials was 50% to 60% lower than for half-hour programs.

The current state of knowledge about political commercials is clearly inadequate. Previous efforts have been unable to relate directly their results to particular spots free from contamination by other information stimuli, unable to compare the effectiveness of image spots with issue spots, and unable to determine the relative effect of varying lengths of commercials. Another important gap in current knowledge is the absence of any follow-up data. None of the laboratory or survey studies can assert with confidence that the effects reported have any permanence. Consequently, the experimental study reported here posed the following questions:

1. Will viewing image-type commercials result in significantly more positive evaluation of the candidate, more recall of commercial content, and/or greater likelihood of voting for the candidate than will viewing issue-type commercials?
2. Will viewing five-minute commercials result in significantly more positive evaluations of the candidate, more recall of commercial content, and/or greater likelihood of voting for the candidate than will viewing 60-second commercials?
3. What combination of type and length of commercial will result in the most positive evaluation of the candidate, the most recall of commercial content, and/or the greatest likelihood of voting for the candidate?
4. How will these differences, if any, hold up over time?

PROCEDURE

A laboratory experiment using closed circuit television was undertaken to isolate the impact of commercials separate from other communication stimuli. A sample of 413 university students from a variety of classes viewed political commercials in the context of 30 minutes of regular television-viewing including a well-known series segment and ordinary product commercials. The total sample was assigned at random into four groups. Group 1 viewed a 60-second image commercial, Group 2 viewed a 60-second issue commercial, Group 3 viewed a five-minute image commercial, and Group 4 viewed a five-minute issue commercial. The 30 minutes of viewing was identical for each group except for the different political commercial.

The political spots chosen for this study were actually political spots used in a 1972 gubernatorial campaign.¹ While distinction between issue and image spots is admittedly somewhat difficult, here issue spots were considered to be those spots which were concerned with specific policy issues (such as jobs or roads) while image spots were those which were concerned with relating personal characteristics of the candidate without advocating any specific issue positions.

The 413 subjects in the experiment were randomly assigned to groups during a four-day period in July 1974. Respondents were told at the beginning of the session that they would be viewing a television program originally aired on another station. At the conclusion of the program, subjects filled out a six-page questionnaire which, in an attempt to disguise the intent of the study, contained numerous questions about all parts of the 30-minute program and product commercials as well as about the political commercial.² The primary questions used to measure the impact of the political commercial were a 12-scale semantic differential to measure candidate image,³ an open-ended question asking subjects to recall the

content of the commercial, and a question asking subjects to indicate on a seven-point scale the likelihood that they would vote for the candidate in the commercials.

In addition, follow-up data were collected in classes two to three weeks after the initial experiment. Although class absences reduced the number in the initial sample to 253, this was over 60% of the original sample. In the follow-up, the masking questions were eliminated, and only data related to the political commercials were included on the questionnaire.

Results were analyzed using a two-way analysis of variance to test for interactions and t-tests to compare responses of the four groups on three dependent variables—candidate evaluation as measured by the semantic differential, amount of content recall, and likelihood of voting for the candidate. The alpha level required for significance throughout the data analysis was .05.

RESULTS

In factorial designs, such as the one in this study, it is essential to determine whether or not significant interaction effects occur between factors (in this study, between type and length of the spots) before the main and/or simple effects of each factor can be meaningfully interpreted. A two-way analysis of variance was performed for each of the three dependent variables. The results indicated that significant interaction effects were present for one of the dependent variables, "likelihood of voting." This was true both for the original sample and the follow-up data. The research questions above were answered with these interaction effects providing a guide to meaningfulness, thus the likelihood of a voting variable is considered only in the section dealing with the best combination of type and length.

**IMAGE COMERCIALS VERSUS
ISSUE COMMERCIALS**

Candidate Evaluation. Since no interaction effect was indicated on this variable, Group 1 (60-second image commercial) and Group 3 (five-minute image commercial) were combined to form an image group (N = 201), and Group 2 (60-second issue commercial) and Group 4 (five-minute issue commercial) were combined to form an issue group (N = 212). The mean scores on the semantic differential (12-scales, each ranked 1 to 7) for each group were compared using a t-test. The results indicated that image spots do not result in more positive evaluation of the candidate than do issue spots. An examination of the mean scores indicates that the opposite may, in fact, be true since issue commercials resulted in a mean candidate rating of 4.45 compared to 4.26 for image commercials ($t = -2.60$, $p < .05$).

