

## MONEY, MESSAGES, AND MISSTEPS: THE PITFALLS OF ANTI-CHINA CAMPAIGNING

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**Abstract:** Money has historically played a pivotal role in U.S. presidential elections, but its influence is not always determinative of electoral outcomes. This study delves into the intriguing phenomenon where candidates, despite substantial financial advantages, failed to secure victory. By focusing on the utilization of campaign advertising, particularly the strategic deployment of anti-China rhetoric, we investigate how excessive spending on such advertisements can potentially backfire for candidates. In the realm of American presidential politics, anti-China rhetoric has become a recurrent theme, with candidates leveraging it to accuse opponents of policies favoring China at the expense of American interests. However, empirical investigations into the effectiveness of these rhetoric-driven strategies in garnering voter support remain scarce.

This article addresses this research gap by employing a scientific methodology to assess the impact of anti-China rhetoric in campaign ads. We specifically examine whether the substantial financial investments made by presidential candidates in airing anti-China advertisements yield the desired electoral benefits or inadvertently harm their prospects. Our analysis draws upon data from Mitt Romney's 2012 "Failing American Workers" campaign commercial, sourced from the Wesleyan Media Project (WMP). Utilizing TimeSeries-Cross-Sectional (TSCS) models, we estimate the influence of the anti-China rhetoric within this ad on Romney's voter support.

Our findings reveal a nuanced relationship between anti-China rhetoric in campaign advertising and candidate performance. On the whole, airing ads featuring anti-China rhetoric tended to enhance voter support for the candidate, particularly in targeted states, over time. However, a striking counterintuitive pattern emerged: the repetition and escalated spending on these ads within the same states correlated with a decrease in voter support for the candidate.

This study offers critical insights into the dynamics of campaign advertising, shedding light on the complexities of messaging strategies and their impact on voter perceptions. Our results suggest that while anti-China rhetoric can be a potent tool for winning over voters, an excess of such messaging can lead to diminishing returns. The delicate balance between utilizing these rhetoric-driven ads effectively and avoiding voter fatigue becomes evident. This research not only contributes to our understanding of U.S. presidential elections but also offers valuable lessons for candidates and strategists navigating the intricate terrain of political campaigning.

**Keywords:** U.S. presidential elections, Campaign advertising, Anti-China rhetoric, Voter support  
Campaign spending

## 1 Introduction

Money does not determine U.S. presidential elections. Mitt Romney outspent Barack Obama but could not beat him in the 2012 presidential election.<sup>1</sup> Hillary Clinton spent twice the amount as Donald Trump did but still lost the election in 2016.<sup>2</sup> Using the case of campaign ad using anti-China rhetoric, I argue that spending too much on campaign advertising may self-harm the candidates under certain circumstances. Almost all presidential candidates in recent general election campaigns have used anti-China rhetoric to accuse their opponents of supporting policies that favored China's boom but harmed American interests.<sup>3</sup> However, few academic studies using scientific methodology have shed light on the effectiveness of using anti-China rhetoric in seeking voter support. Are anti-China rhetoric strategies useful, or harmful? Is it an effective strategy for presidential candidates to spend millions of dollars airing anti-China ads? I examined these underexplored questions in this article. Using data of Romney's 2012 "Failing American Workers" campaign commercial obtained from the Wesleyan Media Project (WMP), I build three TimeSeries-Cross-Sectional (TSCS) models to estimate how the ad using anti-China rhetoric affected Romney's voter support. The results indicate that in general airing the ad using anti-China rhetoric did increase the favoring candidate's voter support across target states over time. However, repeating the ad airing and increasing the ad spending within the same states decreased the favoring candidate's voter support.

