HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

Health Aff (Millwood). Author manuscript; available in PMC 2021 February 01.

Published in final edited form as:

Health Aff (Millwood). 2020 February ; 39(2): 327–333. doi:10.1377/hlthaff.2019.01102.

Guns in Political Advertising over Four US Election Cycles, 2012 to 2018

Colleen L. Barry, Ph.D., M.P.P.,

Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, Department of Health Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD

Sachini Bandara, PhD, M.S.,

Department of Health Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Erika Franklin Fowler, Ph.D.,

Department of Government, Wesleyan Media Project, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT

Laura Baum,

Wesleyan Media Project, Wesleyan University

Sarah E. Gollust, Ph.D.,

Division of Health Policy and Management, University of Minnesota School of Public Health, Minneapolis, MN

Jeff Niederdeppe, Ph.D.,

Department of Communication, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

Alene Kennedy-Hendricks, PhD

Department of Health Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Abstract

Gun-related deaths are on the rise in the US and, following recent mass shootings, gun policy has emerged as an issue in the 2020 election. Political advertising is an increasingly important tool for candidates seeking office to communicate their policy priorities. Over \$6 billion was spent on political ads in the 2016 election and spending in the 2020 election is expected to be even higher. Tracking gun-related political advertising over time can offer critical insights about how candidates view the salience of gun policy in the context of the 2020 election and beyond. We analyzed coverage of guns in over 14 million candidate-related television ad airings for presidential, congressional, gubernatorial and state legislative races over four election cycles: 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018. The share of candidate-related ad airings referencing guns increased from 1% in the 2012 cycle to over 8% in the 2018 cycle. Pro-gun rights content dominated but dropped from 86% of airings mentioning guns in the 2012 cycle to 45% in the 2018 cycle. Pro-regulation and anti-NRA advertising increased overtime. These shifts offer clues to how gun issues are being framed in the upcoming 2020 election.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of mass shootings in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio over the summer of 2019, gun policy has emerged as an issue in the 2020 election. The mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012 catalyzed a contentious national dialogue on guns. Since then, over 3,000 lives have been lost to mass shootings in the U.S.ⁱ Beyond mass shootings, guns were responsible for 39,773 deaths in 2017 alone, the highest level in two decades,ⁱⁱ including 23,854 suicides and 14,542 homicides.ⁱⁱⁱ Even prior to the El Paso and Dayton shootings in August 2019, the shootings in Las Vegas, Nevada, Sutherland Springs, Texas and Parkland, Florida had propelled recent efforts to advance gun violence prevention. Included are a 2018 Florida law raising the minimum age for buying rifles and establishing a three-day waiting period for gun purchases. The topic has entered election-related discourse including references in primary debates and on the platforms of primary candidates. These factors point to gun issues playing a role in the upcoming election cycle.

No published research has examined how guns are featured in advertising by and on behalf of candidates seeking political office. However, televised political advertising is an increasingly important venue through which candidates present their policy views. Over \$6 billion was spent on political ads in the 2016 election and spending in the 2020 election is expected to exceed \$10 billion. A large literature speaks to the importance of campaign advertising to the electorate.^{iv–ix} Scholars argue that political advertising can be helpful in highlighting salient differences in policy stances between candidates.^{x,6,7} Particularly in competitive races, the back and forth between candidates on issues helps voters clarify candidates' policy stances^{xi}, and ads tend to be correlated with public views of the most important problems.⁹

Through a unique dataset developed by the Wesleyan Media Project, we used Kantar's Campaign Media Analysis Group (Kantar/CMAG) data to code and analyze content on guns in 14 million television candidate-related ad airings in presidential, congressional, gubernatorial and state legislative races over four election cycles: 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018. We included ads sponsored by candidates themselves, as well as ads sponsored by political parties (e.g., Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee) and outside groups (e.g., National Rifle Association) that mention or reference candidates for office. We aimed to identify trends in candidate-related election advertising mentioning guns and to assess geographical variation in gun references across US media markets. Results can inform our understanding of the evolving politics around this health issue.

