

**Local Versus External Issue Group Advertising:
A Content Analysis of Political Advertisements in Minnesota Elections**

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Abstract

Spending on political advertising in U.S. elections has surged to unprecedented levels, yet its impact on voter behavior appears minimal, prompting questions about its efficacy. This study investigates one significant contributor to election advertising, issue groups, which have been understudied due to their lack of transparency and the dynamic nature of their legislation. By better understanding the advertising strategies behind issue groups, this research can yield insights for campaigns, guiding more impactful spending. Specifically, this study focuses on examining the relationship between the registered location of issue groups and the types of ad content they generate, offering a more nuanced perspective on their campaign strategies. Through a content analysis of 200 issue group advertisements, half originating from issue groups within the state of Minnesota and the other half from issue groups outside the state, the data analysis revealed statistically significant relationships between issue group location and several components of advertising content, including ad emphasis, ad nature, appeal tactics, issue focus, communication strategies, and regional references. This study concludes that a strong relationship exists between the location of issue groups and the specific types of advertising content they generate. These results help distinguish among issue groups, indicating that investing in issue groups from certain locations can result in the creation of certain advertising messages, thus offering the potential to reach voters more effectively.

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Political campaign spending has witnessed a consistent and substantial increase over the past decades. In 2020, the cumulative expenditure for elections reached a staggering \$14.4 billion, marking a significant leap from the \$3.1 billion spent in 2000 (OpenSecrets, 2020). The largest portion of these expenditures is attributed to advertising and media costs. This study will focus on issue group advertisements, a category of political ads that are paid for by advocacy groups separate from candidate campaigns. Issue group advertising constitutes a notable share of all ads aired during election cycles, yet their messaging strategies and salience on voters are inadequately understood due to their lack of transparency (Ridout et. al., 2020). Despite the available data indicating a rise in advertising spending across elections, especially by issue groups, a knowledge gap persists in understanding how advertising and media strategies are affecting voter behavior (Franz et al., 2020). Therefore, exploring issue group advertising becomes crucial for informing political actors and campaigns. The knowledge uncovered in this study will enable them to make informed investment decisions, including contributions to issue groups, that can produce ad content that more effectively reaches voters.

This research will focus on the Minnesota media market, particularly within broadcast television. Despite broadcast television's declining usage, it remains the number one media channel for political advertising. The Minneapolis-St. Paul or Twin Cities media market stands out in this category. Spanning all eight Minnesota congressional districts and reaching the majority of the state, this market is an important inclusion in any Minnesotan campaign (FCC DTV Reception Maps, 2023). With over 1,839,480 households reached, it ranks as the 14th largest U.S. media market (OAAA Nielsen DMA Rankings, 2021). The extensive coverage makes the Twin Cities an ideal region for research, offering insights of national relevance. Consequently, this study will investigate the Minnesotan television network, specifically examining political advertisements that were aired in the state.

A portion of the advertisements broadcasted in Minnesota are sourced from local issue groups that are based in the state, but another larger portion of the ads are sourced from issue groups that exist from across state lines. The comparison of ad content produced by local versus out-of-state groups has received minimal research and remains poorly understood. This study will therefore focus on examining the relationship between the registered location of issue groups and the types of ad content they generate, which will offer a more nuanced understanding of their campaign strategies.

Preview Literature Review

Past studies have contributed to our understanding of political advertising. The relationship between campaign spending and election outcomes in U.S. elections has been a longstanding concern, with scholars like Ben-Bassat et al. (2015) acknowledging the challenge of establishing a definitive link between campaign spending and election results. Despite extensive research, there is no consensus on the impact of campaign spending, warranting further investigation. Political advertising, a major expenditure of campaigns, surged in 2020, raising questions about its effects on voters (Benoit et al., 2007; Wesleyan Media Project). Studies by Ridout et al. (2020), François et al. (2023), Schuster (2020), and Toniatti (2018) suggest minimal voter influence from advertising, and Niederdeppe et al. (2021) highlight potential negative mental health consequences.

Issue groups, separate from candidate campaigns, significantly contribute to political advertising. Recent court decisions, like *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010), led to the emergence of new issue groups using 501(c)(4) nonprofits to fund political causes with donor anonymity (Cox, 2022). Concerns arise about the lack of transparency in issue groups' financing and potential influence on political outcomes. Studies, including Cox's (2022), indicate that dark money issue groups are not predictive of election outcomes, supporting the notion that political advertising, even from issue groups, may not significantly impact results. Despite this, issue groups continue to grow, contributing to one-third of federal campaign ads in 2020 (Ridout et al., 2020).

The transformation of media strategies, driven by the Internet and social media, has been reshaping political campaigns. Yet broadcast television, despite many new digital advancements, remains

the primary mode of advertising (Fowler et al., 2021; Ridout et al., 2020). Conflicting findings exist on the impact of online political advertising on voters, with some research finding that it is more impactful than traditional channels, and others claiming it has the same minimal effect (Haenschen & Jennings, 2019; Kalla & Broockman, 2018). Media plans adapt alongside the new channels, with questions being raised about the effectiveness of social media advertising, particularly regarding the capabilities of microtargeting (Martin & Peskowitz, 2018; Newell, 2022). Relatively limited attention has been given to changing political ad content, but recent advancements reveal the influence of centrist messages, issue-based ads, and emotional appeals (Berger et al., 2020; Fossen et al., 2022).

In the realm of issue group advertising, large groups like Super PACs adopt a mass-scale approach to producing content, creating one political ad that can be applied to numerous elections across the country (Franz et al., 2016). Local issue groups, however, more often run ads in their own region, addressing concerns closer to home. The contrast between the content of ads made by local issue groups and those from separate regions has not been extensively addressed in prior research, making it a strong focal point for this study.

Impact

To begin filling in the gaps of knowledge regarding issue group campaigns, this study will look specifically at how issue group advertising differs based on location. Such insights are valuable for many political roles. As candidates, media planners, activists, and more look to influence election outcomes, financial contributions to issue groups emerge as one apparent option. As issue groups grow across the U.S., however, the lack of knowledge regarding their differences and how they uniquely reach voters is evident. The findings of this study will add nuance to one factor that can distinguish issue groups, their geography. If issue groups, their ads, and their effects on voters can be differentiated, then political actors can make better-informed investment decisions that will result in more efficient use of campaign dollars. As current spending strategies seem to have minimal impact on voters, despite there being more money than ever, it becomes crucial to identify more effective ways for campaigns to allocate media funds that will better resonate with voters.

This study will address the following overarching research question: To what extent, if any, does the content of political advertising from issue groups within Minnesota differ from issue groups external to the state? Answering this question will require an examination of the specific components that make up an ad's contents. For this study, this will include the emphasis, which refers to the ad's subject matter such as a candidate or issue, the nature, which refers to the ad's inclination for positivity or negativity, the appeal tactics, which refers to the use of persuasive arguments in the ad, the issue focus, which refers to the specific topics and policies covered in the ad, the communication strategies, which refer to the techniques used to convey messages and information to the audience, and the use of regional references, which is a specific communication strategy that uses local imagery, language, or icons.

Preview Methods

In order to address the overarching research question, a content analysis will be employed to evaluate political ads aired in Minnesota, comparing those from Minnesotan issue groups versus those from out-of-state issue groups. The methodology for this analysis begins with the use of the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) database, an online source containing documentation for all political advertising purchases made on U.S. television stations. Details regarding the buyer, amount spent, number of ads, and more can be found by reading the filings in the television station's folder. Therefore, all purchases made on all Minnesota broadcast stations are traceable within the FCC database. These records serve as the foundation for developing a list of ad buyers in Minnesota elections, specifically identifying all issue groups that were involved from 2014 to 2022.

Next, the Facebook Ad Library, which archives all ads aired on Facebook and Instagram, is implemented to locate the videos produced by the identified issued groups. The platform features political disclaimers aiding in pinpointing the ad buyers and their registered locations, an important factor in determining whether an issue group is locally based. After applying specific search criteria to locate and verify the ads, the artifacts were compiled for assessment. The content analysis comprised a sample of 200 ads that aired in Minnesota—100 from local issue groups and 100 from out-of-state groups. The

analysis assessed several variables that aligned with the research questions, including the ad's emphasis, nature, appeal tactics, addressed issues, and communication strategies.

To understand the context that surrounds this research and its methodology, it is essential to examine previous studies. The following literature review will outline the necessary literature and previous work within political advertising that supports this thesis.