## 2 Historical Review

China has become a campaign topic in U.S. presidential elections since 1948.<sup>5</sup> After receiving the nomination, Truman stated that he would continue aiding the recovery of Europe, China, and the Far East in the post-war period, but he did not make any further reference to China. By contrast, Dewey charged the Truman administration with neglect in its provision of aid to the Nationalists in China, and declared that, if elected, it would be a cardinal principle of his administration to help combat communist influences in China (Rosinger, 1948). Truman won the election of 1948, and later his administration was blamed for the "loss of China."<sup>4</sup> The outbreak of war in Korea in 1950 brought the U.S. and China into military conflict, and the two contenders in the 1952 presidential elections debated on the China issue.<sup>5</sup> Issues regarding China muted in presidential elections during the Vietnam War era, though presidential candidates still discussed it. For example, Nixon indicated that he would eventually negotiate with the leaders of Communist China during the Republican national convention in 1968, signaling his future policy towards engaging with China (Bostdorff, 2002). Following Nixon's China strategy, Carter established official diplomatic relations with China. American attitudes towards China had come full circle since 1970

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<sup>1</sup> Romney's campaign and pro-Romney outside groups spent \$992 million from January 2011 to November 2012; during the same period, Obama's campaign and pro-Obama outside groups spent \$985.7 million. See the *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2012/campaign-finance.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Clinton and her outside funding sources spent about 800 million, compared to Trump and his outside funding sources of about 400 million, during the 2016 presidential campaign.

<sup>3</sup> For examples, Wisconsin Advertising Project and WMP have recorded campaign ads using anti-China rhetoric in 2008, 2012, and 2012. Both Clinton and Trump in the 2016 presidential campaigns took tough stances on China in order to seek voter support. See Keith Bradsher, "In Trade Stances Toward China, Clinton and Trump Both Signal a Chill," the *New York Times*, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/30/business/international/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-trade-china.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/30/business/international/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-trade-china.html?_r=0). <sup>5</sup>The term "China" here refers to the regime of Chinese Communist Party.

<sup>4</sup> In 1949, the Communists defeated the Nationalists. Critics portrayed the "loss of China" of the Truman Administration as an "avoidable catastrophe" (Hirshberg, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> On September 4, 1952, Eisenhower charged the Truman administration that abandoned China to the Communists; Stevenson countered Eisenhower by defending the administration's record and by pointing out America's limited ability to affect the outcome of the Chinese civil war (Anderson, 1980).

(Anderson, 1980), and anti-China rhetoric had become more muted during presidential campaigns in that period. A study showed that Reagan's rhetoric towards China was more positive than negative during the 1980 presidential campaign.<sup>6</sup> However, the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 had a significant negative effect on Americans' attitudes towards China, which made China a campaign topic once more.<sup>7</sup> In 1992, Clinton and Bush attacked each other over their approaches to China's human rights violations, trade relations with the U.S., and democratization.<sup>8</sup> Entering the 21st century, discussions of China during presidential campaigns have been proliferated with topics ranging from bilateral relations to personal attack, climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, regional security, and the global economy. For example, Bush and Kerry discussed China's involvement in North Korea and Iran's nuclear programs in 2004; Obama promised to enforce rules against China manipulating its currency in 2008 and attacked Romney's former firm Bain Capital's job outsourcing to China; Romney promised to crack down on trade with China in 2012; and Trump treated to start a trade war with China.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.1 The Effect of Campaign Advertising

Many studies have explored the influence of campaign advertising on voter turnout and voter choice. Some scholars argued that campaign advertising credited active efforts to campaign aggressively, brought voters to the polls, and/or increased voters' support for the sponsoring candidates (Wielhouwer and Lockerbie, 1994; Kaid, 1997; Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein, 2004; Holbrook and McClurg, 2005; Hillygus, 2005). Others questioned the effectiveness of campaign ads. Major criticisms on the effect of campaign advertising include: 1) it had little influence on voter turnout (Krasno and Green, 2008); 2) it was strong but short-lived (Gerber et al., 2011); 3) negative ads made the electorate more cynical and decreased the voter turnout (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995); and 4) it was subject to other factors, such as information, partisanship, political environment, public opinion, and demographic characteristics (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Gerber and Green, 2000; Rosenblum, 2010).

Thought the effectiveness of campaign advertising on American electorates remained debatable, no one denied the assumption of campaign ads airing. That is, the more ads and/or spending for the candidate, the better chance he or she would have of winning the election.