DATA & METHODS

Data

Kantar/CMAG data included all television broadcast and national cable advertising mentioning candidates for political office in presidential, congressional, gubernatorial and state legislative races airing during the 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018 election cycles in all 210 US media markets. Candidate-related election ads could be sponsored by candidates themselves directly, by political parties, or outside groups. We excluded so-called 'issue ads' that focused on policy issues but do not mention specific candidates. This exclusion

reflected our intent to assess how guns factored in the political advertising in campaigns for elected office. Issue ads air irregularly throughout the year, which may not speak directly to the candidate's election-related information reaching citizens. In addition, we excluded 3 media markets in 2012 and 7 in 2014 because no candidate-related election ads aired.

Advertising data included video files for unique advertisements airing on local broadcast television or national cable over the study period excluding Spanish language ads. The Wesleyan Media Project uses a standard approach for coding each ad for content, ad sponsor, and level of the political office of the candidate in the ad (presidential, U.S. Congress – Senate or House, governor, state legislature) with high reliability in coding methodology as described in detail elsewhere.^{xii} The inclusion of presidential ad airings during the 2012 and 2016 election cycles means that the volume of candidate-related airings is higher in those years relative to the 2014 and 2018 cycles. Airings solely on national network or cable stations were excluded (304 unique advertisements, 34,696 airings). The vast majority of advertising that aired on national network or cable outlets also ran in local broadcasts (78% of unique national advertisements and 92% of total national airings). The final analytic dataset included 28,946 unique ads and 14,172,212 airings.

Measures

We developed a coding instrument to characterize the audio and visual content of each advertisement. Measures were developed at the individual unique advertisement level, most of which aired multiple times. For each election cycle, we coded for candidate-related content beginning in the January of the off-year. For example, for the 2018 election, we coded candidate-related television advertisements that aired between January 2017 until Election Day 2018.

We created a binary measure of whether a unique ad included a gun-related reference. Next, ads with gun-related references were categorized into four mutually exclusive groups: pro-gun rights mention only, pro-regulation mention only, both, or neither. We also coded ads with gun-related references for mentions of the NRA, and whether the mention was pro-NRA or anti-NRA. Finally, we coded whether ads with gun-related references mentioned support or opposition to specific gun policy issues. The coding instrument was developed using an inductive process involving trained coders who watched 80 percent of all unique ads from the 2012 and 2016 election cycles to generate a list of specific gun-related references. We chose this approach rather than using an a priori list of gun issues to ensure gun-related references were not missed. Inter-coder agreement ranged from 97.0 percent to 100 percent and kappa (a measure of reliability that adjusts for agreement by chance) exceeded conventional standards for acceptable reliability (κ range = 0.80–1.00). See raw agreement and kappa statistics for all variables in Appendix A.^{xiii}

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data at the ad airings level. We examined whether the proportion of ads with gun-related references changed over time. We used GIS mapping (ArcMap software) to assess geographic variation in pro-gun rights and pro-regulation references in airings within

media markets over time. Using discrete categories of ad airing counts, we applied shading to represent categories of media markets within the same volume range of airings.

Limitations

First, our analysis excluded 257,136 Spanish-language airings (1.7% of total airings), local cable television advertising, and radio and online advertising. Second, by coding only explicit gun-related references, we may have missed nuanced presentations of guns in ads. Also, if an ad showed a visual representation of a gun without a verbal reference, the ad was not coded as a gun-related reference. Third, we analyzed all candidate-related ads, including those sponsored by entities beyond the candidates themselves; but issue ads not mentioning a specific candidate for political office are excluded. While this criterion restricts the ads in our sample that may be referencing guns, it has the advantage of allowing us to assess the gun-related content included in ads promoting specific political candidates for office. Finally, we chose to conduct our analysis at the ad airings level, rather than the unique ad level to capture the prominence of candidate gun-related stance information on television across the country. Examining advertisements at the unique ad level provides information on candidates' and other sponsors' choices about content in the ads they are creating, but no information on the reach of those advertisements. Understanding how ad content is conveyed at the airings level is critical because, as our data show, sponsors choose to air some individual ads a single time and other ads thousands of times. These choices reveal strategic considerations about how important different sponsors view each unique ad in their attempt to shape electoral views.

