

# The Electoral Challenge

Theory Meets Practice

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Edited by

Stephen C. Craig  
University of Florida

David B. Hill  
Auburn University and Hill Research Consultants



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## 6 Political Advertising

Michael M. Franz

The 2008 elections were historic in many ways. The race for the White House, for example, featured no incumbent president or vice president for the first time in fifty-six years. An African American topped the Democratic ticket, and a woman was the vice-presidential nominee on the Republican side. Turnout was at its highest level in nearly forty years,<sup>1</sup> and one candidate (Barack Obama) became the first major-party nominee to reject general election public funding since it became available in 1976. In the congressional context, Democrats completed an unprecedented turnaround begun in 2006 by expanding their majority control in the House and approaching a filibuster-proof sixty seats in the Senate. Beyond these qualities, 2008 also featured the most political advertising seen in the modern period of American elections. According to the Wisconsin Advertising Project, which tracks advertising in all 210 media markets in the United States, Obama, John McCain, and their respective party and interest group allies aired 542,199 ads between September 1 and election day; that averages to 8,400 ads per day across the country.<sup>2</sup> It was also 81,000 ads more than the John Kerry and George W. Bush forces mustered in 2004—an 18 percent increase in just four years. The jump in ads was not limited to the presidential contest, however. Between 2004 and 2008, ads for House and Senate races increased more than 33 percent in the top seventy-five media markets.<sup>3</sup>

While the abundance of political advertising may not seem shocking to the casual observer, the stark increase over a four-year period appeared to violate the common presumption that television ads are soon to be replaced by online social networking, a cheaper alternative than broadcast and an innovative way to reach younger voters. In their seminal study of young voters in contemporary American politics, Winograd and Hais (2008, 154) argued that "[Internet politics] present the possibility of an end to the ever-rising cost of thirty-second television campaign commercials, and the time-consuming and potentially corrupting need to raise the money to pay for them." The development of sophisticated online outreach technologies, they added, "will cause television

to lose its role as the primary medium for campaigns to get their messages out to voters in the near future" (163).

The trend toward more online electioneering has also been motivated by general declines in viewership of traditional television programs. DVR and TiVo afford viewers the chance to skip commercials altogether, and viewership for national network news has reached an all-time low in recent years.<sup>4</sup> These changes in Americans' consumption of television have compelled some executives to consider altering their programming. In the fall of 2009, for example, NBC briefly abandoned its traditional 10 p.m. hour of drama for the cheaper and (they hoped) DVR-resistant nightly comedy of Jay Leno.

All of this suggests that candidates will likely scale back their engagement of the air war in the future. The advertising totals in 2008, however, belie the point.<sup>5</sup> Obama in particular, a pioneer in the use of online politicking, nevertheless made aggressive use of televised political advertising in the general election. His vigorous fundraising (more than \$300 million for the general election alone) precluded the need for the Democratic Party or allied interest groups to raise and spend money for television ads on his behalf. Indeed, Obama sponsored almost 95 percent of all the ads that benefited his campaign, which means that he aired more broadcast ads than any previous candidate since the invention of television. (It should be noted, by the way, that there also were more ads in the Democratic and Republican primary campaigns of 2008 than in any previous primary season; see Ridout 2009.)

The implication is that the study of political television ads is as relevant as ever. With so much money spent on thirty-second ads, the big question is whether television advertising can persuade voters to cast a ballot for the sponsoring candidate. Is the investment that candidates continue to make in television worth the effort? In this chapter I review evidence provided by academic scholarship that addresses this important concern.<sup>6</sup> Assessing the overall impact of TV ads is really only the beginning, however, as candidates and their advisors also want to know what types of advertising are more or less effective at influencing the behavior of voters and what types of voters are more or less likely to be influenced by political ads. In the consideration of these questions, it is important to point out a number of caveats about what academic research can tell us; that is, there are limits to what political science can definitively say about political ads. In addition, I explore an issue that has received relatively little attention from scholars: the sponsorship effects of political advertising. Specifically, are candidate ads more or less effective than party-sponsored ads? What unique effect (if any) do interest group-sponsored ads have? In the

concluding section of the chapter, I reflect on the future of political advertising and comment on advertising effects beyond voter persuasion.