Literature Review

Prior research has made significant contributions to our understanding of political advertising. This literature review will cover the most relevant components of political advertising, including expenditures, media planning, ad content, and more. The review will begin by examining the connection between campaign spending and election outcomes. Then, attention will be turned to the most substantial portion of campaign spending, political advertising, and investigate its impact on voters. Next, the focus will shift to issue groups, seeking to understand their emergence and influence in modern U.S. elections. Following this, the review will examine studies that explore the evolving media landscape and its effects on elections, with a particular emphasis on the Minnesotan television market. Then, the impact of new digital platforms like social media will be considered, aiming to understand how they are shaping the electoral landscape. Furthermore, research investigating these digital developments and how they have been integrated into political media plans will be covered. Finally, the review will assess the current state of political ad content, with a specific look into issue groups, to provide an overview of the current landscape in this field.

Campaign Spending and Political Advertising

The relationship between campaign spending and election outcomes has long been a concern in U.S. elections. Scholars and policymakers are interested in analyzing the impact of candidates' campaign expenditures on the democratic process, as suspicions persist that financial contributions can influence policy and candidate selection. A study by Ben-Bassat et al. (2015) recognizes the relevance of this issue but clarifies that establishing a definitive causal link between campaign spending and election results is

challenging, if not unobtainable. Despite the extensive research, there is no consensus on how campaign spending affects electoral outcomes. This lingering question highlights the importance of further investigating the complex relationship between campaign spending strategies and election results. One of the most important segments of campaign spending is political advertising, which will be the focus of this study.

Political races rely on mass advertising as an important campaign tool for reaching voters—an approach commonly known as political advertising, as outlined in the works of Benoit et al. (2007). Advertising and marketing efforts make up the majority expenditure of campaign finances, and the field continues to grow with each election. In 2020, the Wesleyan Media Project reported a large surge in political ad volumes; a total of 4.9 million ads were broadcast across all federal races during that year, setting a new record. This number was over twice the volume seen during the 2012 and 2016 presidential election cycles, and it significantly exceeded the previous record-setting midterm election in 2018.

Scholars and political leaders are examining the factors behind the surge in ad spending. According to Tyler Goldberg, the North America director of political strategy at Assembly, new government roles are becoming more prominent in the public's view. He stated, "Governor, attorney general, secretaries of state races; these are races that didn't used to receive much attention but are now gaining significant focus" (AdAge 2023). For example, state legislature races in Virginia are experiencing a substantial increase in investment, with millions of new dollars pouring in to fight for competitive seats (OpenSecrets 2023). Goldberg further asserts that this upswing in spending can be attributed to the competitiveness of some down-ballot races, particularly House seats, which happen to be located in some of the nation's most expensive advertising markets, such as New York and Los Angeles. As these expensive markets continue to host close and pivotal races, the cost of competition rises, and political campaigns continue to increase their investments.

The growth of political advertising raises questions on the extent to which this spending is affecting election outcomes. Many researchers highlight the minimal effects of political advertising on voters. Ridout et al. (2020), François et al. (2023), Schuster (2020), and Toniatti (2018) all suggest that

investment in political advertising may do very little to sway voters. Their studies observe that political messaging is often fleeting in voters' memories, and rarely changes a voter's original intentions. The influx of political messages is even found to be degrading to Americans' mental health and is not widely appreciated by viewers. Niederdeppe et al. (2021) set out to examine the relationship between political factors and population health, finding that campaign ads may serve as a vehicle through which negative mental health consequences can occur. The study established a consistent positive association between exposure to campaign advertising and reported diagnoses of anxiety among American adults, suggesting that elections may contribute to individual-level mental health issues. As a result, the lack of evidence regarding its voter impact and its negative psychological impact raises doubts about the rationale behind substantial expenditures on political advertising.

Issue Groups

A notable share of political advertising is sourced from issue groups. Issue groups are organizations or associations that advocate for specific policies and interests. These groups focus their resources on promoting their positions and advocating for or against particular policies and candidates. They often create advertising campaigns to influence public opinion and government decision-making, particularly during elections, by running ads that may support or oppose certain candidates or parties based on their stance. Issue groups come in various forms, some aligned with party leaders, and others championing specific causes. These groups are financially categorized based on donor transparency, falling into three distinct groups: full disclosure, non-disclosing dark money, and partial disclosure groups. This classification sheds light on the evolving landscape of financing and disclosure practices within this domain.

Recent court decisions have led to the emergence of new types of issue groups in election campaigns, growing their power in the current political landscape. In the United States, if a group wants to financially support a political candidate while maintaining their anonymity, they have limited options. Contributions to candidates, political parties, political action committees (PACs), and Super PACs are subject to disclosure requirements. However, after the 2010 *Citizens United v. FEC* case, which permitted

501(c)(4) nonprofit "social welfare organizations" to allocate funds for political causes as long as less than 50% of their expenditures were considered political spending. Under specific conditions, a donor can choose to contribute to a 501(c)(4) and remain undisclosed. To achieve this, the advertisement associated with the donation must refrain from explicitly endorsing or opposing a candidate, and it should avoid mentioning a candidate if aired within 30 days of the primary election or 60 days of the general election; otherwise, disclosure is mandatory. Ads that do not meet the criteria for express advocacy but are still overtly political are labeled as "issue advocacy," and the funds used for these ads are referred to as "dark money." In such cases, neither the expenditures nor the donors are required to be reported. Consequently, 501(c)(4) organizations can allocate unlimited amounts to issue advocacy ads without disclosing their contributors. Given the anonymity behind their formation, many of these groups only exist on paper, and simply serve as conduits for money to flow to other organizations, further obscuring the source of their funds. The legal framework surrounding these groups lacks oversight and contains loopholes, complicating efforts to track their identity, activities, and finances. Given their elusiveness, issue groups are a compelling topic for research that has yet to yield substantial literature. Such knowledge gaps motivate this study, which will investigate issue groups and their involvement in U.S. elections, namely their messaging and advertising.

Issue groups' absence of transparency has raised concerns about the potential for undisclosed and unregulated funds to wield influence over political outcomes and policy decisions. To understand such an issue, Cox (2022) conducted a study that examined the impact of dark money groups on U.S. House elections. The research indicated that dark money expenditures were not predictive of House election outcomes, even when accounting for spending by other entities, such as candidates and Super PACs. This research, as a result, further supports the claim that there is little evidence to show that political advertising has an impact on election outcomes, even when specifically evaluating dark money issue groups. Regardless of influence, however, issue groups continue to grow in size and exert pressure on U.S. elections. With each successive election cycle, issue groups expand their spending on political advertising. In 2020, issue groups were responsible for a substantial one-third of all federal campaign ads,

as outlined in a study by Ridout et. al. (2020). The increased involvement and spending by issue groups in U.S. elections lends itself to the need to further study their advertising strategies. Consequently, this thesis will focus on distinguishing and analyzing their strategies specifically based on their location. Some issue groups operate nationally, getting involved in races across state lines. Other issue groups prefer to push advocacy in local areas. As little research exists investigating issue groups and their advertising, this study will help dissect their nuances, making comparisons among groups based on geography. Specifically, the advertising from Minnesota issue groups will be compared to that of external, or out-of-state groups, operating on a national level.

New and Transforming Media Strategies

Campaigns from both issue groups and candidates have undergone great transformation as the media landscape has evolved. The widespread adoption of the Internet, smartphones, and social media platforms has fundamentally reshaped mass communications. Fowler et. al. (2021) writes about how these advancements carry two pivotal implications for political campaigns: first, social media has substantially reduced advertising costs, broadening access for a wider range of candidates and expanding electoral engagement potential. Second, social media platforms provide precise targeting capabilities that surpass traditional broadcast media.

Despite the spike in spending on digital ads, however, broadcast television retains the highest share of media plan budgets. Ridout et. al. (2020) asserts that in 2020, political ad volumes on broadcast television reached their highest levels ever, surpassing the record-breaking totals set in 2018. As a result, television advertising continues to reign as the primary mode of communication between political campaigns and voters. The relatively high cost of television advertisements makes this modality the most substantial expense of campaign contribution dollars. Further addressed by Martin and Peskowitz (2018), their research found that advertising on broadcast television accounted for over a quarter of all expenditures in congressional campaigns from 2010 to 2014. Therefore, linear television continues to be a crucial component in modern media plans for political campaigns, playing an important role in reaching voters and shaping our understanding of campaign strategies.