RESULTS

Over the four election cycles from 2012 through 2018, 5% (721,238) of the 14 million television candidate-related election ad airings included gun-related references. As shown in Exhibit 1, the share of candidate-related airings with gun references increased over time from 1% of total airings in the 2012 election to 8% in the 2018 election. Over the four election cycles, a majority of gun-related references in airings were pro-gun rights; 51% were pro-gun rights only and an additional 1% included a pro-gun rights reference in the same airing as a pro-regulation reference over the four election cycles. In contrast, 29% of gun-related references in airings were pro-regulation only, and 20% had no overt pro-gun rights or pro-regulation reference overall. The share of pro-regulation mentions in airings with gun-related references increased from 10% in the 2012 election to 37% in the 2018 election. This shift paralleled a decrease in the share of total gun-related airings that referenced pro-gun rights: from 86% in 2012 to 45% in 2018.

Over the entire time-period, 35 percent of ad airings with gun-related mentions referenced the NRA. While the overall share of gun-related ad airings mentioning the NRA were roughly equivalent in the 2012 and 2018 elections – 45% and 40% respectively (dipping in 2014 to 36% and in 2016 to 25%) – the tone of these airings shifted from being overwhelmingly pro-NRA in the 2012 election cycle to being evenly split between pro-NRA and anti-NRA mentions by the 2018 cycle. (Exhibit 2) Specifically, the share of airings with pro-NRA mentions decreased from 45% of airings in the 2012 election to 20% in 2018. In

contrast, the share with anti-NRA mentions grew from less than 1% in the 2012 election to 20% in 2018.

Exhibit 3 examines mentions of specific policy issues in gun-related ad airings. Twenty-one percent of gun-related airings referenced support for the 2nd amendment, and this share barely changed over the four elections. In contrast, a much smaller share of ad airings mentioned support for specific policy options for addressing gun violence in society. For example, only 8 percent of gun-related airings mentioned support for universal background checks, 8% mentioned support for assault weapon bans, 5% mentioned support for restricting guns from dangerous people, and 4% mentioned support for the right to self-defense in a gun context. Other references to policy issues were mentioned in less than 2% of gun-related airings. Assault weapon bans were more likely to appear in gun airings in the mid-term elections than in the presidential elections.

To provide more nuance on how gun references appeared in candidate-related ad airings, we randomly sampled 20 unique ads referencing guns in each of the four election cycles (n=80), and found that most (70 of 80 ads) mentioned guns as one of multiple issues raised rather than exclusively focusing on a political candidate's stance on guns. In 2012, none of the ads sampled focused on guns exclusively. In 2014, four focused exclusively on guns, including three sponsored by the NRA. In 2016, two ads focused exclusively on guns. In 2018, four ads focused exclusively on guns, and these were all pro-gun regulation (i.e., a candidate highlighting an opponent's lack of response to mass shootings, a candidate emphasizing the importance of gun violence prevention after the Parkland mass shooting). Within this subsample, high NRA ratings were described as a marker of being "a true conservative" and "protecting the constitution". In some of the selected ads, the NRA was portrayed simply with a logo with an A rating. Other pro-gun rights ads referenced representing traditional values, linked with support of President Trump and opposition to President Obama. In contrast, candidates in selected ads that were pro-regulation mentioned taking on the NRA, referenced "the radical gun lobby," and emphasized the importance of taking action after mass shootings.

Exhibits 4 and 5 display the geographic variation in the volume of candidate-related airings mentioning pro-gun rights and pro-regulation by media market. The four media markets with 10,000 or more pro-gun rights airings were Charleston, WV; Billings, MT; Butte, MT; Missoula, MT. The four markets with 10,000 or more pro-regulation airings were Chicago, IL; Philadelphia, PA; Washington, DC; and Miami, FL.

