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YouTube Campaign Ads Research: The 2022 Georgia Senate Race

The 2022 Georgia Senate midterm election concluded on December 6th, when the incumbent Democratic candidate Raphael Warnock defeated his challenger, Republican candidate Herschel Walker, with 51.4% of the total vote in a runoff election. Warnock's win means that the Democrats will maintain a majority in the Senate.

Raphael Warnock is a senior Pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, and Herschel Walker is a former American football player, businessman, and mental health advocate. This close race garnered considerable national attention over the potential outcomes of controversial issues like abortion that have divided the country. Georgia is one of the multiple states that has taken steps to reduce abortion rights for women and each of the candidates has strong opposing viewpoints on that issue. Walker had made it clear that he stood for a nationwide abortion ban, while Warnock campaigned for ensuring women the right to choose (Lonas, 2022).

Both Warnock and Walker faced primary elections on May 24th, 2022. Warnock was primaried by Tamara Johnson-Shealey in the Democratic primary and received 96% of the vote. Walker was in the Republican primary with multiple candidates, including Gary Black and Latham Saddler, and won with 68% of the vote. During the midterm election held on November 8th, 2022, neither candidate reached the 50% threshold. According to Georgia Election Code Section 21-2-50, in "instances where no candidate receives a majority of the votes cast, a run-off primary, special primary runoff, run-off election, or special election runoff between the

candidates receiving the two highest numbers of votes shall be held.” Because of this law, the midterm result was declared inconclusive in November which is why the two leading candidates, Warnock and Walker, headed into a runoff election on December 6th.

Throughout the entire 2022 election cycle, both candidates’ campaigns utilized multiple social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to reach potential voters. Political advertising on YouTube is one of the areas that needs more attention. Warnock and Walker each have their own YouTube channel where they distribute election campaign videos, and in this paper, we analyzed the videos posted by each individual candidate on YouTube to understand how candidates and campaigns utilize the platform. Our primary research question was, what are the important characteristics and issues presented in the Georgia Senate candidates’ YouTube campaign ads in the 2022 election cycle? Our secondary question was, how and when do the candidates use negativity in their ads?

The answers to our research questions will provide insight about the YouTube platform for candidates and campaigns. This is because, with this information, they will be able to better understand how certain ads are received by viewers on the platform and if the platform is helpful or essential at all for campaign success.

Political Communication on YouTube

Founded in 2005, YouTube rapidly developed into the largest global video-sharing platform, on which both user-generated and professionally created video content is distributed (Dylko et al., 2011). Similar to other video providers, YouTube focuses on entertainment and lifestyle content, but since the late 2000s, it has “shown the ability to serve as a viable political communication channel” during election season (May, 2010). Scholars have contributed to the

widespread notion that the 2008 Obama victory marks an important milestone for the “youtubification” of political communication (Scherr et al., 2015). In 2007, this US-based website started its own political channel called “You Choose ‘08,” which encouraged many presidential and congressional candidates to utilize the platform to voice their points of view (Dylko et al., 2011). The idea of social media campaigning appealed to politicians with its easy and low-cost distribution of messages from the campaign to voters. During the 2008 election cycle, 110 candidates joined YouTube and garnered 220 million views, with half of the total views directed at Barack Obama’s presidential election campaign which shared more than 1800 videos on its channel (May, 2010). However, videos in the “news and politics” category remained a small percentage, reaching only 4.4% of the more than 3 million YouTube videos in 2008 (Cheng et al., 2008).