The Minneapolis-St. Paul or Twin Cities media market is one particular region of note when discussing broadcast television. The television network reaches all 8 Minnesotan congressional districts, and covers the majority of the state, making it a vital inclusion in any Minnesotan campaign (FCC DTV Reception Maps, 2023). The network utilizes transmitter stations positioned across the state to extend the reach of their broadcasts, ensuring that their programming can be received by viewers in various locations beyond the immediate metropolitan area. Consequently, the Twin Cities network reaches over 1,839,480 households, positioning it as the 14th largest media market in the United States (OAAA Nielsen DMA Rankings, 2021). The extensive network coverage makes it an ideal region for conducting research that can yield valuable insights with relevance on the national scale. Accordingly, this study will investigate the Minnesotan television network, focusing solely on the advertisements that were broadcast within the state. Note, however, that as broadcast television usage declines across the U.S., the Twin Cities market has also slightly shrunk from years prior. These changes in media consumption emphasize the importance of understanding how new digital platforms are interacting with the political space.

With digital transformation in politics, numerous researchers have conducted studies to examine the dynamics of online voter communication. Aldrich et. al. (2016) have established that online voter communication is becoming more mainstream in U.S. national elections, reaching a diverse audience similar to traditional forms of contact. Mediated messaging, especially online, plays a significant role in mobilizing both turnout and campaign participation, particularly among younger voters. Barrett's study (2022) quantitatively mapped the rise of digital advertising firms hired by political committees in U.S. elections, showing a significant increase in the number of these firms since 2008, alongside an expansion in the number of service providers. This indicates the growing reliance on digital channels, such as social media, for voter mobilization. The influence of social media platforms on political advertising was explored by Fowler (2021). The study found that Facebook ads tend to be more partisan and ideological, focusing on mobilizing existing supporters rather than persuading marginal voters. As viewers shift from live television to online content, political advertising is expected to adopt Facebook-like targeting

capabilities across platforms. The rapidly changing world of online voter communications requires ongoing research and updates for each new election cycle.

The shift in media strategies reintroduces the question of whether political advertising, now through online and digital platforms, has an impact on influencing voters. Haenschen and Jennings (2019) conducted a field experiment that demonstrated internet ads' potential to increase voter participation, producing a modest but statistically significant increase in turnout. On the other hand, Kalla and Broockman (2018) analyzed 49 field experiments and found that campaign persuasion is extremely rare in general elections, with campaigns having minimal effects on changing voters' candidate choices. However, they acknowledged the potential indirect influence of campaigns through factors like candidate issue positions and media coverage. Doherty and Adler (2014) showed that the timing of campaign advertisements can impact their effectiveness on voter assessments and candidate recognition, emphasizing the significance of well-timed messaging for voter mobilization. The selection of particular media channels for political communication continues to evolve as campaigns learn more about the platforms and attempt to better reach voters.

Media planning in political advertising has adapted alongside the emergence of new communication channels like social media. Research on these platforms' impact has grown in the past decade, with the U.S. leading the adoption of online communication in national elections, as introduced by Aldrich et al. (2016). Television advertising remains the major expense in campaigns due to the lack of spending limits in the U.S., while social media advertising, particularly microtargeting, continues to be a topic of debate regarding its effectiveness. Newell's study (2022) examined the effectiveness of media planning and political advertising within the context of the 2016 Iowa Presidential Caucus. Aligning with previous literature, they found that increased ad spending did not necessarily lead to higher voter interest. In doing so, they drew parallels with trends observed in branded product advertising, where optimal ad frequency drives better outcomes. Newell's research identifies a notable gap between current political ad purchasing practices and standard media buying norms, potentially resulting in inefficient allocation of campaign resources in media planning. For this reason, this study aims to uncover insights that will assist

media planners and political actors in making informed investment decisions that enhance their communication with voters.

Advertising Content

While media strategies within political advertising continue to be researched, there has been relatively little attention given to how the content of these ads, beyond just their tone, can affect their salience. With the recent advancements in text analytic methods, exemplified by Berger et. al. (2020), researchers have been able to dig deeper into how the specific content of political ads influences voter behavior. Using these methods, a study conducted by Fossen et al. (2022) explored how the content of advertisements from 2016 presidential candidates persuaded voters. They found that ads featuring centrist messages and aligning with the candidate's primary campaign platform were associated with increased online word-of-mouth and voter preference. Furthermore, the findings reveal the drawbacks of using extreme messaging in political advertising, leading to decreased candidate-related word of mouth and voter preference.

Another study by Coppock et. al. (2022) investigated the contents of political ads, specifically their context, message, sender, and receiver, and how they influenced voters. The study did not find strong evidence of heterogeneity in the effects of campaign advertisements on candidate favorability. The characteristics of the advertisements, information environment, and actors did not significantly influence the extent of these effects, either. The study also warns against overly expensive efforts to target or tailor advertisements to specific audiences, as the effectiveness of the advertisements does not significantly vary from person to person or from one advertisement to another.

Sohal et al. (2014) have identified several key elements in constructing political ad content, including the advertisement's nature, emphasis, appeal tactics, and communication strategies, all of which will be implemented in the content analysis of this study. The first component, the nature of the advertisement, can be categorized into positive, negative, or comparative. Durante and Gutierrez (2014) emphasize that positive ads, which highlight a candidate's favorable attributes, can have a substantial impact on viewer behavior by increasing voter turnout for that candidate. A study by Lee et. al. (2019)

asserts that positive messages motivate voters to seek more information, especially for individuals who are less invested in the election. They note, however, that this applies differently to well-known candidates versus less-known ones. They find that exposure to positive information about well-known candidates, like Hillary Clinton, has a muted effect on information seeking, but positive information about lesser-known candidates significantly motivates them to seek out more information. This study investigated the effects of negative messages, as well, as observing that negative messages about a candidate may discourage people from seeking more information about them. This is backed by prior research. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) argue that negative ads, which are particularly common in issue group advertising, tend to suppress overall voter interest and voter turnout. This perspective is further supported by other researchers such as Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner (2007), who suggest that negative ads erode voter confidence in the government and its policies, resulting in a decreased interest in voting. Conclusions vary, however, and some studies have identified other potential outcomes of negative ads, with Allen and Burrell (2002) finding that their impact is minimal if not nonexistent, or the ads could potentially bolster certain candidates in the polls, as observed by Devlin (1995). In the case of comparative ads, Olujide, Adeyemi, and Gbadeyan (2011) contend that this ad nature, which portrays one candidate positively and their opponent negatively, generally has a positive effect on voter turnout. They find that this nature is less implemented than the alternatives.

The next component, ad emphasis, refers to the specific subject matter focus of the advertisement. Iyengar and McGrady (2007) define issue-based advertisements as an emphasis on a certain stance on policy matters, such as citizen welfare or national interests, while image-based advertisements portray a candidate in a favorable light, accentuating personal qualities, background, and a strong commitment to public service. Garramone (1983) argues that issue-based advertisements tend to have better viewer recall and result in viewers being better informed and more convinced compared to image-based advertisements. Furthermore, Joslyn (1980) noted that a significant majority of advertisements, approximately 60% to 80%, focused on issues rather than personal images. This claim was rooted in the classic democratic voting model, which posits that informed voting decisions are primarily based on

issues, not superficial images. Note, however, that Shyles (1983) and Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1997) highlighted qualities such as experience, expertise, sincerity, leadership, and enthusiasm as the most desirable traits in a leader according to voters. As a result, it becomes evident that both issue-based and image-based advertisements hold importance in election campaigns. Research regarding ad emphasis in political advertising has aged, however, and warrants updated claims that apply to the new digital era.

Another critical aspect of political advertisements is the use of appeals or persuasive arguments within the ads. Logical appeals, as defined by Kaid and Johnston (1991), aim to persuade viewers through evidence-based and logical arguments. Such appeals may use statistics or other figures to convince viewers. Emotional appeals, as described by Aaker and Williams (1998), elicit emotional responses from viewers. An emotional appeal may include charged language and intense imagery to communicate with the viewer. Additionally, Johnston and Kaid (2002) write that credibility appeals work to convince voters of a candidate's competence and integrity. These appeals may list off experiences or accomplishments that make the candidate suitable for office. These appeals are broadly applicable across different cultures, as discussed by several scholars (Brader, 2006; Coopman & Lull, 2014; Johnston & Kaid, 2002; Jones, Sinclair & Courneya, 2003; Ridout & Searles, 2011). Samaras (2003) has revealed that emotional appeals, in particular, hold great sway over viewers, evoking emotions such as love, humor, fear, and guilt, which were shown to effectively translate into voting behavior.