The total volume of pro-gun rights and pro-regulation candidate-related ad airings by media market obscure changes that have occurred over time. We display the volume of pro-gun rights and pro-regulation airings by election cycle in Appendices B and C.^{xiv} For pro-gun rights, the biggest increases occurred in the South. Five media markets in Montgomery, AL; Huntsville, AL; Memphis, TN, Rapid City, SD and Atlanta, GA with no pro-gun rights ad airings in the 2012 election cycle had over 2,500 airings in the 2018 cycle.

Equally dramatic shifts occurred in pro-regulation airings, as shown in Appendix C.¹⁵ During the 2012 election, no media markets had more than 1,000 pro-regulation airings. By

2014, multiple media markets in the Northeast (New York, NY, Boston, MA, Washington, DC, Hartford, CT, Springfield, MA) aired over 1,000 pro-regulation ads. By the 2016 election, high pro-regulation airing volume had extended west (Santa Barbara, CA; and Las Vegas, NV) and to markets in Florida (Miami, West Palm Beach) and the mid-Atlantic (Philadelphia, PA; Baltimore, MD; Richmond, VA). By 2018, high pro-regulation markets had extended to the middle southwest (Denver, CO; Albuquerque, NM), the Midwest (Kansas City, MO, Minneapolis, MN) and most media markets in Florida. Finally, in Appendix D and E^{xv} the balance of pro-gun rights versus pro-regulation airings by media market overall and in each election is depicted in maps.

DISCUSSION

With the 2020 election fast approaching, this study indicates that guns are playing an increasingly prominent role in candidate-related political advertising. Gun references have increased substantially in candidate-related ad airings in recent elections. While pro-gun rights and pro-NRA messages dominate, a shift is occurring with both pro-regulation and anti-NRA messages occupying a larger share of candidate-related political ads.

It is noteworthy that only a small share of candidate-related ad airings with gun references have focused on specific gun policies, with assault weapon bans and universal background checks mentioned most frequently. References to “keeping guns out of the hands of dangerous people” were featured in only 5% of gun-related airings. This is surprising given the recent flurry of activity around extreme risk protection orders. Seventeen states and DC now have these laws, 15 of which have been enacted since 2016, creating a civil restraining order process in which family members and law enforcement can petition the court to have guns temporarily removed from an individual exhibiting dangerous behavior and temporarily prohibiting gun purchases. In contrast, 1 in 5 of all airings referencing guns in each of the last four elections mentioned support for the 2nd amendment.

Our findings highlight the geographic variation in gun-related references in ads. Geographic shifts appear to reflect changes in local attention to guns. For example, the sizable increase in volume of ad airings referencing guns between the 2016 and 2018 elections in Florida was likely attributable in part to the February 2018 shooting in Parkland, Florida. This tragedy prompted highly visible student activism and the rapid passage of a Florida law raising the minimum age for buying rifles from 18 to 21, imposing a three-day waiting period for gun purchases, and banning bump-stocks allowing rapid firing of semi-automatic weapons. As the 2020 election shifts into high gear, it will be important to track whether these patterns in political advertising persist.

CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest that many Americans, particularly those more attuned to elections or living in communities where gun-related debates were catalyzed by mass-shootings, are likely to have seen increasing messaging about guns and, to a lesser extent, gun policies via political advertising by or on behalf of candidates running for elected office. These trends suggest an upward trajectory in the importance of guns in candidate-related political

advertising (albeit with huge geographic variation) which, in turn, may shape the public agenda for action on this critical health issue.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

