

Broadcast TV Is the Clear Winner of the 2020 Election

While other ad categories have suffered as the country navigates the Covid-19 pandemic, one area is expected to grow even more than what was projected: TV political advertising.

In all, total ad spend nationally will near \$14 billion, according to a recent S&P Analysis of dollars spent this election cycle, with TV stations absorbing a significant portion. In June 2019, Kantar predicted this election would attract \$6 billion across mediums in political ad dollars.

The record-breaking political ad spend was fueled by the contentious presidential race between President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden, according to the analysis, but also got a boost from high-profile House and Senate campaigns.

“Record fundraising means record advertising,” said Steve Passwaiter, vice president and general manager of Kantar’s Campaign Media Analysis Group. “An enormous amount of passion in this year’s cycle brought out donors like never before.”

In the lead-up to Election Day, some networks notched record-breaking ratings surrounding political coverage, largely seen as an opportunity for the linear networks even as audiences have shifted their viewing to streaming services.

The S&P analysis did not provide an exact breakdown per medium, but both presidential campaigns spent over 40% of their budgets on broadcast TV advertising. Elsewhere, dollars also flowed to digital channels, radio and OOH advertising. Online ad platforms, including Google and Facebook, released

new rules concerning political advertising this year, refusing to accept new election-related ads a week before Nov. 3.

The top three markets that saw the most political advertising were in areas that proved crucial to the presidential election: Phoenix, Arizona (where companies like the Meredith Corporation, Tegna, Fox Television Stations and E.W. Scripps have holdings) and two Florida markets, Orlando-Daytona Beach-Melbourne (Hearst Television, Graham Media Group, Fox and L4 Media Group) and Tampa-St. Petersburg (Nexstar Media Group, Tegna and Fox).

“Everybody in media is going to crow about how well they did in political ads this year, and that’s a good salve for the industry seeing what’s happened with ads in general,” Passwaiter said.

Indeed, those public TV companies have already noted the success they saw in political advertising in their most recent quarterly earnings.

Scripps’ 2020 local media political advertising totaled about \$265 million through Election Day, beating its projections earlier this year of \$196 million. Of those dollars, 50% came from political action committees and another 16% from presidential candidates, according to the company’s quarterly earnings, announced this morning.

“Despite the lingering economic disruption, Scripps achieved record political advertising revenue,” Scripps president and CEO Adam Symson said.

Meredith, too, saw benefits from political ad dollars. “We are off to an encouraging start to fiscal 2021, with 15% growth in national digital advertising to a record high, and a 43% increase in local political spot advertising from the prior cycle two years ago,” said Meredith president and CEO Tom Harty. In all, first quarter revenue for the company totaled \$694 million, thanks to growth in political advertising.

Fox, which owns 17 stations, including in 9 of the top 10 markets, said it attracted \$969 million in advertising in its most recent quarter. Without saying precisely how much of that was political advertising, executive chairman and CEO Lachlan Murdoch said political advertising at local TV stations “will have achieved a record for any election.”

Sara Jerde

@SaraJerde sara.jerde@adweek.com Sara Jerde is publishing editor at Adweek, where she covers traditional and digital publishers’ business models. She also oversees political coverage ahead of the 2020 election.

Recommended articles

<https://www.adweek.com/tv-video/broadcast-tv-clear-winner-2020-election/>