A third important element in political advertisements is the use of communication strategies to influence viewers. Communication strategies differ from appeal tactics in that they do not require an argument to connect with the viewer. Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier (2004) say that election campaigns employ various strategies, including the incorporation of national symbols, securing celebrity endorsements, and depicting a promising future for the country, all aimed at enhancing the candidate's positive image. Roddy and Garramone (1988) argue that political parties often employ two types of strategies: a positive approach, where they emphasize their achievements without targeting opponents, and a negative approach, where they challenge opponents' portrayals of the truth and present their own

viewpoints. The different message tones are an important component of ad content, and will be strongly considered in this thesis.

Issue Group Advertising

Issue group advertising content often differs from conventional candidate ads. Large issue groups, such as Super PACs, are primarily concerned with generating a vast quantity of advertisements aimed at influencing elections across the nation (OpenSecrets 2022). Consequently, their approach often involves assembling one political ad, and then substituting the subject of the ad based on the particular candidate and race being targeted. For instance, a generic ad would be created criticizing the reckless spending of a candidate, and then a candidate's name and image would be filled in based on which region the ad is planned to air. This process allows the issue group to create essentially one ad that can be applied to numerous elections across the country.

Paul Wilson, a political professional whose advertising firm works with issue groups, speaks on the state of issue group ads, asserting in a publication by Franz et. al. (2016) that "We have organizations with the ability to marshal resources and focus a machine gun fire of ads at a particular message". As a result, many issue groups are capable of producing ads on a mass scale, reaching audiences across the U.S. For instance, an issue group from the East Coast, like the Congressional Leadership Fund, can create a political advertisement that targets elections on the West Coast. However, some issue groups are more focused on local matters. These small local groups, like Take Action Minnesota or Minnesota Ag Energy Alliance, often run their ads within their own region to address local concerns. The contrast between the ads made by local issue groups and those from separate regions has not been addressed by prior research and will therefore be the focus of this study.

Motivation for Research

The existing research indicates that even with unprecedented levels of campaign spending, the impact of political advertisements on voters appears to be limited. However, issue groups are steadily increasing their participation in elections and are progressively investing in political media plans,

intending to shape the voting behavior of Americans. Campaign media strategies are also evolving, making the most of new digital platforms, but broadcast television remains the dominant medium for political advertising. Ongoing investigations continue to learn more about the content, salience, and significance of these ads, with issue groups employing their unique approach to content creation that has yet to be completely understood due to their evolving legislation. Since issue groups have such a large contribution to political advertising, and modern high-budget media plans need remodeling to become effective, this research sets out to offer insights that will help political actors invest in messages that will better reach voters. Moreover, considering the limited understanding of issue groups and the intricate nature of political advertising strategies in the existing literature, it becomes imperative to assess the differences among these groups. This study will utilize this context to compare the advertising content of Minnesota-based issue groups with that of issue groups from outside the state. The aim is to uncover potential differences in messaging strategies and add nuance to our understanding of issue groups. Therefore, the following research question can be proposed. To what extent, if any, does the content of political advertising from issue groups within Minnesota differ from issue groups external to the state? This question will require an individual breakdown of the components that make up advertising content. Focusing on each of these components will help inform the larger research question, and can be positioned as such:

1. To what extent, if any, does the emphasis of ads differ between issue groups based in Minnesota and issue groups from outside of the state?
2. To what extent, if any, does the nature of ads differ between issue groups based in Minnesota and issue groups from outside of the state?
3. To what extent, if any, does the use of appeal tactics differ between ads created by issue groups based in Minnesota and issue groups from outside of the state?
4. To what extent, if any, does the focus on specific issues differ between ads created by issue groups based in Minnesota and issue groups from outside of the state?

5. To what extent, if any, does the use of communication strategies differ between ads created by issue groups based in Minnesota and issue groups from outside of the state?
6. To what extent, if any, does the use of regional references differ between ads created by issue groups based in Minnesota and issue groups from outside of the state?

Methods

This section outlines the research methodology used in this thesis. Grounded in the rationale for this study and its research questions, a content analysis is employed to assess political advertisements from diverse issue groups based in both Minnesota and out-of-state. The content analysis approach, as used by scholars like Sohal and Kaur (2018) and Fossen et al. (2022), facilitates comparisons among advertisements from various issue groups. The results from the analysis will provide insights into the ads' emphasis on specific subjects, messaging styles, use of appeal tactics, addressed issues, and communication strategies.

Database Overview

The process of gathering political ads for analysis begins with the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) database, which provides comprehensive documentation of advertising purchases made on broadcast television stations within the United States. The documents in this database yield details on all ad orders placed at broadcast stations. For instance, when the Congressional Leadership Fund, a large Super PAC, purchases airtime for their political advertisements on WCCO, a Minneapolis television station, their paperwork is stored in the FCC's online files. Details regarding the buyer, amount spent, number of ads, and more can be found by reading these documents in the station's folder.

Purchases made on all Minnesota broadcast stations, as a result, can be located in the FCC database. These filings were used to develop a list of all ad buyers in Minnesota elections, or more specifically, all issue groups involved in Minnesota elections from 2014 to 2022. This returned the names of 150 different issue groups, all of which can be found in Table 1 of the appendix.

After this list is developed, the Facebook Ad Library, a database that archives all ads run on Facebook and Instagram, is employed to search, locate, and filter the advertisements made from the identified issue groups. Since political advertisements run on broadcast television are not archived in a centralized location, the Facebook Ad Library is the next most viable option. The platform includes political disclaimers that aid in identifying the ad buyer and their registered location, which is useful in determining if an issue group is based in Minnesota. Upon using this tool to locate and retrieve ads from the issue groups, a content analysis is conducted on 200 ads that ran in Minnesota. The sample consists of 100 ads from Minnesota issue groups and 100 from out-of-state groups. The content analysis assessed multiple variables, including the emphasis of the ad, its nature, appeal tactics, the issues it addresses, and communication strategies.

Federal Communication Commission Database

The FCC gathers information about political advertising purchases made on broadcast television stations in the United States. The FCC mandates that television and radio stations maintain a record of "all requests for broadcast time made by or on behalf of a candidate for public office." The station's documents include airtime requests submitted by candidate committees, self-certification affidavits from the National Association of Broadcasters demonstrating their representation of a political entity, and advertising contracts produced by the station or its sales representatives. These requests, affidavits, and contracts are uploaded and organized in the FCC's online Public Inspection File system in PDF format within a few days of being received by the television station. The documents contain information about the group that purchased the ads, the start and end dates, the number of ads, the cost, and the specific time slots or show titles for each purchase. Upon opening and reviewing the stored files, specific information can be pulled and aggregated into a separate spreadsheet, creating a more unified dataset that contains details for each advertising purchase.

The Minnesota media market, in particular, can be accessed through the FCC database. As previously discussed, the Twin Cities television market, one of the largest in the nation, is known for its

extensive coverage of the state due to its integration of transmitter stations. Therefore, the inclusion of this media market is vital in any political media plan targeting Minnesota.

The FCC database provides access to advertising order documentation for each television station within this network, including prominent stations like WCCO, WUCW, KARE, KSTP, KMSP, KSTC, and others. In this analysis, 15 Minnesota stations were examined, collectively representing a significant share of all television ad purchases in the Minnesota market. The primary aim of reviewing this documentation is to identify the groups that placed advertising orders in Minnesota elections.

By reviewing the 15 station's contracts and compiling their information into a single spreadsheet, prior research successfully identified nearly every political ad order placed among these stations from 2014 to 2022 (Terry, 2022). From this data, a list of all issue groups participating in Minnesota elections during this timeframe was gathered, providing a thorough overview of the organizations involved in the state's political landscape. In total, 150 different issue groups were identified from the research. These names were then used in the Facebook Ad library to gather artifacts for analysis.

Facebook Ad Library

The Facebook Ad Library provides the necessary functionality for retrieving previous advertisements, including those within political advertising. The Ad Library is a searchable database that offers clear insights and analytics into the ads featured on Facebook and Instagram. Users can access both currently active and archived ads, with the ability to review various details, including advertiser names, ad start dates, target demographics, ad content, estimated expenditures, and ad placement. The library maintains historical data and offers filtering options to facilitate data analysis. As a result, this tool fosters transparency, accountability, and accessibility in digital advertising by allowing users to search and study archived ads. Note, however, that the database's archive only extends back to 2018, while the list of issue groups encompasses organizations with involvement dating back to 2014. Despite this gap, all issue groups were searched to provide a holistic understanding of their election involvement. Beginning in 2020, Facebook began mandating that political and issue-related groups include disclaimers with

additional information regarding their identity, which was essential for validating the source of the advertisements.