### The Big Question: Can Political Ads Persuade?

Political scientists have long been skeptical of the ability of media in general to influence voter decision making in significant ways. This skepticism was inspired by some of the earliest research on the impact of campaigns. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944), for example, found weak evidence of campaign effects in their study of the 1940 presidential election. When voters received campaign communications, the researchers discovered, their candidate preferences rarely changed; rather, receipt of these messages either activated individuals, turning undecided voters into supporters of a candidate in line with their existing political beliefs, or reinforced their initial candidate preferences. Klapper (1960) argued further that the media are likely to have little impact overall because of people's selective exposure to media sources they agree with, and their selective perception and retention of messages from those and other sources. (The specifics behind selective exposure and retention are discussed later in this chapter.) In subsequent years, scholars looked for and speculated about effects in different places (for example, in framing the issue debates within a campaign or in the activation of issues that voters use to evaluate candidates<sup>7</sup>), and a consensus eventually emerged: the impacts of campaigns generally, and of the media specifically, can be substantial, but only some of the time and with some of the people (Leighley 2004).<sup>8</sup>

Political advertising is one campaign tool that is expected to have some influence on voters. The research in this area often focuses on two dependent variables: vote choice and candidate evaluations. Because voters' affinity toward candidates is a strong predictor of how they will ultimately vote, the ability of campaign ads to influence such assessments is particularly important. As with the research on campaigns more generally, the consensus is that ads can move votes and candidate evaluations, but usually in small doses. Several experimental studies, for example, have analyzed the impact of advertising on voters' candidate preferences and concluded that advertising can indeed benefit the sponsor (for example, Kaid 1997; Kahn and Geer 1994; Pinkleton 1997, 1998; Kaid and Tedesco 1999; Meirick 2002; Tedesco and Kaid 2003; Valentino, Hutchings, and Williams 2004; Clinton and Owen 2006). With these studies, though, scholars are limited to showing participants just one or a handful of ads and recording their perceptions in the immediate aftermath

of the treatment. The long-term impact of exposure on ballot-box decisions remains untested and unknown.

Goldstein and Freedman (2000) broadened the scope of research on campaign effects to include survey data, which allowed for asking voters what they actually did at the polls on election day.<sup>9</sup> This particular study examined the impact of advertising in several U.S. Senate races using the 1996 American National Election Studies data set.<sup>10</sup> Combining an extensive database of ads aired in the country's largest media markets with survey-based measures of respondents' television viewing habits, the authors created a relative measure of ad exposure. Their analysis revealed that as exposure to a Senate challenger's advertising increased, the likelihood of voting for that candidate increased as well; the same was true for incumbent advertising. Franz and Ridout (2007) adopted a very similar approach (but with panel data instead of a cross-sectional sample) in their study of how advertising influenced vote choice and candidate favorability in U.S. Senate races in 2004 and in that year's presidential election. They, too, found that advertising had a significant impact.

Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson (2004) also conducted an individual-level analysis, using ad tracking data at the market level to measure the information environment. Their setting was the 2000 presidential contest, and their key measure of advertising was the difference in the number of ads aired in a particular market between Al Gore and George W. Bush in the previous week. Using the National Annenberg Election Survey, they found that overall ad volumes had an impact on the probability of voting for Bush. The net effect of advertising varied over time, depending on the candidates' relative advertising advantages, ranging from pro-Gore by two percentage points to pro-Bush by four percentage points. This persuasive effect was confirmed by Huber and Arceneaux (2007), who examined the same data as Johnston and colleagues but confined the analysis to non-battleground states, thereby eliminating the correlation between ad buys and candidates' ground efforts in highly contested states.<sup>11</sup>

Other researchers have examined ad effects at the aggregate level through the use of actual vote tallies or poll standings. For example, Daron Shaw (1999b) looked at advertising in the 1988, 1992, and 1996 presidential campaigns, matching the number of ads aired in a state with the percentage of the vote that a candidate earned in that state. In general, statistical models supported the conclusion that advertising had its intended impact, increasing the vote share of the candidate who had an ad advantage. Shaw found, however,

that the magnitude of the effect varied from one election to the next, with ads mattering the most in 1996, least in 1992, and in 1988 lying somewhere in between (see also Althaus, Nardulli, and Shaw 2001).

Shaw's approach to the study of ad effects has one important advantage: it allows for the calculation of how many votes the airing of an ad gets a candidate. This is not possible with survey-based research, which in most instances can only estimate the change in probability of an individual's voting for a particular candidate. With only one thousand respondents in a typical survey, for example, there simply are too few cases to aggregate the results up to a predicted campaign outcome. The use of vote tallies or pooled survey data, however, is one method of assessing actual impacts. In Shaw's (1999b) cross-sectional models of state-level vote returns, an increase of 500 gross rating points (GRPs) of advertising in a state boosted a presidential candidate's share of the vote by 2.2 percentage points; this is the equivalent of airing one hundred ads during programs with an average rating of 5 (reflecting moderate popularity). His pooled-time series models using poll data predicted similar impacts of advertising: a 500-gross-rating-points increase in a state for a candidate would result in a 1.6 percentage point increase in support.<sup>12</sup> A follow-up study (D. R. Shaw 2006) discovered a significant impact for advertising in the 2000 and 2004 presidential races, but the size of the impact was smaller. In both elections, a 1,000-gross-rating-points advantage for Bush was estimated to produce a 0.1 percentage point increase in the Republican share of the general election vote.

