

# How Political Advertisers Are Adapting to the Coronavirus Pandemic

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**A**s with nearly everything, the coronavirus has affected US political activity: Campaign staff are working remotely, presidential debates were held without audiences and the Democratic Party weighed the possibility of a virtual convention. **And like commercial brands**, it seems that political campaigns could be putting some of their advertising efforts on hold.

According to **Advertising Analytics** data cited by **Adweek** on April 1 when former Vice President Joe Biden and Sen. Bernie Sanders were still contending for the nomination, both campaigns spent roughly \$1.7 million on advertising during the week of March 17. That was down from \$7.8 million and \$9.5 million during the previous week, respectively. (Sen. Sanders has since suspended his campaign.)

Advertising Analytics also reported that neither candidate ran TV ads between March 17 and April 1.

Based on our estimates, US political advertising is still heavily weighted toward linear TV, particularly local channels. Our latest figures (pre-pandemic) showed that political advertising in the 2019/2020 election cycle would reach \$6.89 billion. The bulk of spending (\$6.23 billion)

would take place this year, with 69.0% of political ad budgets dedicated to traditional TV vs. 15.3% for digital platforms.

With consumers spending more time online while self-isolating, the scale for political advertising in 2020 could tip more toward digital platforms. Social media, primarily Facebook, is already a powerful advertising tool for political advertisers, especially in the early stages of a campaign for fundraising and list-building.

But most new digital dollars are more likely to come from nonmarketing advertising tactics, such as rallies and other in-person events that have been put on hold, than from TV. Radio ad budgets may also shift toward digital, given that fewer people are commuting.

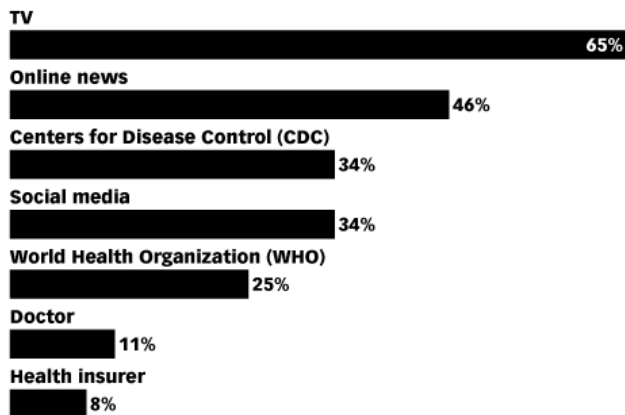
That means any hiatus from TV by political candidates is likely temporary and more a result of Biden emerging as the presumptive candidate after Super Tuesday, making the Democratic primary effectively over. The remaining candidates will return to consumers' living room screens. Political advertisers aren't shy about advertising against hard news, and with rising numbers of voters also turning to traditional news channels for coronavirus-related information, that return may be sooner rather than later.

According to a March 2020 survey by [McKinsey & Company](#), 65% of US internet users ages 18 to 84 received information about the coronavirus from TV vs. online news (46%) and social media (34%).

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**Sources US Internet Users Used to Receive Information About the Coronavirus, March 2020**

% of respondents



Note: ages 18-84

Source: McKinsey & Company, "McKinsey Consumer Healthcare Insights" as cited in press release, March 24, 2020

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The traditionally heaviest ad spending period for political campaigns is the three months leading to Election Day. That final push for political advertisers is focused on persuasion and mobilization, and TV still tends to be their best bet for reaching wide audiences and getting them to the polls.

Connected TV, however, could take advertiser attention away from traditional TV. Before the pandemic, political campaigns were already experimenting with connected TV advertising, and the rise in streaming video service use due to the coronavirus pandemic could accelerate this trend.

"Though completely non-existent in 2016, connected TV is going to be huge this year," said Micheal Beach, founder and CEO of Cross Screen Media in an interview for our March [report on political content on social media](#). "It blends the quality and impact of TV advertising with digital targeting."

Regardless of where the dollars come from, political advertising [is poised to be one bright spot](#) in an otherwise strained 2020 ad market.