The Ad Library was implemented to locate and retrieve advertisements from the 150 issue groups identified in the FCC database. After applying search criteria to all 150 groups, the search yielded a total of 37,778 ads that aired in Minnesota. However, this figure includes a substantial number of duplicate and irrelevant ad content, leading to an inflated count beyond the actual number of unique ads. Regardless, the platform remains the top choice for locating specific political advertising content and produces the most quantifiable estimate of the universe of artifacts.

Sampling Procedures

To establish the universe of artifacts, a set of specific search criteria were applied. Beginning the process, direct language designating the issue groups from FCC contracts was entered into the search bar of the Facebook Ad Library, using quotation marks to ensure exact matches. If an organization was associated with a specific Facebook group, it was chosen in the search.

To further distill the search, certain filters were selected. First, the results were refined to include only video content. Then, the search was narrowed down to exclude ads that did not air in Minnesota. A temporal constraint was also added, only including advertisements preceding December 31st, 2022. Following this search criteria, the results yielded 37,778 ads that aired in Minnesota across the 150 issue groups.

After determining the search criteria, a set of rules was established to validate which ads from the sample would be selected for analysis. First, only ads with disclaimers naming the issue group sponsors that matched the title of the issue group were considered for assessment. While the search criteria included various groups beyond those listed in the FCC filings, this rule was designed to ensure that only the intended groups were included in the analysis. Second, 50% or more of the ad's audience had to be from Minnesota. The Facebook Ad Library makes this audience information readily available in the summary details for each ad. This criterion served to filter out ads not originally intended for broadcasting in Minnesota, facilitating a more accurate comparison of content. Third, only advertisements with

runtimes exceeding 5 seconds but not exceeding 90 seconds were taken into account. This timeframe was chosen to exclude ad durations that are less common on broadcast television, where the issue groups initially made their advertising purchases. Fourth, no duplicate ads were considered in the analysis to prevent reproduced content from being overrepresented in the sample.

Categorizing Issue Group Location

When constructing the data frame, the issue groups were classified into two categories: Minnesota-based issue groups and out-of-state issue groups. To determine their location, the disclaimer details in the Facebook Ad Library were implemented. All ads in the database that were created after 2020 are required to include a disclaimer that specifies the ad sponsor's information, including their identity, address, and website. When available, this information was used to determine their location. In cases where no address was provided, often due to the ads being run before 2020, the issue group's website was visited, and the P.O. box information clarified the location.

Following the categorization process, it was found that out of the 150 issue groups, 46 were located in Minnesota. Remarkably, the Minnesota-based groups were disproportionately represented in the overall set of artifacts, comprising only 12% of the total 37,778 ads found in the library search. Despite this discrepancy, the overarching question remains: how do the messages in these ads vary depending on whether they are sourced from a Minnesota issue group or an out-of-state group? Consequently, a content analysis was conducted, with an equal 50/50 split between ads from Minnesota groups and out-of-state groups. In total, 200 ads were analyzed, with 100 originating from Minnesota-based groups and the remaining 100 from out-of-state groups.

Content Analysis

The content analysis included several variables, each of which is explained below. These variables were adapted from the works of Sohal and Kaur (2018), who conducted their own content analysis of political advertisements. The codebook used to analyze each video can be found in Table 3 of the appendix.

Subject of Advertisement

The advertisements were assessed for their emphasis, or subject matter focus, in the political video. A code of 1 was assigned if the emphasis was on the political party, 2 if the emphasis was on the candidate, 3 for the party identity of the candidate, and 4 for a particular issue or cause. Out of the total 200 ads, 15 (7.50%) were focused on the party, 116 (58.00%) on the candidate, 8 (4.00%) on the party identity of the candidate, and 61 (30.50%) on an issue or cause.

Nature of Advertisement

The advertisements were assessed for their nature, or their inclination for positivity and negativity. A code of 1 was assigned for a positive advertisement, indicating that the ad focused solely on positive attributes of the candidate, party, or issue, while 2 was used for a negative advertisement, which focused solely on negative attributes. For example, an ad focusing on Angie Craig, an MN-2 candidate, and her great qualities, accomplishments, and suitability for office would be considered a positive ad. On the other hand, an ad focusing on her poor qualities and her unsuitability for office would be considered a negative ad. A code of 3 was assigned for a comparative advertisement, indicating a focus on criticizing the candidate, party, or issue along with alternative methods of action. For instance, an advertisement that begins by portraying Angie Craig as a bad candidate, and then presents her competitor, Tyler Kistner, as a better option would be classified as a comparative ad. Out of the 200 ads, 34.5% were positive, 44% were negative, and 20.5% were comparative.

Appeal Tactics

The ads were evaluated for their use of appeal tactics, or types of arguments. This included logical, emotional, and credibility (positive and negative) appeals. The appeals were coded 1 if present, and 0 if not. To be clear, an ad could have multiple appeals present. Logical appeals use facts and evidence to convince the viewer. For example, an advertisement featuring statistics on Minnesota Governor Tim Walz's contributions to the economy would be categorized as a logical appeal. Emotional appeals evoke feelings such as anger, patriotism, pride, and more. In the same scenario involving Tim Walz, an advertisement that employs charged language and bleak imagery to evoke fear regarding his

COVID-19 policies would be categorized as an emotional appeal. Credibility appeals increase (positive credibility appeal) or decrease (negative credibility appeal) the credibility of the candidate or cause. An ad highlighting Tim Walz's previous success in office would be considered a positive credibility appeal, and an ad undermining his experience and qualifications would be considered a negative credibility appeal. In total, logical appeals were present in 145 (72.50%) ads, emotional appeals were present in 163 (81.50%) ads, positive credibility appeals were present in 59 (29.50%) ads and negative credibility appeals were present in 91 (40.50%) ads.

Issue

The ads were assessed for the presence of specific issues and were coded as 1 if the issue was present and 0 if not. 19 of the most topical issues were evaluated, and were adapted from the codebook from Sohal & Kaur (2019). The most common issue was the economy, with 61 instances, followed by fiscal policy with 56, and healthcare with 41.

Communication Strategy

Lastly, the videos were evaluated for their usage of particular communication strategies, which were coded as 1 if present and 0 if not. Communication strategies refer to the techniques used to convey information, messages, and ideas to an audience. They should be differentiated from appeal tactics, as they do not always entail making an argument to the viewer. For example, one communication strategy, adding Minnesota imagery into the ad to create a stronger connection to the audience, is not a form of argument and therefore should not be considered an appeal tactic. Of the 14 different strategies evaluated, the most commonly used was the "attack ad," with 107 instances. An attack ad is a style of political advertisement that aims to discredit or criticize an opponent by highlighting their weaknesses, mistakes, or controversial aspects. For instance, an advertisement that heavily criticizes governor candidate Scott Jensen for his stance on abortion or his spending policies would be classified as an attack ad. Additional details about the codebook procedures and the assessed variables can be found in the appendix.

Data Analysis

Upon completing the coding process for the 200 videos, the dataset was finalized for analysis. Chi-Squared tests were conducted to explore the relationships between ad content variables. Since this study is focused on determining differences in ad content based on geographical factors, the first variable was consistently the registered location of the issue group, or whether the group was based in Minnesota or not. The location was then statistically compared to other components of ad content identified in the research questions. These components include the ad's emphasis, nature, appeal tactics, issue focus, communication strategies, and issue focus.

Results

RQ1 sought to understand the extent to which the subject matter, or emphasis, in political ads differ among issue groups from Minnesota and out-of-state. The Chi-squared results indicate a significant association between the location of the issue group and the emphasis within their political advertising, $\chi^2(3) = 18.95, p < .001$. The most common emphasis was on the candidate in issue groups from Minnesota ($n = 50, 50.00\%$) and those from out-of-state ($n = 66, 66.00\%$). The second most common emphasis was on a specific issue or interest, with ($n = 42, 42.00\%$) for Minnesota issue groups and ($n = 19, 19.00\%$) for out-of-state groups. The party was the third most frequent ad emphasis among Minnesota issue groups ($n = 100, 8.00\%$) and out-of-state groups ($n = 7, 7.00\%$). The party identity of the candidate was fourth, with Minnesota issue groups ($n = 0, 0.00\%$) and out-of-state ($n = 8, 8.00\%$).

