Programmatic advertising and CTV are becoming forces in political advertising—but there's a transparency problem

Article

The news: Political advertising keeps growing—but its surge during the 2022 midterms is leading to questions about its overall transparency.

- **Spending is on track to reach $9.7 billion this election cycle**, according to AdImpact.

- That would represent a 144% gain over 2018's election cycle and would be **$660 million more than 2020, which was a presidential election year**.

CTV surges: The **biggest winner this cycle is connected TV, which should account for 14.92% ($1.44 billion) of all spend**, according to AdImpact.

US General Election Political Ad Spending, by Media, 2022
billions and % of total

	General election political ad spending	% of total
Broadcast	$4.98	51.5%
Cable	$1.54	15.9%
CTV	$1.44	14.9%
Digital	$1.44	14.9%
Radio	$0.27	2.8%
Total	**$9.67**	**100.0%**

Note: numbers may not add up to total or 100% due to rounding
Source: AdImpact, "2022 Midterm Projections Spending Report," Aug 19, 2022

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- Political advertisers increased their spending on CTV devices **by 1500%** in the first half of 2022 compared with the same period in 2020, according to Basis Technologies, which handles programmatic ads for political campaigns. Our own CTV advertising forecast expects overall 2022 growth over 2020 to "only" be 109%, meaning that **political advertising is heavily over-indexing on CTV.**

- The percentage of spending flowing to CTV this fall is expected to increase even further as target audiences broaden as the general election approaches and budgets grow.

- While political marketers' programmatic expenditure on streaming audio is still relatively small (4% YTD), it has increased 100 times since the first half of 2020—despite this being a midterm election.

Is programmatic problematic? Social media has been called out for election [misinformation on sites like TikTok](#)—but what about programmatic?

- As a result of Big Tech platforms' crackdown on political advertisements following the 2020 election, programmatic ad leaders like **The Trade Desk** and **Xandr are seeing an influx in political advertisements**. But there's an inherent danger: Campaigns can run ads including misinformation and falsehoods that could help decide a close race—and with no centralized archive to review these ads, they might get away with it.

- Given all the economic uncertainty these days, the influx of cash the big programmatic players are receiving is not insignificant.

- According to a [study](#) by the Center on Technology Policy at UNC Chapel Hill obtained by Axios, few programmatic advertising firms make their policies regarding false information in the context of political advertisements obvious, and none of the companies examined by the authors clearly forbid lying about election procedures or results.

- The study also found that just one programmatic advertising provider, Xandr, maintains an archive of ads for accountability purposes.

   Industry sounds off: "An archive of ads seems like a sensible step; I'm not sure how you can review ads and understand what's running without one," said **Michael Tuminello**, vice president of strategy at Mediaocean.

- Given the speed with which a given politician may choose to change or evolve messaging, it's unrealistic to expect maintenance of archives that are decentralized; a more effective solution, Tuminello argues, would be one that is centralized and archives ads *before* the ad has run, much like the UK's Clearcast system.

   The big takeaway: Political ads have always had a transparency problem—and while it's no one player's fault, the decentralized nature of programmatic advertising could be making it worse.