The Visibility of Individual Political YouTube Videos

Scholars have looked into many factors that differentiate the visibility of individual YouTube videos. Three ways users encounter and interact with videos on YouTube were identified by Scherr, Reinemann, and Jandura (2015). “Direct navigation” describes a user accessing videos through search engines; “goal-oriented browse” refers to watching videos on a certain topic; and “unarticulated wants” means coming across videos in “entertaining mode.” The visibility, shown in the absolute number of views or the dynamics of click rates a video has within a certain time, often determines the “success” of a video (Scherr et al., 2015). Without any violation, a YouTube video’s life span is almost infinite. Cheng, Dale, and Liu (2008) suggest, however, a video’s active life span completes when its popularity declines over time, resulting in fewer and fewer people accessing the video. The authors have found a positive correlation

between the video age and the number of views which explains that older videos have more opportunities to be accessed by users. Different growth trends also influence a video's popularity and lead to the occurrences of extremely popular newer videos and unpopular older ones (Cheng et al., 2008).

For the political campaign videos, their active life span on YouTube aligns with the ongoing election period, with a limited niche audience in the aftermath of the election (May, 2010). In the post-2008 climate, many studies predicted more candidates will utilize YouTube and other new media in political campaigns because of its relative ease of use and wide accessibility. While campaign materials can be repurposed across different platforms, Borah, Fowler, and Ridout (2018) suggested the candidates strategize around a different visibility condition on YouTube than on other traditional outlets like television. The authors believed that in today's polarized American society, more people are subjected to "partisan selective exposure" on YouTube during their time on the platform. A Walker supporter is unlikely to watch videos from the Warnock campaign and vice versa. The YouTube political campaign videos are in turn "aimed at a more partisan audience and core supporters for mobilization" rather than targeting the swing voters (Borah et al., 2018). Thus, we propose:

H1: There will be more positivity than negativity used in YouTube political campaign ads.

Scherr et al. observed another factor that affects a YouTube video's visibility. The authors contended that "YouTube videos are ranked higher the better they are integrated in so-called web 2.0 applications, like Facebook, Twitter and Google+." YouTube links embedded in other web applications and social platforms increase the likelihood of chance encounters with a video. The political YouTube videos that are shared with us through other social media, however, are usually

also from people who have similar political viewpoints as us since “online social networks are relatively homogenous politically” (Borah et al., 2018).

The Use of Negativity in Campaign Videos

The tone used in campaign ads has a lot of impact on the message that the viewer gets out of watching the ad. Negative campaigning refers to the criticism leveled by one candidate against the other and positive campaigning means focusing on advocacy for the candidate. The decision to use a negative or positive tone in a campaign ad depends on multiple factors. One of these factors is incumbency. “Incumbents use less negative advertising and challengers use more negative advertising; candidates in open seat races generally come out somewhere in the middle” (Grossmann, 2012). Because of their experience, incumbents are able to promote themselves and their accomplishments which leads to positive self-promoting campaigns, rather than negative campaigning (Nai, 2018). It is not worth it for them to use negativity when they have experience that they want to show off in their ads. Contrastingly, due to a lack of experience, challengers do not have the experience to have this option and are thus more likely to run negative campaign ads (Nai, 2018). Attack ads can attract undecided voters or lower the positive feelings people feel for their opponent (Nai, 2018). Additionally, even though negative ads can be risky, if a candidate is facing unfavorable odds, the potential benefits of them posting negative ads outweighs any of the risk associated with the negativity (Nai, 2018).

In terms of the impact that negative political ads have on viewers, Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner (2007) concluded that negative campaigns produce a small but significant increase in campaign knowledge partly because negative ads are easier for people to remember than positive ads. However, despite that information, the data that they conducted showed that there was no

evidence that negative campaign ads are more effective than positive campaign ads (Lau et al., 2007). Negative ads might not make people dislike politics (Erikson and Tedin, 2015). Thus, we purpose:

H2: There will be a higher level of negativity in challenger Walker's campaign ads than in incumbent Warnock's ads.

