

## Political advertising in America

### Buying votes

#### Nobody loves a tight political race as much as a media firm

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MEG WHITMAN, who used to run eBay and now wants to run California, talks a lot about strengthening business. She is already propping up the media industry. Ms Whitman spent more than \$80m, mostly on television advertising, to win the Republican nomination for governor on June 8th. Hardly had the confetti from the celebrations settled when she returned to the airwaves to promote her candidacy for November's election.

The price of democracy in America has risen in recent years. Kantar Media, which tracks political advertising, reckons \$2.6 billion was spent on the 2008 general election—up from \$1.7 billion four years earlier. It thinks slightly more could be spent in this year's mid-term contest. In January the Supreme Court removed almost all limits on corporate political giving. For television firms stumbling out of recession, it could not have come at a better time.

Michael O'Brien of E.W. Scripps, a television and newspaper firm, says Florida's candidates began to advertise in the first quarter of this year—much earlier than usual. The governor's office and a Senate seat are up for grabs, with no incumbents running. Such open races, of which America has an unusually large number this year, tend to be both competitive and expensive. And a turbulent, anti-politics mood, stirred by the tea-party movement, is making even incumbents nervous. Harry Reid, Nevada's long-serving Democratic senator, is already running television ads.

Firms like Scripps and Sinclair Broadcast Group, which rely on local advertising, are the most obvious beneficiaries. But money will flow more broadly, including to media giants like Walt Disney and News Corporation, which own television stations in the biggest, most lucrative markets. There will be so much demand for local ad slots close to the mid-terms that commercial advertisers will be forced to spread their money around, to radio, cable television and national broadcast TV, says Evan Tracey of Kantar.

The only losers are the viewers, who must put up with the barrage. Most political advertising is crude, and only inadvertently entertaining. Carly Fiorina, a former boss of Hewlett-Packard who is running for the Senate in California, is at least providing some laughs. Her ads, which are available on YouTube, depict opponents as flying saucers and demonic sheep. Hostile advertising seems to work not so much by firing up a candidate's own supporters but by suppressing the turnout for the other side. Just 1.3m Californians voted for Ms Whitman last week. And each of those votes cost her more than \$60.