In the follow-up, the issue commercials also resulted in a higher mean score (4.37 versus 4.27) than did the image commercial, but the difference was not statistically significant ($t = -1.10$; $p > .05$).

Content Recall. In determining the content recall, the answers to an open-ended question "What do you recall about the commercial?" were used. Each respondent was given a score equivalent to the specific number of items of accurate recall from the commercial.⁴ The accurate number of items recalled ranged from 0 to 6. It is interesting to note that 47 (11.4% respondents said they did not recall seeing a political commercial at all and another 23 could recall nothing specific about it. This resulted in a total of 16.9% of the total sample receiving a score of 0.

Image commercials do appear to result in significantly more content recall than do issue commercials. With the image and issue groups formed the same way as before, the mean number of items recalled for the image group was 1.86 and for the issue group 1.30 ($t = 4.51$, $p < .05$).

The same was true of the follow-up, although there was an obvious reduction in the number of items recalled. The image group (N = 121) recalled only 1.44 items while the issue group (N = 132) recalled 1.00 ($t = 3.58, p < .05$).

FIVE-MINUTE COMMERCIALS VERSUS 60-SECOND COMMERCIALS

Candidate Evaluation. Here groups 1 (60-second image) and 2 (60-second issue) were combined into a 60-second group, and Groups 3 (five-minute image) and 4 (five-minute issue) were combined into a five-minute group. Using the mean scores on the semantic differential, the mean-rating for those in the 60-second group (N = 194) was 4.25, and for those in the five-minute group (N = 219), it was 4.45. The results of the t-test indicated that five-minute commercials do appear to result in significantly more positive evaluation of the candidate than do 60-second commercials ($t = -2.94, p < .05$).

This was also true in the follow-up. The mean-rating was 4.20 for the 60-second group (N = 112) and 4.42 for the five-minute group (N = 141). The five-minute group's mean-rating of the candidate was significantly higher ($t = -2.44, p < .05$).

Content Recall. With the scores for amount of recall compiled as before, the results indicated that five-minute commercials are not significantly more successful than 60-second commercials. Such advertisements do not result in a greater quantity of items recalled. In fact, 60-second commercials result in slightly more recall (a mean of 1.59 items recalled compared to 1.55 for five-minute commercials), but the difference is not statistically significant ($t = .32, p > .05$).

The follow-up revealed the same pattern. The 60-second group recalled a mean of 1.31 items while the five-minute group recalled only 1.13, but the difference was not significant ($t = 1.47, p > .05$).

TABLE 1
T-Test of all Four Combinations of Commercials:
Candidate Evaluation

Type	Mean	60-s. Issue t prob.	60-s. Issue t prob.	5-m. Image t prob.	5-m. Issue t prob.
Original:					
60-s. Image* (N=84)	4.15		-1.81 .04	-2.12 .02	-4.31 .00
60-s. Issue (N=110)	4.32	-1.81 .04		-.20 .43	-2.49 .01
5-m. Image (N=117)	4.34	-2.12 .02	-.20 .43		-2.44 .01
5-m. Issue (N=102)	4.58	-4.31 .00	-2.49 .01	-2.44 .01	
Follow-up:					
60-s. Image (N=54)	4.14		-1.06 .14	-2.12 .02	-2.38 .01
60-s. Issue (N=58)	4.26	-1.06 .14		-1.00 .16	-1.47 .08
6-m. Image (N=67)	4.38	-2.12 .02	-1.00 .16		-.58 .28
5-m. Issue (N=74)	4.45	-2.38 .01	-1.47 .08	-.58 .28	

*Reading from left to right, the 60-second image commercial produced a mean value of 4.15. This value is significantly different ($t = -1.81$; $p < .04$) from the mean score produced by the 60-second issue commercial and from the mean value of 4.34 produced by the five-minute image commercial ($t = -2.12$; $p < .02$), and so on.

