

Political TV ads referencing guns increased eightfold over four election cycles

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The number of political candidate television advertisements that refer to guns increased significantly across four election cycles in U.S. media markets, according to a new study led by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

The study, to be published in the February issue of *Health Affairs*, analyzed more than 14 million televised campaign advertisements that aired for candidates running for president, U.S. Congress, governor, and state legislatures in 210 U.S. media markets over four [election](#) cycles in 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018. The researchers found that the number of [political ads](#) aired that referenced guns increased by 369,600, an eightfold increase from one percent of candidate-related television political ads aired in 2012 to 8 percent in 2018.

Among the televised political ads aired that referenced guns, the share with gun regulation-oriented messages that were focused on reducing gun violence increased almost threefold over time—from 10 percent of all gun-related political ads aired in the 2012 election, to 37 percent in the 2018 election. Alternatively, pro-gun rights advertisements decreased from 86 percent of all gun-related political ads aired in the 2012 election, to less than half—46 percent—in the 2018 election.

"In the past, if guns were mentioned in political ads about candidates, it was in a pro-gun rights context," says lead author Colleen L. Barry, Ph.D., MPP, Fred and Julie Soper Professor and Chair of the Department of Health Policy and Management at the Johns Hopkins

Bloomberg School of Public Health. "Our study indicates that a real shift has occurred in political discourse over the role of guns in our society. The upswing we are seeing in gun regulation messaging in political ads aimed at reducing gun violence is striking."

With gun-related deaths and mass shooting events on the rise in the U.S., gun policy has emerged as an important part of candidates' campaign policy platforms in the 2020 election cycle. Television advertisements remain an important tool for candidates to share their views on policy issues, including guns. In the 2016 election cycle, candidates spent over \$6 billion dollars total on media, and the total cost in the 2020 election cycle is projected to reach \$10 billion with nearly half spent on electronic media (broadcast and cable television and radio).

For the study, the researchers analyzed broadcast television ads collected by Kantar/CMAG, a campaign media analysis firm, and available through the Wesleyan Media Project. The Wesleyan Media Project is a [research center](#) based at Wesleyan University that tracks and analyzes advertising by candidates during elections. Researchers from the Wesleyan Media Project collaborated with the Bloomberg School research team on the study.

The study sample included 28,946 unique political ads that aired in 210 U.S. media markets 14 million times from the beginning of January the year before an election (2011, 2013, 2015, and 2017) through Election Day of the election year (2012, 2014, 2016, 2018). Ads were included if they mentioned a specific candidate for political office. Researchers excluded issue ads that did not mention a specific candidate for office and excluded airings on national network and national cable television.

The research team coded each unique ad based on audio and visual content. Researchers first identified ads referencing guns and then coded them for whether the gun reference in the ad was: pro-gun rights, pro-

gun regulation, both, or neither. Researchers also coded for whether ads mentioned the National Rifle Association, and included a reference to support for or opposition to specific gun policies. The research team also examined where ads aired across the 210 U.S. media markets to identify geographic shifts overtime in gun-related references.

Over the four election cycles, five percent, or 721,238 of the 14.17 million campaign ads that aired on television, had gun-related references. Overall, 51 percent were gun rights references and 29 percent were gun regulation messages. For 20 percent of political aired ads, the reference to guns was more neutral in tone and did not include an overt gun rights or gun-regulation message.

Thirty-five percent of the political ads aired that referenced guns mentioned the NRA, and that share remained relatively stable over each of the four election cycles. However, researchers noted a shift over time from nearly all mentions of the NRA in political ads aired being pro-NRA in the 2012 election to an even split in the 2018 election between pro-NRA and anti-NRA references.

The researchers found that very few of the televised political ads that mentioned guns referenced specific policies. By far, the most commonly referenced policy was support of the Second Amendment. Twenty-one percent of gun-related ads mentioned support for the Second Amendment and this share was stable over each of the four election cycles. Only eight percent of political ads aired that mentioned guns included a reference to support for universal background checks. Eight percent also referenced a ban on assault weapons. Even fewer political ads, only five percent, mentioned support for restricting guns from dangerous people.

"We were surprised to see so few ads focused on keeping guns out of the hands of dangerous people," says Barry. "Extreme risk protection order

laws temporarily removing guns from individuals at risk of gun violence have now been enacted by state legislatures around the country in the past couple of years. However, this approach to reducing gun violence has not yet become a major theme in political candidate advertising."

The study also found enormous geographic variation in the volume of candidate-related ads aired featuring gun rights versus gun regulation messages. Researchers identified five media markets with more than 10,000 gun rights ads aired in West Virginia and Montana. Media markets with 10,000 or more gun regulation ads aired were in Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Miami.

Various locations in Alabama, Tennessee, South Dakota, and Georgia had the biggest increases in gun rights political ads aired over time. Shifts also occurred geographically in gun regulation messages. During the 2012 election cycle, no media markets had more than 1,000 pro-regulation airings. However, over the next three election cycles, [media](#) markets in New England, the Mid-Atlantic, and the West experienced substantial increases in candidate-related ads aired featuring gun regulation messages. These pro-regulation messages spread over time to new geographic regions including Colorado, New Mexico, Missouri, Minnesota, and other parts of Florida beyond Miami.

"We see substantial geographic differences in whether and how guns are mentioned in candidate-related political ads," says Barry. "Depending on where you live, you are likely to hear very different messages from candidates for political office about the role of guns in our society."

"Guns in Political Advertising Over Four US Election Cycles, 2012-18" was written by Colleen L. Barry, Sachini Bandara, Erika Franklin Fowler, Laura Baum, Sarah Gollust, Jeff Niederdeppe, and Alene Kennedy-Hendricks.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

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