More recently, Franz and Ridout (2010) used county-level vote returns in the 2008 election to assess the impact of advertising for Barack Obama and John McCain. In line with previous scholarship, they discovered a significant relationship between ad buys and vote returns. Having a one thousand-ad advantage across the entire campaign, for example, resulted in a roughly 0.5 percentage point improvement in a candidate's share of the vote at the county level. The greatest observed difference between candidate advertising in one media market was about five thousand ads, however, meaning that a 2.5 percentage point improvement was a realistic upper limit on the effect of advertising on vote share in a given county.

### **Caveats**

The finding that advertising can influence both individual vote choice and aggregate vote tallies is a comfort to consultants and candidates, who have been buying television ads for more than fifty years. The relatively small overall effect,

however, is an important qualifier. One obvious reason for this is the tendency for effective, but competing, messages to cancel each other out (Zaller 1996); that is, someone may be exposed to one hundred John Kerry ads, but also to one hundred George W. Bush ads. In such situations, it is not surprising that little persuasion takes place. Of course, in many races and in many media markets, candidates can score decent-sized ad advantages over their opponent (Goldstein 2004), and these are where effects are usually located.<sup>13</sup> In competitive races, however, both sides (investing considerable sums of money) often have comparable resources and see minimal gains on election day. If one candidate airs no ads while the other airs many, the latter will undoubtedly reap great rewards; but in almost no modern campaign would an otherwise competitive candidate unilaterally disarm in such a manner.

Although one way that candidates can overcome this is to produce *better* ads than their opponent, this is more easily said than done. Geiger and Reeves (1991) tested whether the structure and style of political ads (multiple scenes with quick camera cuts versus a single shot) influence effectiveness, and they found evidence that a dynamic ad does in fact tend to produce more favorable viewer reactions. Political scientists, however, have not produced enough research along these lines to say with any confidence what constitutes an effective ad. If a candidate airs an ad about education or health care, for example, it might be easy (for consultants, candidates, or scholars) to say that it is well produced or compelling in terms of content, but the effect on voters will likely depend on a variety of other factors such as how many times it airs and the nature and timing of ads by the opponent's campaign.

### Which Types of Ads Persuade?

The caveat discussed above has led scholars to ask whether certain types of ads, on balance, tend to be more effective than others. This question has generally focused on the tone of political ads, most especially negative versus positive. Negative campaigning is prevalent in American politics. According to the Wisconsin Advertising Project, nearly one in every three ads aired on television is primarily an attack on an opposing candidate.<sup>14</sup> There is also evidence that negativity in campaigns, and on television specifically, is higher in recent elections than in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (Kaid and Johnston 2001; Geer 2006; West 2009).

Attack ads in campaigns are not random, as different candidates operating under different circumstances may have greater or lesser incentive to highlight

weaknesses in their opponents. For example, challengers are often more negative than incumbents (Lau and Pomper 2004; Kahn and Kenney 2004) because they need to be, while both candidates in competitive elections are likely to go on the attack (Franz et al. 2008a). The frequency of negative ads also tends to increase as the campaign progresses and voters start paying more attention to the impending election (Kahn and Kenney 2004), and there is some evidence suggesting that negativity in one campaign is driven by (changes in) the level of negativity by the other campaign (Sides n.d.). In addition, the overall negativity of campaign ads sponsored by political parties and outside interest groups appears to be higher than in the case of candidate-sponsored ads (Franz et al. 2008a, 62).

Because negativity is a strategy informed by rational political actors (who presumably would not choose to attack unless experience led them to anticipate a positive result), it is fair to predict that such ads will frequently have the "intended" effect—that is, to lower evaluations of the attacked candidate and generate support for the ad's sponsor. Further, voters' general disapproval of negative campaigning notwithstanding,<sup>15</sup> many political professionals and scholars alike believe that the impact of positive ads is often weaker than that of negative ads. Fridkin and Kenney (2004), for example, found these intended effects in the 1988–1992 U.S. Senate elections, specifically with certain types of negative messages; negative messages deemed legitimate by voters (discussing issues relevant to the campaign) tended to lower evaluations of the targeted candidate. A number of experimental studies, including the work of Pfau et al. (1989) and Kaid (1997; see also Kaid and Boydston 1987), also support the intended effects hypothesis.