Methods

To examine these questions, we conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of YouTube videos posted by the two Georgia Senate candidates, Raphael Warnock and Herschel Walker, concerning their campaigns. As of December 7th, 2022, Raphael Warnock's YouTube channel has 4,710 subscribers and a total of 19,656,613 views, and Herschel Walker's channel has 3,870 subscribers and a total of 425,932 views. We reviewed all videos produced within the time frame of the 2022 Georgia senate election cycle, ranging from August 25th, 2021, when Walker formally announced his candidacy, to the runoff election day on December 6th, 2022. Warnock, the incumbent senator, defeated fellow Democrat Tamara Johnson-Shealey during the primary election held on May 24th, 2022. We collected the sample of his campaign ads (n=34) that includes 13 videos from the primary cycle, 4 from the midterm cycle, and 17 from the runoff cycle, released between January 10th, 2022 and December 2nd, 2022 (Figure 1). Walker, the political amateur and challenger, faced off with five fellow Republicans prior to the midterm election. We analyzed all campaign ads on Walker's YouTube channel, a sample (n=26) comprising 13 videos from the primary cycle, 9 videos from the midterm cycle, and 4 videos from the runoff cycle (Figure 2). Reviewing Warnock and Walker's campaign ads in the entire

2022 election cycle allowed us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics and issues the two present.

To evaluate each sample on the same basis, we excluded the consideration of campaign materials that were released as YouTube Shorts—a format with affordances that could potentially engage with audiences differently. Walker has utilized YouTube Shorts to publish segments of his campaign speeches on his channel. The sole documentation of the campaign events, along with the recording of TV news interviews, are both left out of our sample collection. Besides, we were unable to capture the audience’s textual reactions on YouTube since Walker disabled the comment section and Warnock garnered zero comments under his campaign advertising videos.

A quantitative and qualitative analysis was performed on the sample of campaign advertising videos. To begin with, we entered the title of the video for each sample entry and recorded quantitative variables including the date of release, video length, and the number of views. We employed a 0 (absent) or 1 (present) scale to determine the presence of background music, diversity, and the mention of Democrats/Liberals, Republicans/Conservatives, Biden, and Trump in each video. To measure negativity, we evaluated the tone of candidates’ videos on a scale ranging between 1 (extremely negative) to 7 (extremely positive), and non-applicability is indicated by 0. To perform the qualitative analysis, we closely evaluated the contexts and nuances in the sample before coding textually-described data on up to 3 most prominent topics in each video. Lastly, we switched back to the 0 or 1 scale to code the feelings felt (fear, anger, hope, or empowerment) after neutrally examining each sample.

On December 7th, 2022, the day after the runoff election result was declared, we updated the number of views on each video to reflect each campaign ad’s reach at the end of the senate race.

Results

RQ 1: What are the important characteristics and issues presented in the Georgia Senate candidates' YouTube campaign ads in the 2022 election cycle?

On December 7, 2022, Warnock's ads averaged to 338,994 views per video and Walker's ads averaged 10,372 views per video. Every ad posted by the candidates focused on specific issues and topics that were significant to each campaign. One of the most common topics that Warnock mentioned in his YouTube videos was the work he has done to lower the cost of insulin. Warnock posted 9 different videos that mentioned lower drug costs, specifically insulin prices. It makes sense that this is something he often brought up in his videos because his bill to cap insulin costs at \$35 a month for patients on Medicare and to lower the cost of prescription drugs for seniors, was one of his major policy successes while in the Senate. Many of the videos about insulin include testimonials from Georgians who have been impacted by the high costs and are thanking Warnock for his work to lower them. This has the power to attract voters who can relate to those with diabetes and feel encouraged to support Warnock due to his work to help people like them, struggling to pay for their insulin and other prescription drugs.

Walker, on the other hand, has largely focused his campaign on highlighting his accomplishments in other areas of life due to his challenger status and lack of experience in the office. A total of 4 videos highlighted his past as the "greatest college athlete of all time" and at least two videos were endorsed by coaches. Walker has also emphasized his role as a mental health advocate throughout his campaign. Some of his discussions included his own struggles growing up with speech impediment, his book on this topic, and his care for veterans's mental health.