For example, Sides and Vavreck (2013) argued that the difference between two candidates' campaign ads in quantity shift votes in their favor. Accordingly, Obama won the 2012 presidential election in part because more pro-Obama ads than pro-Romney were aired; they also found that neither presidential candidate was able to pull hard enough or long enough to change the dynamic of the race because the two campaigns largely neutralized each other's efforts. Nevertheless, I criticized that all dollars were valued equal, but all ads were not.

Existing studies treated advertising as a combination of different ads and did not take the content of campaign ads into consideration. They treated all the campaign ads as "undifferentiated" individuals and used large-N statistical analysis to find whether the ads affected voters, but they did not differentiate the content of those ads and therefore failed to specify what kinds of ads mattered, and what kinds of ads did not. Specific strategies, issues, topics, and

<sup>6</sup> See Chang (1984). The author found that 37% of the news and features in three papers (*Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*) were coded as positive towards China, while 28% were coded as negative.

<sup>7</sup> According to Gallup's "Historical Trend of Americans' Opinion of China," favorability went down from 72% to 13% in 1989, and has remained under 50% since then. See *Gallup*, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1627/china.aspx>.

<sup>8</sup> See Thomas L. Friedman, "The 1992 Campaign: The Democrats; Clinton Asserts Bush Is Too Eager To Befriend the World's Dictators," the *New York Times*.

<sup>9</sup> See USC US-China Institute, "China In US Presidential Debates," updated on 10/20/16, <http://china.usc.edu/usc-us-chinainstitute-china-in-the-us-presidential-debates>.

rhetoric contained in campaign ads should be considered in addition to the quantity of ads airing and associated spending. In this way, we can estimate the exact effect of certain campaign ads on their target audience.

## 2.2 The Effect of Anti-China Rhetoric

Regarding anti-China campaign rhetoric, however, there is a dearth of literature on how it affects the American electorate. Some scholars explored the rationale of utilizing anti-China rhetoric in presidential campaigns, for example, “yellow peril” and anti-communist tropes (Yang, 2016) and economy-security-human rights concerns (Peniston, 2016), but they did not mention the effect of the anti-China rhetoric on the electorate. Ramirez (2012) found quantitative evidence that anti-China rhetoric in the newspaper had a negative effect on the overall U.S.-China relations.<sup>10</sup> However, the effectiveness of anti-China rhetoric on American public opinion or presidential elections remained underexplored. Fang (2016) built TSCS models to examine Obama’s 2008 “Sold Us Out” campaign ad and found that airing the ad using anti-China rhetoric increased the favoring candidate’s next-day voter support across the target states over time, but the increasing amounts and spending on the same ad had no effects on voter support. However, Republican presidential nominee John McCain did not air any campaign ad used anti-China rhetoric in 2008, which left substantial leeway for Obama to manipulate the rhetoric about China in campaign advertising. Without a competition on China issues, a one-sided advantage for Obama seemed to be obvious. If both presidential candidates had aired ads using anti-China rhetoric, how would the ads favor or disfavor them in the general election campaign? Are there any hazards of airing anti-China campaign ads in certain states or during certain time periods? These questions had not been addressed.