However, a second possible effect of negative advertising is a backlash effect (Garrazone 1984; Lemert, Wanta, and Lee 1999). In other words, viewers of negative ads might lower their evaluations of the sponsoring candidates if they believe the advertising is untruthful or unfair, and thus they would become less rather than more likely to vote for that candidate. The idea here is that viewers may sometimes punish candidates for going negative, and there is at least suggestive evidence in the literature that such a backlash is not infrequent. Jasperson and Fan (2002), for example, observed an apparent backlash against Republican Party ads aired in Minnesota against Sen. Paul Wellstone in 1996. Lau and Pomper (2004), in addition to some results that were consistent with the intended effects hypothesis, also found backlash effects, particularly among incumbents; a similar finding was noted by Kahn and Kenney (2004) in their own study of U.S. Senate campaigns.

A third consequence of negative advertising is that it might lower evaluations of both candidates, which is called the *double-impairment effect* (Merritt 1984; Basil, Schooler, and Reeves 1991; Shapiro and Rieger 1992; Pinkleton 1997, 1998). Here, the ad has its intended effect, lowering evaluations of the attacked candidate, but also a backlash effect. The net result on persuasion will clearly be small in these circumstances. Fridkin and Kenney (2004) found a double-impairment effect for certain types of negative campaigns, specifically those described as having degenerated into “mudslinging” (attacks on a candidate’s character or personal traits).

What remains a puzzle in each of these models linking ad tone and vote choice is the specific mechanism that connects the treatment with the effect, which is generally not well specified. One possible mechanism is provided by a *cognitive account*, in which people presumably learn positive information about the ad sponsor or negative information about the ad’s target; that information then leads them to update their evaluations of the candidates. There is a good amount of research, for example, suggesting that negative ads are more memorable (Brians and Wattenberg 1996; Kahn and Kenney 2000, 2004) and contain more information (Geer 2006) than positive ads, a point I will return to later in the chapter. Another possibility is provided by an *affect transfer account* (Marcus and MacKuen 1993; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000), where an ad generates positive feelings for the sponsor and a negative ad generates negative affect for the target. Thus, the important mechanism in this alternative model is the emotional or psychological reactions evoked by viewership.

The latter account underlies the work of researchers who examine the specific, discrete emotions elicited by advertising (Chang 2001; Brader 2006). To these scholars, ads that elicit anger, fear, or anxiety, for example, may transfer those negative emotions to the targeted candidate, thereby resulting in lower voter evaluations of that candidate and a diminished likelihood of voting for that candidate. In some sense, then, certain ads might frighten or anger viewers into voting for one candidate over the other. Likewise, emotions such as pride and enthusiasm may be transferred to the ad sponsor, leading to higher evaluations and a greater likelihood of voting for that person. Evidence for the affect transfer model in the realm of political advertising is preliminary. For example, Brader’s experimental research (2006) found that exposure to enthusiasm cues embedded in political ads actually lowered affect toward the ad’s sponsor (instead of making receivers feel more warmly toward that candidate), although they also reinforced support for the sponsor among his or her initial supporters. Brader also found that fear appeals were effective in moving voters toward

the ad’s sponsor, particularly among those who initially favored the opposing candidate.

### *Caveats*

In many ways, the evidence is clear that negative ads can work to benefit the sponsor. On the other hand, the risk of a backlash is real, and political consultants and candidates are very sensitive to the possibility. Along with any message that attacks the opposition comes the possibility that viewers will instead reject both the message and the messenger. The problem with the available research is that it does not allow us to predict with confidence which effect is more likely. This is probably the one key area in the study of political advertising where there is the least consensus among academics. Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner (2007) performed a meta-analysis of the large literature on ad tone and persuasion and found very little evidence that negative advertising consistently has its intended impact. Indeed, intended and backlash effects were about as frequent. Lau and colleagues (2007, 1183) concluded that “negative campaigning is no more effective than positive campaigning”—this despite the fact that negative ads tend to be more memorable.

Of course, some scholars speculate that the variation within negativity is of crucial importance. The presence, absence, and type of emotional appeal are sources of variation that have already been noted. Another possible factor relates to the use of contrast ads (Jamieson, Waldman, and Sherr 2000), which compare candidates’ issue positions or personal characteristics and may provoke a different response than ads that strictly attack the opposition. Contrast ads contain potentially valued discussions of risks, but are designed not to stray too far from voters’ expectations of positive information (Pinkleton 1997). Campaign consultants, in particular, resist characterizing their clients’ ads as negative if they contain any comparison of positions or traits. Compared with negative ads, contrast ads are predicted to more frequently have the intended impact.