Moreover, Walker accentuated many Republican-embraced values in his campaign, especially in the primary cycle. As a Donald Trump-endorsed candidate, Walker repeatedly echoed Trump's rhetoric that praises America as "the greatest country in the world." This notion of the "American dream" was brought up in 8 out of 13 primary ads. Faith was another salient topic for which Walker spent six videos, partially or in entirety, expressing his love for Jesus. Many of these videos have recognizable titles such as "Foundation" and "Praying Man." It appears to be a useful strategy to attract more Republican voters since this party has long been affiliated with more religious voters.

Notably, Walker branded himself with his lack of political experience and justified it as an advantage. On two occasions Walker said God isn't looking for a politician but a warrior, which associated his campaign with a higher purpose. He has also portrayed himself as a people-loving Georgian "small town guy" in most of his ads that correspond to the "candidate characteristic" category.

Each candidate attempted to capture different emotions from their viewers. Both Warnock and Walker's overall most commonly scored emotion was "hope" (figure 3 & figure 4). However, we observed a drastic shift in Walker's campaign, as "fear" replaced "hope" to be the top scoring category in midterm cycle, and both "fear" and "anger" rose to a 0.75 average during the runoff election (table 1).

Warnock's ads featured many different people, some of them included President Obama, Walker's former football coach, Warnock's mother and Sheriff Alfonzo Williams. It is also important to note that Warnock only mentioned the Republican party in three of his videos. However, in two of the three videos he brought up Republicans in a positive light, highlighting that he worked across the aisle on bipartisan work with his Republican colleagues in the Senate.

Another characteristic that we took note of is that in every Warnock video, except for three, there was background music playing. Similarly, Walker used music in every video he posted besides one. The average length for Warnock's ads was 56 seconds and the videos ranged from shortest being 15 seconds to the longest being 1 minute and 59 seconds. The average length for Walker's ads was 48 seconds and the videos ranged from shortest being 30 seconds to the longest being 1 minute and 57 seconds.

RQ 2: How and when do the candidates use negativity in their ads?

Our analysis of each of the candidate's campaign videos found the confirmation that a challenger has a higher likelihood to go negative on their opponent than the incumbent, in line with the idea that the challenger is likely to already be behind and have "nothing to lose". Warnock posted 11 negative ads out of 34 total ads during the entire election cycle which is around 32%. However, all 11 of the negative ads that Warnock posted were posted after the November election and were for the runoff election. Prior to the runoff, Warnock focused solely on his own characteristics and did not mention his opponent in a negative light at all. It is likely that Warnock felt that his record in the Senate and political experience was enough to gain support in the general election, that he did not need to use negativity in his ads. In one of his first campaign videos of the cycle Warnock says, "this campaign is about who is ready to represent Georgia, and when it comes to that, I am proud to be leading the fight to cap the cost of insulin, to make sure our military has safe housing, and to stop the big banks from ripping of consumers" highlighting some of the work he has already done as Senator.

However, because the results of the November election were so close, Warnock's campaign thought it would be a useful strategy to include negativity in the ads leading up to the

runoff election. Especially due to the controversial nature of his opponent, even within the Republican party, Warnock's campaign was hoping to reduce the number of people who would turnout, again, to vote for Walker. There were no negative Warnock ads focused on Republicans or the Republican party, he instead focused on attracting Walker's character. His negative ads highlight the fact that Walker is unfit to be a leader due to his inexperience and dishonesty. One of his attack ads is even focused on fact-checking some of the lies that Walker has publicly said, such as the fact that he says he is a member of law enforcement, when it has been confirmed that he is not.

Walker, in contrast, started the midterm cycle with a counterattack ad. It is the only campaign ad on his channel without a background soundtrack, and Walker directly spoke to the camera from his living room. As Nai (2018) mentioned, "candidates have a strategic incentive to respond to negativity with another attack, because failing to do so might create in the eyes of the voter the image that candidates are ineffective or uncommitted to the issues at stake." In this video, Walker appeared to be responding to one of Warnock's negative TV ads, for which Walker accused Warnock that he made the negative ad because he "can't talk about his accomplishments. He had failed Georgia." In two other attack videos, Walker contended that "Warnock runs a nasty dishonest campaign" with all his "slick TV ads."