COMBINATION OF TYPE AND LENGTH

In this section, the results focus on the comparison of each commercial with each other commercial, seeking to ascertain if one particular combination of type and length is better than others. Here each group is considered separately. Although the lack of significant interaction affects the dependent variables of candidate evaluation and recall of content indicated that the simple effects are not of great interest since the combinations are merely estimates of the main effects, the results of comparisons for these two variables are provided in Tables 1 and 2 in order to set all findings in context. The five-minute image com-

TABLE 2
T-Tests of All Four Combinations of Commercials:
Content Recall

Type	Mean	60-s. Image		60-s. Issue		5-m. Image		5-m. Issue	
		t	prob.	t	prob.	t	prob.	t	prob.
Original:									
60-s. Image (N=84)	1.77			1.98	.03	- .73	.23	3.30	.00
60-s. Issue (N=110)	1.45	1.98	.03			-2.63	.00	2.16	.02
5-m. Image (N=117)	1.91	- .73	.23	-2.63	.00			4.31	.00
5-m. Issue (N=102)	1.14	3.80	.00	2.16	.02	4.31	.00		
Follow-Up:									
60-s. Image (N=54)	1.52			2.61	.01	.76	.23	3.67	.00
60-s. Issue (N=58)	1.12	2.61	.01			-1.39	.08	1.36	.09
5-m. Image (N=67)	1.37	.76	.23	-1.39	.08			2.53	.00
5-m. Issue (N=74)	.91	3.67	.00	1.36	.09	2.53	.00		

mercial was superior in terms of candidate evaluation. In content recall, both image commercials were superior to their issue counterparts, and the five-minute issue commercial resulted in the lowest mean number of items recalled.

The question of likelihood of voting for the candidate, like the semantic differential, was a seven-point scale. Overall mean scores for all groups were low, probably indicating a reluctance to support a candidate from another state after only viewing one television commercial. The question is, perhaps, too direct a measure of the impact as well as unrealistic in light of the lack of an alternative.

No one commercial was shown clearly superior to all others based on this variable. However, the image-type, when combined with the 60-second length, was clearly inferior to all others, generating a mean-rating of 2.39 compared to 3.38, 3.30, and 3.07, respectively for the 60-

TABLE 3
T-Tests of All Four Combinations of Commercials:
Vote Likelihood

Type	Mean	60-s. Image		60-s. Issue		5-m. Image		5-m. Issue	
		t	prob.	t	prob.	t	prob.	t	prob.
Original:									
60-s. Image (N=84)	2.39			-4.08	.00	-.73	.00	-2.74	.00
60-s. Issue (N=110)	3.38	-4.08	.00			.35	.37	1.33	.09
5-m. Image (N=117)	3.30	-.73	.00	.35	.37			.95	.17
5-m. Issue (N=102)	3.07	-2.74		1.33	.09	.95	.17		
Follow-Up:									
60-s. Image (N=54)	2.91			-3.27	.00	-2.46	.01	-1.70	.04
60-s. Issue (N=58)	3.88	-3.27	.00			.83	.21	1.64	.05
5-m. Image (N=67)	3.63	-2.46	.01	.83	.21			.82	.21
5-m. Issue (N=74)	3.39	-1.70	.04	1.64	.05	.82	.21		

second issue, five-minute image, and five-minute issue commercials. Although the 60-second issue commercial was rated slightly higher than the others, the t-tests indicate no significant differences among these latter three commercials, as is shown in Table 3.

In the follow-up, the 60-second image commercial retained its position as the least effective. Again, although the 60-second issue group still had the highest mean score, this group did not rate their vote likelihood as significantly higher than all other groups.

DISCUSSION

The most obvious conclusion from these results, taken as a whole, is that some types and lengths of commercials produce one effect while others produce different effects. In terms of candidate evaluation, issue spots were superior

to image spots, and five-minute spots were superior to 60-second spots with the five-minute issue spot, therefore, the most effective of all. Within the limitations of this study, it seems that candidates can achieve higher evaluation with the presentation of issue information. This result may not only indicate a need for a change in the views of political practitioners, but also should allay some of the fears of political observers that image politics is tainting the democratic process.