Another source of variation relates to the difference between negativity and mudslinging mentioned earlier. There is some evidence to suggest, for example, that issue-based attack ads are more likely to have the intended effect than those that attack candidate characteristics or character (Kahn and Geer 1994). Finally, there are a host of other potential intervening variables that might diminish the potential for backlash, including the use of humor (Pfau, Parrott, and Lindquist 1992) or providing content and maintaining a tone that voters consider to be “relevant,” “civil,” or “fair” (Fridkin and Kenney 2008; Lawton

and Freedman 2001). This research is ongoing, and it is certainly possible that intended or backlash effects are more idiosyncratic than scholars might like; in other words, their impact may depend on too many factors to allow for generalized rules of thumb that apply to all races in all circumstances. With this in mind, the message to candidates is clear: negative ads are potentially rewarding but highly risky—tread lightly when going on the attack.

### Which Types of Voters Are Persuadable?

Although the characteristics of campaign ads themselves should influence their effectiveness, one should not overlook how the characteristics of those who receive the ads play a role as well. There are at least two receiver characteristics that are important moderators of ad effectiveness: the receiver's level of political awareness and his or her partisanship.

The moderating influence of political awareness on persuasion is expressed most clearly and most succinctly in the existing scholarship through the *dosage-resistance model* (Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Iyengar and Simon 2000). The basics of the model are straightforward. Every voter is aligned at some point on the political awareness scale. At the low end are political novices who know little about politics; when asked, for example, to identify the majority party in Congress or the job that Gordon Brown held, they are unable to do so. They may very well be interested in politics or care about the larger issues, but in practical terms they have no preexisting store of political information. This is in sharp contrast to the political junkies on the high end of the scale who know everything there is to know about politics and keep daily tabs on political events.

These varying levels of political awareness are expected to moderate to a great degree the impact of political information that floods American voters during an election season. The model first predicts that as political awareness rises, the greater the chance voters will "receive" the message in the first place—that is, the greater the chance they will understand and take in political events or news. As an example, imagine a voter watching television who is exposed to a candidate ad about health care. The message is received if the voter understands the point of the ad and is able to discuss the ideas and arguments raised in the message. Zaller (1992) calls the assumed relationship between reception and political awareness his *reception axiom*. In contrast, with rising political awareness comes a decline in a voter's "yielding" potential, referring to the degree to which the person is persuadable. For those who possess little or no

political knowledge, new information might easily sway their decision making. But for voters with large stores of political information, new messages have greater difficulty breaking through and are more likely to be counter-argued.

When we combine reception and yielding, we can see that those on the low end of the awareness scale need the information the most (high yielding potential) but are unlikely to attend to or understand it (low reception potential). Those on the high end of the scale are more likely to attend to and understand it (high reception potential) but are less likely to need or respond to it (low yielding potential). The model consequently predicts that those with moderate levels of political information are most likely to "accept" a political message.

Yet one might argue that the nature of the thirty-second spot, expertly designed to convey a simple message and often appeal to emotions, makes it easier for low-information voters to take them in and be influenced by them. This is in contrast to many political messages that are difficult to process and understand, for example, hour-long discussions on the Sunday morning talk shows, candidate interviews or reports on *60 Minutes* and *Nightline*, exposés in *Vanity Fair* and *Newsweek*, detailed policy statements on candidate Web sites or blogs—all of which require a considerable investment by the message receiver, and can often be too complicated for many citizens. Campaign ads, however, are designed to convey a simple, evocative message in short bursts (and with sometimes numbing repetition). Knowing nothing about the issues or the candidates does not preclude someone from reacting to a simple, compelling message about family, morals, the economy, or national security.

From this perspective, the standard dosage-resistance model may be inaccurate for the study of political advertising. For example, some research (Franz et al. 2008a) shows that campaign ads have as much of an impact (and sometimes even a larger impact) on the knowledge and political interest of low-information citizens as on the knowledge and interest of high-information citizens, suggesting that even those without much political awareness are able to receive the message. Such evidence changes expectations about the probable effect of campaign ads. Now, a revised dosage-resistance model predicts that persuasion will be located chiefly among individuals who are low in political awareness. The reasoning here is that, with political advertising, novices have a high chance of reception *and* a high yielding potential.

The few studies of political advertising that look specifically for effects moderated by political awareness appear to confirm this pattern. An experimental study by Valentino, Hutchings, and Williams (2004), for example, showed that persuasion occurred mainly among low-information voters.