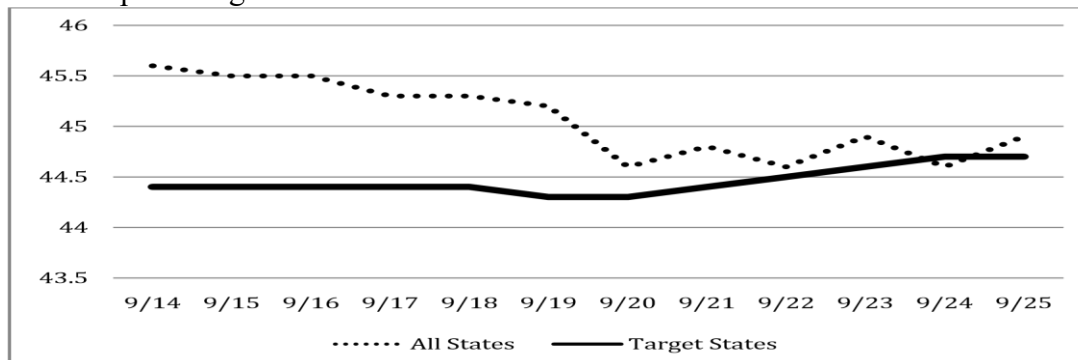
## 3 Methodology

Using a similar approach as Fang (2016)’s models, I develop new TSCS models on Romney’s 2012 “Failing American Workers” ad. The data sources are WMP, Huffington Post, RealClearPolitics, and various other institutes. Romney’s “Failing American Workers” campaign commercials sought to link Obama to losing manufacturing jobs to China. It blamed Obama for refusing to stop China’s cheating. The ads were aired 10,799 times across nine target states from September 14-25, 2012. During the same period of time, Romney’s average popularity in all states was generally declining, whereas his average popularity in the nine target states was steadily growing (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Means of Romney’s Next-day Polls**

September 14-25, 2012

Share in percentage



<sup>10</sup> Ramirez (2012) found that an increase in China-bashing led to a decline in Sino-American relations after about four months.

### 3.1 Hypotheses

The following hypotheses estimate the effects of campaign ad using anti-China rhetoric in the presidential election by exploring three factors: ad airing, ad quantity, and ad spending. Hypothesis<sub>1</sub>: Airing ad using anti-China rhetoric increases the favoring candidate's voter support in target states. Hypothesis<sub>2</sub>: As the number of ad using anti-China rhetoric increases, the voter support of the favoring candidate decreases in the target state. Hypothesis<sub>3</sub>: The more spending on ad using anti-China rhetoric, the less voter support the favoring candidate gains in the target state.

### 3.2 Data and Models

To test the hypotheses, I generate a dataset for the nine target states from September 14-26, 2012, matching the 13-day airing record of "Failing American Workers" ad. Based on the airing and spending data obtained from the WMP dataset, each observation record includes whether the ad was aired on the state, daily amount of the ad aired on the state, and daily spending of airing the ad on the state (rescaled in \$1,000 dollars).<sup>11</sup> Each of the nine states has 13 daily observations, with 117 possible observations (The missing data reduced the number of observations to 104). The dependent variable is Romney's share of the vote from the next day's state poll after the ads airing (Poll). According to the three hypotheses, the following indicated the independent variables:

- 1) Whether the ad was aired in the state (Airing).
- 2) Daily amount of the ad aired in the state (Amount).
- 3) Daily spending of airing ad in the state (Spending).

Some control variables are included in the models. First, since the data has a time-series dynamic dependent variable, I added lag values (LPoll) of Romney's vote share of state poll as independent variables. Second, since there were other pro-Obama and pro-Romney ads aired during the same period of time and the existing literature argued that the total ads volume affected candidates' popularities, I calculated the daily amount of two candidates' all ads (N.Romney and N.Obama), as well as the daily spending of two candidates' all ads (S.Romney and S.Obama), into the models. In addition, since the economy was a longstanding effect according to the existing literature and the "Failing American Workers" ad was related to the job and China issue, I added the state-level unemployment rates (Unemployment) in September 2012 and state level cumulative China FDI from 2000 to 2012 into the models. To estimate the effect of the "Failing American Workers" ad on Romney's daily state poll, I built "three models": 1) an OLS regression (Pooling) to estimate the general effect of the ad on Romney's daily state poll; 2) a fixed effects (FE) model to estimate the within-state effect of the ad on Romney's daily state poll; and 3) a random intercept (RI) model to take into account both the between- and within-state variances.

Presented in equation form my models as follows:

**Models using Romney's daily state poll as dependent variable:**

$$\text{Poll}_{(t+1)i} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{LPoll}_{ti} + \beta_2 \text{Airing}_{ti} + \beta_3 \text{Amount}_{ti} + \beta_4 \text{Spending}_{ti} + \beta_5 \text{Unemployment}_{ti} + \beta_6 \text{FDI}_{ti} + \beta_7 \text{N.Obama}_{ti} + \beta_8 \text{S.Obama}_{ti} + \beta_9 \text{N.Romney}_{ti} + \beta_{10} \text{S.Romney}_{ti} + \varepsilon_{ti}$$