REFERENCES

- i. <https://www.massshootingtracker.org/data/all> Last accessed on 07/08/2019
- ii. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Underlying Cause of Death 1999-2017 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released December, 2018. Data are from the Multiple Cause of Death Files, 1999-2017.
- iii. Kochanek KD, Murphy SL, Xu JQ, Arias E. Deaths: Final data for 2017 National Vital Statistics Reports; vol 68 no 9 Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics 2019.
- iv. Freedman Paul, Franz Michael M., and Goldstein Kenneth M.. 2004 "Campaign Advertising and Democratic Citizenship."
- v. Ridout Travis N., Franz Michael M., Goldstein Kenneth M., and Freedman Paul. 2002 "Measuring the Nature and Effects of Campaign Advertising."
- vi. Geer John G. 2006 "In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns." University of Chicago Press.
- vii. Mattes Kyle, and Redlawsk David P.. 2015 The Positive Case for Negative Campaigning. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- viii. Kaplan Noah, Ridout Travis N., and Park David. 2006 "Dialogue in American Political Campaigns? An Examination of Issue Convergence in Candidate Television Advertising." American Journal of Political Science 50: 724–36.
- ix. Fowler Erika Franklin, Franz Michael M., and Ridout Travis N.. 2016 Political Advertising in the United States. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- x. Franz Michael M., Freedman Paul, Goldstein Kenneth, and Ridout Travis N.. 2008 Campaign Advertising and American Democracy. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- xi. Lipsitz Keena. 2013 "Issue Convergence Is Nothing More than Issue Convergence." Political Research Quarterly 66 (4): 843–855.
- xii. Fowler EF, Baum LM, Jesch E, Haddad D, Reyes C, Gollust SE et al. Issues relevant to population health in political advertising in the United States, 2011–2012 and 2015–2016. Milbank Q. 2019;97(4):1062–1107.
- xiii. To access the Appendix, click on the Appendix link in the box to the right of the article online.
- xiv. To access the Appendix, click on the Appendix link in the box to the right of the article online.
- xv. To access the Appendix, click on the Appendix link in the box to the right of the article online.

Exhibit 1.

Share of Candidate-Related Television Ad Airings with Gun-Related References in the 2012 to 2018 US Election Cycles

Exhibit 2:

Share of Gun-Related References in Candidate-Related Television Ad Airings Mentioning the NRA in the 2012 to 2018 US Election Cycles

	Total Airings with Gun-Related References	2012 Election	2014 Election	2016 Election	2018 Election
n	721,238	39,355	100,109	208,110	373,664
Mentioning support for the 2nd amendment (%)	21%	22%	20%	23%	21%
Mentioning support for universal background checks (%)	8%	0%	11%	8%	7%
Mentioning support for assault weapon ban (%)	8%	0%	8%	5%	10%
Mentioning support for restricting guns from dangerous people (%)	5%	1%	7%	5%	4%
Mentioning support for right to self-defense in a gun context (%)	4%	4%	6%	5%	3%
Mentioning support for restricting gun access due to mental illness (%)	2%	0%	3%	1%	2%
Mentioning opposition to national gun registry (%)	1%	0%	0%	<1%	2%
Mentioning opposition to assault weapon ban (%)	1%	0%	<1%	3%	0%
Mentioning support for concealed carry policy (%)	1%	1%	<1%	3%	<1%
Mentioning opposition to guns in schools (%)	<1%	0%	1%	<1%	1%

Exhibit 3.

Share of Gun-Related References in Candidate-Related Television Ad Airings Mentioning the Gun Policy Issues in the 2012 to 2018 US Election Cycles

Source: Authors' analysis of data from Kantar Media's Campaign Media Analysis Group.

Note: Mentions of specific gun issues with less than 1,000 ad airings are not exhibited. They include opposing restricting guns from people determine to be dangerous (n=13), supporting a national gun registry (n=108), supporting tracking stolen guns (n=338), and supporting guns in schools (n=572).

Gun Rights Airings (2012 – 2018)

Exhibit 4:

Geographic Variation in Volume of Pro-Gun Rights Mentions in Candidate-Related Television Ad Airings in the 2012 to 2018 US Election Cycles

Source: Authors' analysis of data from Kantar Media's Campaign Media Analysis Group.

Gun Regulation Airings (2012 – 2018)

Exhibit 5:

Geographic Variation in Volume of Pro-Regulation Mentions in Candidate-Related Television Ad Airings in the 2012 to 2018 US Election Cycles

Source: Authors' analysis of data from Kantar Media's Campaign Media Analysis Group.