Huber and Arceneaux (2007) analyzed the 2000 Annenberg panel survey and found that low to moderately educated voters (though not the least educated) were most influenced by political advertising in the 2000 presidential election. Franz and Ridout (2007) also observed effects for low-information voters who were exposed to presidential and Senate ads during the 2004 campaign. The focus on Senate ads in this last study is worth noting. Some scholars have suggested that political novices are most likely to be influenced by a range of campaign messages in particularly intense campaign environments where the flows of information are so heavy that voters can hardly avoid electioneering efforts. Zaller (1992, 267), in fact, said so explicitly, arguing that when campaigns are extremely intense even the less knowledgeable are able to acquire relevant election information. Presidential races certainly qualify as intense campaign environments, but Senate races tend to be decidedly less intense.

While there is a body of research showing that political messages have the greatest impact on *highly* aware citizens, the bulk of these findings have to do with the impact of news messages and are concerned with priming (the activation of issues that voters use to evaluate candidates), not persuasion (Druckman 2004; Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Miller and Krosnick 2000). On that score, Krosnick and Brannon (1993, 972) argued that high-knowledge individuals “have a greater ability to interpret, encode, store, and retrieve new information.” This expectation is most compelling for news reports and other campaign messages because they are sometimes quite difficult to understand, a condition not necessarily true for political ads. The short, intense format of the thirty-second political spot does not preclude low-information voters from processing the message. Consider this point also in the context of our earlier discussion regarding ad characteristics. If the effectiveness of political ads is due largely to a transfer of affect (fear, anger, enthusiasm, anxiety, hope, and so forth), there is no reason to expect that low-information voters will be unable to receive and process such emotional appeals.

The second characteristic of the receiver that should moderate the effectiveness of political advertising is the person’s partisanship. One might expect that independents, because they have no basis for resisting the messages of any candidate as being inconsistent with their existing partisan views, are often influenced by exposure to advertising from both sides. In contrast, Democratic advertising should have little impact on Republicans (although it presumably *will* increase support for the sponsor among Democrats), and the opposite should apply for Republican advertising (which should have the greatest effect on independents and Republican identifiers). Thus, in addition to influencing

independents, one effect of the campaign may be to bring partisans home, just as Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) noted more than a half century ago.

The literature speaking to this hypothesis has offered a mixed assessment of its validity. Chang (2003) reported that it was partisans who were influenced most by ad exposure, as expected, but not political independents. Likewise, a series of experiments by Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) supported the claim that nonpartisan voters are “the least receptive to political advertising” (77). Instead, these authors concluded that the effect of campaign advertising is mainly *reinforcement*, moving voters to cast ballots in line with their existing partisan inclinations (see also Iyengar, Jackman, and Hahn 2008). At the same time, however, a different experimental study (Kaid 1997) found support for the opposite conclusion, that political independents are more influenced by watching political ads than are partisans.

#### *Caveats*

There is one major concern associated with political advertising if its primary audience is (or the most receptive viewers are) low-information voters: Are ads manipulating those with less interest or knowledge about politics? Given that the less informed seem disproportionately likely to be persuaded by campaign ads, is it possible that these ads are shifting voters away from a choice that would be more in line with their interests and preferences (see chapter 4 in this volume)? Are less attentive voters being duped into a choice they would not normally make under conditions of full information? This is possible, of course, and if true it would indicate that ads are more harmful to the democratic process than we might want them to be. Yet the evidence discussed above suggests otherwise; the principal effect of ads is more likely to reinforce existing partisan views (not to drive voters away from their predispositions), and their influence on independents is sporadic at best. Indeed, while campaigns in general—and campaign ads specifically—sometimes appear to have little impact (the “minimal effects” model mentioned earlier), their primary role may be as a heuristic (Franz et al. 2008a) that helps people make quick decisions about how to vote and reminds them what they already like and dislike about the candidates or parties (Gelman and King 1993).

#### **Unanswered Questions: What Influence Does Sponsorship Have?**

Most existing research on political advertising examines the general impact of campaign ads, the types of ads that work best, and the types of voters that are most strongly affected. Important questions remain largely unexplored,



however. One of the most prominent of these concerns the sponsorship effect of political ads; that is, are party, candidate, or interest group ads more effective? The question here is particularly important because party and interest group ads have become more abundant in recent election cycles. In the mid-1990s, for example, these entities exploited a loophole in federal election laws that allowed them to raise and spend unlimited amounts of unregulated campaign cash for the purpose of buying loosely veiled candidate advocacy ads (Franz 2008).<sup>16</sup> The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act in 2002 (known also as McCain-Feingold) attempted to rein in interest groups and parties by closing the loophole. This had the effect of eliminating unregulated ads from political parties in elections after 2002, but it also compelled interest groups to form so-called Section 527s—a type of outside group (Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, MoveOn.org, and Progress for America are some examples; see La Raja 2008; Weissman and Hassan 2005) that was generally unrestricted by the new law. Consider these numbers for congressional elections from 2000 through 2004: in Senate races for the three election cycles, respectively, interest groups and parties accounted for 27 percent, 40 percent, and 21 percent of all ads in the top seventy-five media markets. In House races, they accounted for 39 percent, 30 percent, and 28 percent, respectively.<sup>17</sup>