Where:  $t_i$  = state  $i$  at date  $t$   $\alpha$  = intercept for equation  $\beta_n$  = regression coefficient for variable  $n$   $\varepsilon_{ti}$  = error term for state  $i$  at date  $t$

## 4 Results

The models show that airing "Failing American Workers" ad had statistically positive effects on Romney's daily state poll. Specifically, airing "Failing American Workers" ad increased Romney's daily state poll by 0.795 points in the Pooling model and by 0.795 points in the RI model ( $R^2=0.749$  in Pooling and 0.749 in RI). In the FE model,

<sup>11</sup> WMP recorded the airing information of major campaign ads since 2012.

however, airing “Failing American Workers” ad decreased the Romney’s daily state poll by 0.215 points ( $R^2=0.609$ ). In the FE model, ad quantity had a statistically significant positive effect on Romney’s within state daily average poll (Coefficient=0.002), but ad spending had a statistically significant negative effect (Coefficient=-0.003). Table 1 shows the results of the models.

**Table 1**

**“Failing American Workers” Ad and Romney’s Daily State Polls**

Dependent variable: Poll

Independent variables	Pooling	FE	RI
LPoll	0.365*** (0.043)	0.006 (0.001)	0.365*** (0.043)
Airing	0.795** (0.244)	-0.215*** (0.046)	0.795*** (0.244)
Amount	-0.001 (0.002)	0.002*** (0)	-0.001 (0.002)
Spending	0.001 (0.004)	-0.003*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.004)
Unemployment	0.045 (0.030)	N/A N/A	0.045 (0.030)
FDI from China	0.001*** (0)	N/A N/A	0.001*** (0)
S.Obama	0.002* (0.001)	0.001** (0)	0.002* (0.001)
S.Romney	0 (0.003)	0.002*** (0)	0 (0.003)
N.Obama	0 (0.001)	0 (0.001)	0 (0.001)
N.Romney	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001*** (0)	-0.001 (0.001)
Constant	26.530*** (1.996)	44.362*** (0.463)	26.530*** (1.996)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.748	0.609	0.749
Probability	0	0	0
Obs.	104	104	104

Notes: September 14-25, 2012

\* Significant at the 0.1 level; \*\* significant at the 0.05 level; \*\*\* significant at the 0.001 level

The models in Table 1 reveal mixed outcomes for the three hypotheses. Hypothesis<sub>1</sub> is verified in the Polling and RI models but rejected in the FE model with a reverse effect. In general, airing the ad using anti-China rhetoric increased the favoring candidate's daily voter support across the target states by about 0.8 percent, but as the ad continued airing in the same state, the favoring candidate's within-state voter support decreased.

Hypothesis<sub>2</sub> is rejected in the FE model with a reverse effect. Within a target state, as the number of ads using anti-China rhetoric increases, the voter support of the favoring candidate increases. Hypothesis<sub>3</sub> is verified in the FE model. As the ads spending increased within a target state, the favoring candidate's voter support decreased over time. In general, the models using Romney's 2012 "Failing American Workers" confirm Fang's (2016) argument on ad airing but refute the arguments on ad quantity and ad spending. Specifically, 1) airing the ad using anti-China rhetoric has significantly "one-day" effect in seeking voter support; 2) increasing the quantity of anti-China ads helps seek voter support within the same state over time, but has little influence across states; and 3) increasing the spending on the anti-China ad within the state hurt the favoring candidate's voter support.

The FE model also shows that as Romney's total spending on all ads increased within the state, his vote support increased over time, which echoed the conventional wisdom that "the more ads and/or spending, the better chance". Admittedly, Romney's total spending on all ads, in general, was successful in these nine target states during the research period. However, each campaign ad had a different value. Though increasing the spending on all ads was helpful, increasing the spending on the specific anti-China ad was harmful. The similar pattern also applies to the effects of ad amount. As shown in the FE model, though increasing the amount of the anti-China ads was helpful within the state, increasing the total amount of all ads was harmful. One possible explanation for this phenomenon was that repeating some other ads within the state hurt Romney's voter support over time.