RQ2 sought to understand the extent to which the ad's nature differs between issue groups in Minnesota and out-of-state. The Chi-squared results indicate a significant association between the location of the issue group and the nature of their political advertising, $\chi^2(2) = 16.09, p < .001$. The most common ad nature was negative in issue groups from Minnesota ($n = 100, 31.00\%$) and those from out-of-state ($n = 100, 59.00\%$). The second most common nature was positive, with ($n = 100, 42.00\%$) for Minnesota issue groups and ($n = 100, 27.00\%$) for out-of-state groups. The comparative nature was third, with Minnesota issue groups ($n = 100, 27.00\%$) and out-of-state ($n = 100, 14.00\%$).

RQ3 sought to understand the extent to which appeals were used by issue groups in Minnesota and out-of-state. The Chi-squared results indicate a significant association between the location of the issue group and the appeals used in their political advertising, $\chi^2(3) = 9.00$, $p < .05$. The most prevalent type of appeal found in the videos was emotional appeal, where issue groups from Minnesota ($n = 100$, 73.00%) and those from out-of-state ($n = 100$, 91.00%). The second most common appeal observed in the advertisements was a logical appeal, with ($n = 100$, 72.00%) for Minnesota issue groups and ($n = 100$, 73.00%) for out-of-state groups. The negative credibility appeal was the third most frequently used, with Minnesota issue groups ($n = 100$, 34.00%) and out-of-state groups ($n = 100$, 59.00%). Last, the least utilized appeal was the positive credibility appeal, with ($n = 100$, 35.00%) for Minnesota issue group ads and ($n = 100$, 23.00%) for those from out-of-state.

RQ4 sought to understand the extent to which issue groups in Minnesota and out-of-state focused on specific issues in their advertisements. The Chi-squared results indicate a significant association between the location of the issue group and the issue focus of their ads, $\chi^2(17) = 49.38$, $p < .001$. The most common issue was the economy from issue groups within Minnesota ($n = 100$, 29.00%) and those from out-of-state ($n = 100$, 31.00%). The second most common issue was fiscal policy, with ($n = 100$, 20.00%) for Minnesota issue groups and ($n = 100$, 36.00%) for out-of-state groups. The third most frequent issue was healthcare, with Minnesota issue groups ($n = 100$, 19.00%) and out-of-state ($n = 100$, 22.00%).

RQ5 sought to understand the extent to which communication strategies were used by issue groups in Minnesota and out-of-state. The Chi-squared results indicate a significant association between the location of the issue group and the use of communication strategies in their political advertising, $\chi^2(2) = 57.62$, $p < .001$. Omitting regional references, the most prevalent type of communication strategy in the videos was the attack ad, where issue groups from Minnesota ($n = 100$, 38.00%) and those from out-of-state ($n = 100$, 70.00%). The second most common strategy was a display of lack of competency, with ($n = 100$, 35.00%) for Minnesota issue groups and ($n = 100$, 45.00%) for out-of-state groups. The third most common strategy was references to recognizable leaders, with Minnesota issue groups ($n = 100$, 13.00%) and out-of-state issue groups ($n = 100$, 39.00%).

RQ 6 sought to understand the extent to which regional references were used by issue groups in Minnesota and out-of-state. The Chi-squared results indicate a significant association between the location of the issue group and the use of Minnesotan references in their political advertising, $\chi^2(2) = 13.21, p < .01$. The most prevalent type of regional reference found in the videos was the use of Minnesotan iconography and symbols, where issue groups from Minnesota ($n = 100, 49.00\%$) and those from out-of-state ($n = 100, 23.00\%$). The second most common regional reference in the advertisements was Minnesotan imagery and locations, with ($n = 100, 58.00\%$) for Minnesota issue groups and ($n = 100, 5.00\%$) for out-of-state groups. Minnesotan language was third among the regional references, with Minnesota issue groups ($n = 100, 49.00\%$) and out-of-state issue groups ($n = 100, 9.00\%$).

Discussion

The content analysis has revealed several key insights concerning the location of issue groups and their political advertising strategies. This study provides evidence of a connection between the geography of issue groups and the specific types of advertising content they produce. The primary goal of this research was to investigate if there are differences in the content of political advertising generated by issue groups operating within Minnesota compared to those operating outside the state. These findings contribute to the body of knowledge regarding issue groups and their advertising tactics, a topic that has been challenging to study due to their lack of transparency (Cox 2022; Ridout et. al., 2020; Franz et. al., 2020). Further research may explore the presence of this relationship in other states. Alternatively, a comparative analysis could be conducted, comparing advertising strategies from local issue groups who solely run ads in their own state.

Given the increasingly prominent role of issue groups in U.S. elections and their substantial investments in political advertising (Wesleyan Media Project, 2020), it is important to understand their messaging strategies and their effect on voter behavior. The lack of knowledge and literature in this space is the rationale for this study. The research findings presented in this thesis provide valuable insights for campaigns, political sponsors, and media planners to make informed decisions regarding their allocation of money, including their choice to invest in issue groups.

Billions of dollars are continually poured into political advertising, and this expenditure only continues to rise with each election cycle (OpenSecrets, 2020). Consequently, it becomes increasingly crucial for political actors to make well-informed choices that enable them to reach and engage with voters effectively, as the literature indicates that current spending strategies are doing little to sway elections (Ridout et al., 2020; François et al., 2023; Schuster, 2020; Toniatti, 2018). The results from study find that investments in issue groups from different locations result in different advertising content; such knowledge can play a crucial role in guiding campaign spending decisions as campaigns look to find ways to better reach voters.

Negativity from Out-Of-State Groups

This study found a relationship between the location of the issue group and the nature of their advertisements, with out-of-state groups tending to be more negative. The content analysis indicated that 59.00% of ads from out-of-state issue groups were negative in nature, 70.00% implemented attack ad formats, and 59.00% used negative credibility appeals. In contrast, 31.00% of ads from local groups were negative in nature, 38.00% implemented the attack ad format, and 34.00% used negative credibility appeals. The discrepancies in these figures marks a sharp difference in tonality from local versus external issue groups.

The existing research suggests that negative advertisements often suppress overall voter participation in the election (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1995, Lee et. al. 2019, Lau et al. 2007). The inclination of out-of-state issue groups to employ negative advertising, typically in the form of "attack ads," sheds light on their election-influencing strategies. By crafting ads with a negative focus, these national issue groups can discourage viewers from engaging in politics and elections. This approach may result in one or both candidates losing a portion of their base in the polls, which could be a significant tactic for affecting voter numbers. Regardless of their knowledge of these effects, large out-of-state issue groups, such as the Congressional Leadership Fund or the NRCC, can potentially turn voters off on a mass scale, as they advertise in countless races across the U.S. Given this widespread impact on voter disinterest, further research may involve an analysis of how issue groups might be contributing to the

suppression of voter turnout. However, the research on negative ads has no confirmed consensus on their effects, indicating that these ads may be leading to various voter behaviors that are not entirely understood (Allen and Burrell, 2002; Devlin, 1995). As Franz et. al. (2020) postulate, there is an argument for issue groups being both “loyal soldiers” or “loose cannons” regarding their alignment and contributions to their party interests. In other words, the negative messages from these issue groups have the potential to both bolster or obstruct the goals of their own party. This study suggests that investment in out-of-state issue groups tends to produce negative ad content which, paired with other studies, suggests that such negative ads may disengage voters, or it may result in uncertain effects.

On the other hand, the local Minnesota issue groups favored positive ads. The effects of these advertisements are more straightforward and primarily serve to increase voter turnout for the targeted candidate (Durante & Gutierrez, 2014). This ad nature more commonly results in viewers seeking out more information about the candidate or cause (Lee et. al., 2019). Such voter-motivating effects are stronger when concerning people and topics that are not well-known. As a result, local issue groups, which tend to be more positive, appear to have a less complex relationship with voter behavior, as their strategies largely revolve around boosting awareness and polling numbers. This study suggests that investment in local issue groups tends to produce more positive ad content that will help raise favorability among viewers. Recall that this effect on voters is stronger when considering lesser-known candidates and issues, which are more prevalent in local and state elections—races that local issue groups are regularly involved in.

Differences in Ad Emphasis

The content analysis also identified a relationship between the location of the issue groups and their ad’s subject matter, or emphasis. Out-of-state groups tend to focus more on party politics, while local groups tend to concentrate their ads on community and specific issues. Out-of-state issue groups focused on candidates or their party identity in nearly 3 out of every 4 of their ads. Local Minnesota issue groups, however, not once focused on the party identity of the candidate as the main topic. Instead, local groups preferred to cover specific issues, with 42.00% of local groups’ ads being issue based, compared to

19.00% from external groups. Furthermore, out-of-state groups' interest in party politics is revealed by their tendency to more often reference big party leaders in Washington, like Nancy Pelosi or Donald Trump. Out-of-state groups directed attention to party leaders three times more often than local Minnesota groups, even when these leaders were not the main subject of the ad. Similarly, they used party endorsement messages three times more often. Minnesota groups, on the other hand, steered away from partisan symbols and instead preferred to use public endorsements, with 39.00% of local groups' ads integrating a public endorsement message compared to only 9.00% from external groups.