Negativity has since filled Walker's channel as all except two ads in the midterm and runoff elections utilized negativity. The use of tone towards Warnock scored considerably low at 0.42. Subjects of the Warnock attack ads included the police footage of Warnock's ex-wife calling him "a great actor," the alleged child abuse in Warnock's summer camp, and the reported poor conditions at the apartment building paid by Warnock's church.

Other negative ads were directed toward the Democrats. Walker blamed the opposition party and especially President Biden in 3 videos for the massive inflation, “border mess,” and the rising crime rates in our society. He also claimed that “Democrats use race to divide us” but provided little discussion on his viewpoints. Most of his issue videos presented a broad topic, except in one ad his campaign brought up the wedge issue of transgender participation in college sports. As the challenger, Walker seemed reluctant to offer his solutions while recommending himself as the best candidate to solve the problems.

Conclusion

This study exhibits that a challenger is more likely to go negative on their opponent than the incumbent, due to the fact that a challenger is likely to already be behind an incumbent and have “nothing to lose”. For our research we are observing two candidates of the same gender and race, which eliminated confounding factors that could affect their likelihood of posting negative ads on YouTube.

As with all research, our study comes with some limitations. YouTube as a social media platform gains popularity with interactive affordances and user experience in the participation of discussions and replies under the videos. The absence of comments on both candidates’ channels and a lack of other statistics made public on YouTube limited our understanding of the audience’s demographics. We cannot draw conclusions about viewers’ party affiliations or motivations without their textual reactions, nor can we make predictions about the effects of YouTube political campaign ads on their voting behavior.

Another potential limitation is that our sample only considered Warnock and Walker’s campaign ads posted as a normal, horizontal YouTube video. Both candidates have utilized the newly emerged YouTube Shorts, the vertical, TikTok-like videos that are 60 seconds or less in

length, to deliver their campaign messages. This format has different affordances (i.e. visibility associated with algorithm and sharing) that could engage with audiences differently. Besides, videos that document campaign events and TV interviews are posted alongside campaign ads but we left out of our sample to ensure consistency across both candidates' pages. However, these types of videos might have a better effect on voter-turnout for people who rely on traditional news outlets for political information.

Furthermore, YouTube does not have all of the candidate's campaign ads. It is possible that we missed many ads that were distributed on other outlets such as television, Twitter, and Instagram. Although they were not included in our research, we did take note of ads that were posted on other social media platforms but not on YouTube.

While we investigated ads posted on each candidates' personal channel, many ads were actually produced and released by organizations affiliated with their campaigns. Besides, a longer period of time to evaluate the number of views and an examination of other YouTube political campaigns in the 2022 election cycle might help to confirm some of these patterns.

Although we did our best to avoid any coding biases, we each have our own partisan beliefs that could have unintentionally impacted the way we coded the campaign ads. However, we feel that the variables and scales that we used, made it difficult for our biases to have much of an impact, if any, on our data and results.

Future research should investigate the impact campaign ads have on the likelihood of citizens to turnout and vote for the candidate whose ads they watched. Additionally, one can look at the impact negative vs. positive ads have on vote choice. This research would require more data than we had access to, as well as a longer time frame and the ability to study the individual vote choices of human subjects.

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Appendix:

Figure 1: Warnock YouTube Ad Timeline 2021-2022

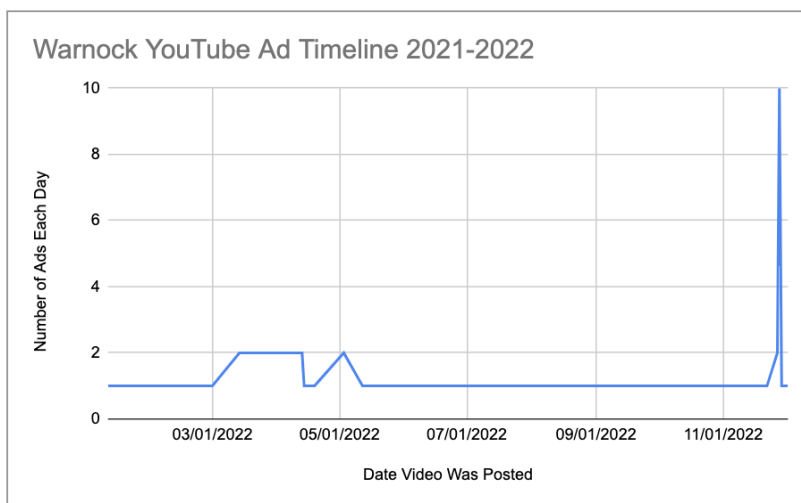


Figure 2: Walker YouTube Ad Timeline 2021-2022

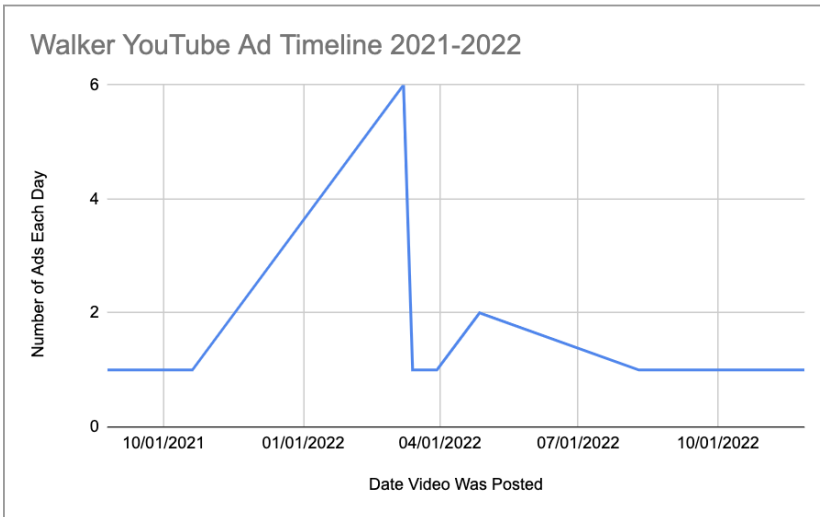


Table 1: Breakdown of Average Scores of Emotions in Each Stage of Walker’s Ads Campaign

	Average Scores of Emotions in Each Stages of Walker’s Ads Campaign			
	Fear	Anger	Hope	Empowerment
Avg. Score Overall	0.192	0.423	0.577	0.462
Avg. Score Primary	0	0.077	0.846	0.692
Avg. Score Midterm	0.333	0	0.222	0
Avg. Score Runoff	0.75	0.75	0.25	0

Figure 3: Average Scores of Emotions Felt in Warnock's Campaign

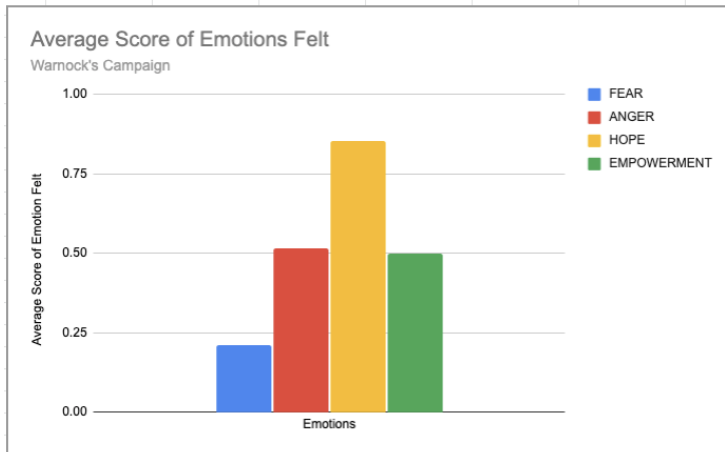


Figure 4: Average Scores of Emotions Felt in Walker's Campaign