Advertising sponsorship raises numerous questions with regard to persuasion effects. For example, is there an impact associated with party or interest group ads that is distinct from the impact of ads aired by candidates? Clearly, if interest group ads are generally less effective, the rising investment by these sponsors in recent years would represent an inefficient use of resources. Might party ads be more effective for challengers who often have trouble raising enough money on their own to compete against entrenched incumbents (Wallison and Gora 2009)? Do party and interest group ads help to shield candidates from the potential backlash produced by negative ads? (Recall, there is a good amount of research showing that such backlash is not uncommon.) That is, does negative advertising by parties and groups allow candidates to deny involvement in attack campaigns (Magleby and Monson 2004)? If so, the increased involvement of outside groups should, in the aggregate, enhance the persuasion effects of political advertising, assuming that candidates shift toward positive ads and outside groups carry the burden of attacks. However, voters may not distinguish well among sponsors. Despite the mandate for candidates to “stand-by-their-ad” (another change mandated by McCain-Feingold in 2002), most ads, regardless of sponsor, do not mention the party of the favored candidate (Holman and McLoughlin 2001); in fact, direct partisan

appeals are not common components of television ads at all (Spiliotes and Vavreck 2002). Under the circumstances, it is possible that party, group, and candidate ads will tend to have similar levels of effectiveness.

One exception to the dearth of scholarship on this topic is Magleby (2004), who finds no sponsor-based effects on vote intention in his study of advertising in the 2000 presidential election. Using experimental designs, however, Pfau and colleagues (2001, 2002) found that candidate ads have a greater impact on citizen interest in the campaign and knowledge about the candidates, suggesting that voters pay closer attention to these ads. In contrast, research by Garramone (1985) indicated that a group-sponsored attack ad was more persuasive with voters than a comparable candidate-sponsored ad. Questions such as these are increasingly relevant in a world where outside advertising from groups and parties is expected to grow even more in coming election cycles. More good empirical work is needed in order to provide answers.

### Campaign Advertising and Effects Beyond Persuasion

Campaigns spend considerable time and money trying to convince voters to cast ballots in particular ways, but this is not their only goal. Mobilization of the electorate can also be very important to a candidate's prospects for victory. Several studies have examined whether heavy levels of television advertising serve to boost turnout levels. Some scholars believe that they do, although only to a relatively modest degree (Hillygus 2005; Franz et al. 2008a, 2008b); others are skeptical (Clinton and Ashworth 2007; Krasno and Green 2008). Most agree, however, that television ads have a much lower probability of increasing turnout than do traditional forms of voter mobilization, such as direct mail or door-to-door contacts (Gerber and Green 2000b; see also chapter 10 in this volume).

A number of researchers have contextualized the question, asking whether and how negative advertising in particular is related to turnout. Evidence from early studies suggested that negative ads tend to demobilize the electorate (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Simon 1999), thereby providing support for the argument—shared by many political pundits and voters alike—that attack advertising is damaging to democracy. More recent empirical work confirms more robustly that negative ads potentially have a mobilizing effect on turnout, even if very small (Goldstein and Freedman 2002a; Freedman and Goldstein 1999; Martin 2004; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Djupe and Peterson 2002; Lau and Pomper 2004; Wattenberg and Brians

1999). A few studies, however, indicate that there is no relationship between negativity and turnout, which further undermines the argument that negative ads are harmful to the democratic process (Finkel and Geer 1998; Clinton and Lapinski 2004; Brooks 2006).<sup>18</sup>

Beyond persuasion and mobilization, campaigns use advertising to inform the public about candidates' issue positions and personal traits. There is a good deal of evidence that advertising has consistent effects in this regard (see also chapter 4 in this volume). Most famously, Thomas Patterson and McClure (1976) found campaign ads during the 1972 presidential election rife with issue content, leading them to conclude that "presidential advertising contributes to an informed electorate" (117). Indeed, according to Patterson and McClure, television ads in 1972 led to a greater degree of issue learning among voters than did television news. Similarly, Brians and Wattenberg (1996), in their analysis of the 1992 presidential campaign, reported that self-reported ad exposure (and especially exposure to negative ads) was a stronger predictor of political learning than either newspaper reading or television news viewing.