Both emphases offer unique advantages. According to existing literature, ads focusing on specific issues tend to be more convincing and enhance viewer recall compared to candidate ads (Garramone, 1983). However, voters often prioritize qualities such as experience, expertise, sincerity, leadership, and enthusiasm when making decisions at the polls (Shyles, 1983; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1997). Candidate ads, as a result, can directly highlight these desirable traits and play into voters' motivations, an element that may be lacking in issue based ads. Studies and evidence concerning the effects of emphasizing specific subjects in political advertising are outdated, however. Updated research is warranted, especially focusing on ad content from issue groups, which have been shown to have the capacity to vary across several different topics.

Paired with prior research, this study suggests that investment in out-of-state issue groups tends to produce ad content that more often concentrates on candidates and their party, which are well equipped to show off personal qualities that speak to voters' priorities. Conversely, investment in local issue groups tends to produce ad content that focuses on issues and community, which is advantageous for voter recall.

Regional References from Local Groups

Furthermore, the content analysis indicated a relationship between the location of the issue groups and the usage of Minnesotan references, with out-of-state issue groups tending to use far less overall. Recall that large, typically external, issue groups often mass-produce advertisements to run in elections across the nation (Franz et. al., 2016). Their assembly line creation of advertisements includes generic content that is not tailored to one particular region beyond a substitution of a candidate's name and image.

Local Minnesotan issue groups, however, often create fewer ads but air them in their own region. The sampling procedure of this study is evidence of this, as the archive search results revealed that Minnesotan issue groups created far fewer ads in the state than out-of-state groups. This relationship between issue group location and regional references speaks to the different approaches used for content creation among local and external groups.

Local Minnesotan issue groups opt to add in more regional references, having easy access and comprehension of local culture. Out-of-state issue groups, however, are more distant from the regional culture and include fewer references, instead opting to create content for a broader audience. Incorporating references enables viewers to establish familiarity while processing and decoding the message in the video, indicating local issue groups have a strong advantage. The impact and resonance of regional references in political advertising on voters has not been thoroughly explored, making it a compelling subject for further research. The evidence of this study shows that investment in local issue groups, in this case, Minnesota-based, may produce ad content that more often integrates regional imagery, language, and iconography.

Conclusion

Based on the content analysis, the research concludes that there is a relationship between the location of issue groups and the content of their political advertising. The results indicate that there are differences in ad emphasis, ad nature, appeal tactics, issue focus, communication strategies, and regional references among issue groups from Minnesota versus those from out-of-state. Issue groups based in Minnesota generally adopt a more positive tone, concentrating on specific concerns and incorporating regional references more frequently. On the contrary, issue groups from outside Minnesota tend to lean towards a more negative approach, often resorting to attack ads. Their advertisements place a greater emphasis on candidates and party politics while incorporating regional references less frequently.

The evidence presented in this thesis adds nuance to our understanding of the political advertising strategies of issue groups. Despite the increasing involvement of these groups in U.S. elections, distinctions among them and their advertising strategies have not been adequately explored by

previous studies. Current campaign spending, reaching unprecedented levels, appears to have a limited impact on swaying voters (Benoit et al., 2007; Wesleyan Media Project). Hence, there is a pressing need to identify new approaches to create and sponsor ad content that can more effectively resonate with voters. This study suggests that issue groups from different locations produce different ad content. As a result, political actors and campaigns can make more informed decisions about where to allocate their financial resources.

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Appendix

Table 1: Issue Groups Involved in Minnesota Elections from 2014 to 2022

Issue Group	Years Involved					MN	FB Ad Library Results
	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022		
Abler Volunteer Committee				1		1	0
Action 4 Liberty			1			1	2
Advance Minnesota Independent Expenditure Committee / "Advance Minnesota"			1	1		1	0
AFL-CIO (MN)			1			1	330
Ag Food Alliance			1			0	0
Alliance for a Better Minnesota	1		1		1	1	3200
Alliance for a Greater Minnesota				1		0	1
Alliance for Reform					1	0	51
America First Action SuperPac			1			0	0
America First Policy Institute				1		0	150
American Action Network	1		1			0	110
American Chemistry Council			1			0	180
American Encore	1					0	8
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees / "AFSCME"	1					0	470
American Future Fund			1			0	0
American Petroleum Institute	1					0	670
Americans for Affordable Birth Control			1			0	0
Americans for Prosperity			1			0	850
Benton County Republicans			1			0	0
Brown County Republicans			1			1	0
BUC Pride				1		0	0
Business Roundtable			1			0	50
Center for Election Science			1			0	210
Center for the American Experiment			1	1		1	0
Center Forward Committee			1			0	0
Coalition of Minnesota Business			1	1		1	0
Committee for a Stronger America				1		0	0
Committee for Stronger Rural Communities				1		1	20
Congressional Leadership Fund	1		1	1	1	0	790
Conservative Leadership Alliance			1			0	8

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CUFI Action Fund		1			0	2	
DAGA Minnesota Peoples Lawyer Project				1	0	0	
DCCC Sage			1		0	0	
DCCC-Amplify			1		0	0	
Demand Justice		1			0	110	
Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee / "DCCC"	1	1		1	0	870	
DFL / "Minnesota DFL Party"	1	1	1		1	190	
Driving Minnesota		1			0	0	
DSCC / "Senate Democrats"		1	1	1	0	3700	
Duluth BizPAC / "The Greater Duluth Business Association"		1	1		1	0	
Enbridge		1			0	7	
End Citizens United		1			0	1000	
Everytown for Gun Safety (Action Fund)	1	1			0	0	
Faith and Freedom Coalition				1	0	6	
Family Farm Action		1			0	3	
Federation for American Immigration Reform / "FAIR"				1	0	210	
Foundation for Minnesota's Future	1				1	10	
Freedom Club (PAC)		1	1	1	1	140	
Freedom Defense Fund / "Press Freedom Defense Fund"		1			0	0	
Future Forward PAC / "Future Forward USA Action"				1	1	0	9
Giffords Courage to Fight Gun Violence / "Giffords PAC"		1			0	1300	
Grant County Republicans		1			1	0	
Great American Alliance		1			0	0	
Great American PAC		1			0	0	
Growth Energy		1			0	14	
Heartland Fund		1			0	0	
House DFL Caucus / "Minnesota House DFL Campaign"		1	1		1	5	
House Majority PAC	1	1	1	1	0	750	
HRCC / "House Republican Campaign Committee"		1	1		1	99	
Hubbard County Republicans			1		1	0	
I Vote					1	0	1300
Independence USA (PAC)	1	1			0	540	

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Iowa Leaders in Education and Advocacy	1		0	0	
Iowa State Education Association / "ISEA"	1		0	8	
ISD Community Group	1		0	0	
Itasca County DFL		1	1	0	
Job Creators Network		1	0	73	
Jobs for Minnesota	1		0	3	
Judicial Crisis Network	1		0	11	
Kandiyohi County Republicans		1	1	0	
Keep the Promise (PAC)	1		0	0	
LCV League of Conservation Voters / "LCV Victory Fund"	1		0	150	
Majority First	1		0	13	
Majority Forward	1		0	290	
Minnesota Action Network (PAC)	1	1	1	0	
Minnesota AG Energy Alliance	1	1	1	400	
Minnesota Conservative PAC / "Conservative American PAC"		1	1	2	
Minnesota Family Institute / "Minnesota Family Council"			1	1	7
Minnesota For Freedom / "Minnesota Freedom Fund"			1	1	0
Minnesota Freedom Club	1	1	1	1	0
Minnesota Gun Rights / "American Firearms Association"			1	0	26
Minnesota Jobs Coalition	1	1	1	1	0
Minnesota Taxi Owners and Operators	1		0	0	
Minnesotans for Bold Reform	1		1	0	
Minnesotans For Pipeline 3			1	0	0
MN Police PAC			1	0	0
MN Victory PAC	1	1	1	0	
Morrison County Republicans / "Morrison County GOP"	1		1	0	
My Faith Votes		1	0	200	
National Association of Home Builders	1		0	20	
National Federation of Independent Business / "NFIB"	1		0	9	
National Republican Senatorial Committee / "NRSC"	1	1	0	8900	
National Right to Life (Victory Fund)		1	0	9	