Why could the airing, repeating and spending of the campaign ad using anti-China rhetoric hurt the favoring candidate? A probable reason is "linkage." Once a candidate is linked to the rhetoric on the certain negative issue, he or she will be hurt by all the relevant rhetoric thereafter, regardless of who makes the campaign efforts. In July 2012, Obama had already aired the similar campaign ad using anti-China to attack Romney in these nine states, which linked Romney to the jobs outsourcing to China and made Romney's September ad spending on the same issue self-harming.<sup>12</sup> As Fang (2016) stated, ads alone did not exert wide and extended influence over a candidate's popularity, what expanded its power was the echo effect.<sup>15</sup> As the ad using anti-China rhetoric influenced the population of the airing media market, it also raised the public attention on the China-related issues that generated the echo effect from other factors such as campaign rallies, presidential debates, and news coverage, which expanded the negative attack on the candidate who had been linked to China and together contributed to change of public support beyond the airing period.

The "linkage" also happened to Obama. In all three models, Obama's total spending on all ads, in general, had a statistically significant positive effect on Romney's voter support. Perhaps Romney had successfully linked Obama to some other issues, which made Obama's ads spending on those issues self-harming. Besides, FDI from China had a statistically significant positive effect on Romney's voter support in the Polling and RI models.

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<sup>12</sup> Starting July 7, 2012, Obama began airing "The Problem" ad in 17 states. "The Problem" ad highlighted that Romney's firms were pioneers at helping companies outsource their manufacturing to China. The airing information was obtained from WMP. <sup>15</sup> For example, following the airing of Obama's "Sold Us Out" ad in Ohio since September 16, 2008, Biden reinforced the anti-China rhetoric by attacking China's clean energy policy at a campaign event in Maumee, Ohio and the *Plain Dealer* in Ohio reported Biden's anti-China rhetoric on September 23. As a result, Obama gained 0.1 percent of vote share of public support in the Ohio poll on September 23 (Fang, 2016).

Perhaps voters in the states where China had more investment were more worried about the jobs outsourcing to China and were more likely to be influenced by Romney's anti-China ad.

## 5 Conclusion

All dollars were valued equal, but all ads were not. The "freshness" of the ad using anti-China rhetoric in different states was more effective than the "repeating" of the ad in the same state over time. Obama took advantage of airing ad using anti-China rhetoric in 2008, and it helped to increase his voter support (Fang, 2016). Romney partially learned from Obama's experience and aggressively aired the anti-China ad during the general election campaign.<sup>13</sup> However, what Romney did not learn was the importance of "freshness," and the danger of "linkage" and "repeating."

By concentrating his spending in nine states in mid-September, Romney's "Failing American Workers" anti-China ad had failed to create an extended effect on his voter support. What is more, the increased spending, as well as the daily repeating, hurt him in the states where Obama had previously attacked him with similar anti-China ad.

This study uses the case of one ad to evaluate its effectiveness in seeking voter support, of which the outcome is limited to presidential campaign ads using anti-China rhetoric. The quality of other ads being run by Romney and/or Obama is not my concern. Also, the study does not aim at answering what causes a presidential candidate's popularity and/or the presidential election outcome. It only seeks to evaluate a particular presidential campaign strategy, in which the ad productions, targeting, placements, and timing are highly strategic, not random. Other short-term and/or long-standing factors, which may or may not contribute to the candidate's popularity and the election outcome, are not included in the model. The future study could consider these potential factors and conduct further analyses on the effects of anti-China campaign ads on presidential elections.

Campaign advertising is not always useful or safe. Airing the campaign ad using anti-China rhetoric, in general, can increase the favoring candidate's voter support across the target states. However, increasing the ad spending and/or repeating the daily airing within the same state over time can hurt the candidate in that state. Presidential candidates should pick the right topics and issues that favor themselves and air the advertisements in the right time period. They should also be wary of spending too much on ad using certain rhetoric in the states where the opponent has already used the same rhetoric to attack them.

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<sup>13</sup> According to Wesleyan Media Project, nearly 39% of all pro-Romney ads mentioned China in September 2012. See Wesleyan Media Project, "2012 Shatters 2004 and 2008 Records for Total Ads Aired," available at <http://mediaproject.wesleyan.edu/releases/convention-or-ad-bounce/>.

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