On the content-recall variable, image commercials were superior to issue commercials, but no significant difference was found between lengths. This latter result parallels the findings of some research on ordinary product commercials which has found 60-second spots to be no more effective than shorter ones (Beik, 1962; Sadowski, 1972; Wheatley, 1968).

In terms of likelihood of voting for the candidate, an issue commercial combined with a 60-second length was better than an issue/five-minute commercial, but image commercials were better when combined with the five-minute length. The scores on the voting variable were low for all groups.

The follow-up data indicate that, for the most part, between-group differences hold up over time. The same interaction effects were present in the follow-up, and similar differences among the groups were present on all three variables. The maintenance of most of the original differences over time is especially significant since the study was conducted in a situation where no additional stimuli regarding the candidate were likely to enter into the respondents' evaluations at the later date.

Not only were the between-group differences sustained over time, but, in some instances, the effects themselves were maintained. On the candidate evaluation variable, there was no significant difference between the mean scores in the original and in the follow-up for any com-

TABLE 4
Mean Score Comparisons of Original With Follow-Up

	Cand. Evaluation		Content Recall		Vote Likelihood	
	Original	follow-up	Original	follow-up	Original	follow-up
Image	4.26	4.27	1.86	1.44*	2.92	3.31*
Issue	4.44	4.37	1.30	1.00*	3.23	3.61*
60-second	4.25	4.20	1.59	1.31*	2.95	3.41*
5-minute	4.45	4.42	1.55	1.13*	3.19	3.50*
60-sec. Image	4.15	4.14	1.77	1.52	2.39	2.90*
60-sec. Issue	4.32	4.26	1.45	1.12*	3.38	3.88*
5-min. Image	4.34	4.38	1.91	1.37*	3.30	3.63
5-min. Issue	4.58	4.45	1.14	.91	3.07	3.39

*t-tests indicated that the difference between the mean score on the original and the follow-up was significant at .05.

mercial or combination, as Table 4 demonstrates. This seems an unusual finding, particularly in view of the lack of any reinforcement, and might be an indication of the powerful impact of the commercials.

Table 4 also shows an expected drop-off of content recall in the follow-up. The reduction in the mean number of items recalled is significant in all but two situations, the 60-second image and the five-minute issue commercials.

However, the most unusual aspect of the follow-up data was the unexpected increase in the vote-likelihood scores for all groups. Respondents said they were more likely to vote for the candidate two to three weeks later than immediately after seeing the commercial, again without any possible reinforcement. Table 4 places all of these scores in direct comparison and indicates that the higher scores do, in fact, represent significant differences for most groups. Whether this is indicative of a sleeper effect or a reduction in unwillingness to admit influence, this finding may be the most important contribution of the follow-up aspect of the study.

NOTES

1. In addition to the fact that they were typical of their genre, these particular spots were chosen for a number of reasons. Using only one candidate provided for control across cells of the possible impact of physical appearance of the candidate and related variables. Second, the spots were clearly different enough in content to provide an obvious distinction between image and issue according to the definition used here. Finally, the setting of the campaign and the candidate were sufficiently removed in time and geography to permit reasonable confidence that most subjects would have no previous exposure to the candidate or commercials used in the study.

2. This effort to disguise the intent of the questionnaire was quite successful as only 3.4% of the sample came even remotely close to guessing the intent.

3. The 12-scales on the semantic differential, each rated from 1 to 7, were unqualified-qualified, unsophisticated-sophisticated, dishonest-honest, serious-humorous, insincere-sincere, modern-old-fashioned, unsuccessful-successful, handsome-ugly, unfriendly-friendly, liberal-conservative, calm-excitable, spender-saver. This semantic differential is the result of extensive testing and refinement since 1968, and has been successfully used to measure candidate image in a number of studies.

4. An item of recall was considered accurate if it referred to anything actually present in the commercial described. In practice, this was not a difficult coding problem since three coders agreed perfectly on all items.

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