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North Dakotans for Public Integrity		1		0	3
North Dakotans for Sound Government		1		0	0
Northstar Leadership Fund		1		1	0
NRA Institute for Legislative Action	1	1		0	41
NRA-PVF		1		0	0
National Republican Congressional Committee / "NRCC "	1	1	1	0	4500
NRCC (IND Expenditure)			1	0	0
Nurses for a Healthy Minnesota		1		0	0
Olmsted County Republican Party		1	1	1	0
One Nation		1	1	0	36
Patriotic Veterans (PAC)			1	0	0
PETO / POET		1		0	18
Pro Jobs Majority		1	1	1	0
Reform Fargo		1		0	34
Renville County DFL			1	1	0
Republican Governors Association		1		0	210
Republican Jewish Coalition		1		0	55
Republican Party of Minnesota	1		1	1	40
Republican State Leadership Committee		1		0	110
Restoration PAC / "Restoration of America"		1		0	590
Rice County Republicans			1	1	0
Right to Rise		1		0	3
Rural America 1 / "Rural America Fund"			1	0	0
SAFE MN				1	10
Service Employees International Union / "SEIU"		1		0	1800
Senate District 13 Republicans		1		1	0
Senate Leadership Fund		1	1	0	69
Senate Majority PAC		1	1	0	190
Senate Victory PAC			1	0	0
Send in the Marine PAC			1	1	0
Smarter Future Fuel Consumption		1		0	0
South Dakotans Against Higher Taxes		1		0	0
Stronger WI Project		1		0	0
Take Action Minnesota (Federal Fund)			1	1	86
Tenth Amendment Action / "Tenth Amendment Center"		1		0	370
Term Limits Action				1	0

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Together Minnesota	1		1	0
Tom Steyer	1		0	20
United for Jobs MN	1		1	0
United States Chamber of Commerce	1	1	0	44
Velocity Public Affairs	1		1	0
Vote No on Measure 1	1		0	1
Vote Vets (Action Fund)	1	1	0	1200
Vote Yes Bemidji		1	1	0
Vote Yes For Roads	1		0	0
Vote Yes for WAPS (Winona Area Public Schools)	1		1	3
Vote Yes on Measure 1	1		0	3
Wadena County Republicans	1		1	0
Winona County Republicans		1	1	0
Wisconsin Alliance for Reform	1		0	51
Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce	1	1	0	0
With Honor Fund	1		0	2
Women Vote!	1		0	380
Working Families Party (Independent Committee)	1		0	420
Yes on NLS		1	1	0
Yes To America		1	0	3
Yes We Are Krue	1		0	0

Table 2: Data Summary of Content Analysis

Political Video Variable	Issue Group Location	
	Out-of-State (%)	Minnesota (%)
<i>Emphasis</i>		
Party	7 (7.00%)	8 (8.00%)
Candidate	66 (66.00%)	50 (50.00%)
Party of Candidate	8 (8.00%)	0 (0.00%)
Specific Issue	19 (19.00%)	42 (42.00%)
<i>Nature</i>		
Positive	27 (27.00%)	42 (42.00%)
Negative	59 (59.00%)	31 (31.00%)
Comparison	14 (14.00%)	27 (27.00%)
<i>Appeal</i>		
Logical	73 (73.00%)	72 (72.00%)
Emotional	91 (91.00%)	73 (73.00%)
Credibility (+)	23 (23.00%)	35 (35.00%)
Credibility (-)	59 (59.00%)	34 (34.00%)
<i>Issue</i>		
Economy	31 (31.00%)	29 (29.00%)
Women Empowerment	8 (8.00%)	16 (16.00%)
Healthcare	22 (22.00%)	19 (19.00%)
Public Health	6 (6.00%)	9 (9.00%)
Crime	6 (6.00%)	17 (17.00%)
Gun Policy	7 (7.00%)	3 (3.00%)
Children	7 (7.00%)	17 (17.00%)
Education	3 (3.00%)	5 (5.00%)
Corruption	4 (4.00%)	7 (7.00%)
Ag Development	3 (3.00%)	18 (18.00%)
Industrial	0 (0.00%)	7 (7.00%)
Water/Electricity	6 (6.00%)	1 (1.00%)
Unemployment	0 (0.00%)	1 (1.00%)
Terrorism	0 (0.00%)	1 (1.00%)
Environmental	6 (6.00%)	8 (8.00%)
Fiscal Policy	36 (36.00%)	20 (20.00%)
Foreign Relations	5 (5.00%)	3 (3.00%)
Infrastructure	3 (3.00%)	17 (17.00%)
<i>Communication Strategy</i>		
Minnesota Imagery	5 (5.00%)	58 (58.00%)
Minnesota Language	9 (9.00%)	49 (49.00%)
Minnesota Iconography	23 (23.00%)	49 (49.00%)
Leader Reference	39 (39.00%)	13 (13.00%)
Power Symbols	25 (25.00%)	11 (11.00%)

Competency	17 (17.00%)	21 (21.00%)
Lack of Competency	45 (45.00%)	35 (35.00%)
Optimism	2 (2.00%)	13 (13.00%)
Pessimism	7 (7.00%)	7 (7.00%)
Representative of Party or Cause	14 (14.00%)	7 (7.00%)
Party Endorsement	14 (14.00%)	5 (5.00%)
Public Endorsement	9 (9.00%)	39 (39.00%)
Accomplishments	12 (12.00%)	12 (12.00%)
Attack	70 (70.00%)	38 (38.00%)

Table 3: Codebook Procedures

S. No.	Statements
1.	Issue group name
2.	The year the advertisement first ran
3.	Region the issue group is located in <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Minnesota 2. A non-Minnesota location
4.	Link to video
5.	Title of the video
6.	Emphasis on the subject of the political video <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. on the party 2. on the candidate 3. on the party identity of the candidate 4. on a specific issue or interest
7.	What was the nature of the sponsored advertisement? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Positive advertisement: Focuses on positive attributes of the candidate, party, or issue 2. Negative advertisement: Focuses on the negative qualities of the candidate, party, or issue along with no alternative methods of action 3. Comparative advertisement: Focuses on criticizing the candidate, party, or issue along with alternative methods of action
	What types of appeals are used in the video? Code 1 if present, 0 if not present.
8.	Logical appeals: Such appeals use facts and evidence to make an argument
9.	Emotional appeals: Such appeals use language and imagery to invoke sensitive emotions in the voters such as feelings of pride, patriotism, anger, etc
10.	Credibility Appeal (positive): Such appeals increase the credibility of the candidate or cause by conveying their capacity to do great work
11.	Credibility Appeal (negative): Such appeals decrease the credibility of the candidate or cause by conveying their capacity to do poor work
	Which of the following issues are present in the video? Code 1 if present, 0 if not present.
12.	Economic concerns

13.	Women's security and empowerment
14.	Healthcare
15.	Public Health / COVID-19
16.	Crime
17.	Gun Policy
18.	Concern for children
19.	Education
20.	Corruption and scams
21.	Rural and agricultural development
22.	Industrial problems
23.	Electricity and water supply
24.	Unemployment
25.	Terrorism
26.	Environmental concerns
27.	Fiscal policies
28.	International foreign relations and related policies
29.	Infrastructural development
	Which strategies are present in the video? Code 1 if present, 0 if not present
30.	Visual usage of Minnesotan imagery, locations, or scenes
31.	Auditory usage of Minnesotan language, terms, or vernacular
32.	Inclusion of Minnesotan symbols or iconography (includes script like MN)
33.	Reference, comparison, or attention drawn to another nationally recognizable leader that is not the main focus
34.	Usage of symbols, images, or charisma to express importance and power
35.	Competency of the candidate, party, or cause is brought to attention: Transmits the image of effective leadership and strong credentials
36.	Lack of competency of the candidate, party, or cause is brought to attention: Transmits the image of ineffective leadership and poor credentials

37.	Optimistic future: Expresses that things will get better in the future
38.	Pessimistic future: Expresses that things will get worse in the future
39.	Appearing as a representative of a party or cause: Has recognition from the party or cause as a representative of their viewpoint.
40.	Using endorsements by political leaders or non-political influencers: Leaders or spokespersons speak in favor of the candidate or cause, focusing on their virtues
41.	Using endorsements from common people: Voters and the general public speak favorably about the candidate or cause
42.	Emphasis on the accomplishments: Stresses the achievements of the candidate, party, or cause.
43.	Attacking the opponent or opposite viewpoints: Criticizing the failures of the opponent or opposing cause