Zhao and Chaffee (1995) provided additional, albeit partial, support for the learning hypothesis; specifically, examining surveys in six different electoral contests, these researchers found advertising to have a discernible positive impact on learning in only three of those contests.<sup>19</sup> Weaver and Drew (2001) and Huber and Arceneaux (2007), in contrast, were unable to document any knowledge gains from advertising. In fact, after finding that ad exposure had a persuasion effect but not a knowledge effect, Huber and Arceneaux concluded that "by manipulating voters' expressed candidate preferences, the partisan balance of the advertising stream has a direct, important, and underdocumented effect on election outcomes" (976). In other words, because ads can persuade without also educating, it is possible that the candidate with the most resources can win an election that she or he might not otherwise have won. This is certainly possible, but remains speculative. As noted earlier, there is very little evidence in any of the existing scholarship that ads are driving people away from candidates whose policy positions are more in line with their predispositions.

Persuasion, mobilization, and education—these are all important goals of campaigns and of campaign advertising. Some scholars have asked, however, whether ads can have effects beyond the goals of candidates. For example, what is the relationship between ad exposure and democratic attitudes such as political interest and efficacy? Franz and his colleagues (2008a) call these *spillover effects* because candidates and their allies are not explicitly interested in changing such perceptions, except perhaps as a means of mobilizing core supporters.

A host of scholarship has looked for various kinds of spillover effects (Freedman and Goldstein 1999; Schenck-Hamlin, Procter, and Rumsey 2000; Martin 2004; Franz et al. 2008a), but the findings are mixed. Geer (2006), for example, found there to be little relationship between negativity in presidential elections and assessments of voters' faith in elections and trust in government. Yet in their meta-analysis of the growing literature on negative campaigns, Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner (2007) concluded that the bulk of the evidence suggests a slight harmful influence. Even if this is true, however, it is likely that a host of other factors in contemporary American elections (such as the rise of cable news and the twenty-four-hour news cycle, the skyrocketing costs of campaigns, personal scandals involving candidates) and in society generally (including unpopular policies, an ever-increasing national deficit, scandals involving government, business, and religious leaders) have contributed as much or more to citizens' negative feelings toward the political realm.<sup>20</sup> In other words, campaign ads are almost certainly not the only, nor even the main, culprit.

### Final Thoughts

Television is one of the primary weapons of many candidates for office, as evidenced by the intensity of the air war in 2008. New campaign tactics, however, are enhancing the tactical options of many candidates and candidate allies, with clear implications for the future of televised political advertising. For example, what effect are online social networking tools and candidate Web sites likely to have in the near term (see chapter 8 in this volume)? The immediate impact, perhaps ironically, is a transformation in how candidates and their allies *fund* the air war. According to journalist Kate Kaye (2009), "many political consultants don't think Internet ads can be used to sway voters. . . . Obama grabbed millions of dollars [in 2008] through online fundraising from countless donors giving relatively small amounts of cash. But, as in every election in recent history, the bulk of that money was spent on television ads" (14, 19). Thus, Internet fundraising has afforded candidates the ability to raise large sums of campaign cash quickly, and that cash is then typically used to fund traditional forms of campaigning offline. Only in the longer term will online campaigning replace television advertising as a primary means of reaching and persuading voters. This is not to diminish the spread of online technologies in the tool bag of campaign tactics; much has been written (and is being written) about what these tactics can do for youth involvement in politics (Harfoush 2009) and for the mobilization of core supporters. Still, we are in the first act

of an unfolding story and should therefore be careful not to overemphasize the effects of the Internet on contemporary American elections.

Another trend in elections involves the aggressive mining of consumer purchasing data (tracked by credit card companies) to identify relationships between retail preferences and political choices (Hillygus and Monson 2008); the information is subsequently used to instruct GOTV (get-out-the-vote) efforts and peer-to-peer contacts. Republicans employed this tactic aggressively beginning in the 2004 elections (Gertner 2004; Sosnik, Dowd, and Fournier 2006). Put simply, campaign consultants want to know if conservatives disproportionately purchase domestic beer and subscribe to hunting magazines; if liberals prefer lattes at Starbucks and give often to charities; and if moderates prefer American-made to foreign-made cars. They are able to get answers to these and similar questions through extensive polling that looks for trends and relationships between consumer habits and political attitudes. Voter files are subsequently linked to data on individuals that is purchased from credit card companies and, because polling has identified which consumer habits are associated with which political attitudes, these data can be used by campaigns to develop a highly tailored message that can be sent (via phone calls or direct mailings) only to certain types of consumers/voters. Targeting along these lines can be so precise that a grandmother in apartment 4B might receive a health care mailing that emphasizes the candidate's efforts to secure the long-term viability of Medicare, while the graduate student in apartment 6C receives the student loan mailing outlining the candidate's commitment to affordable education.

This tactic is intended to reduce inefficiencies that come with the use of blanket communications. For example, most campaign ads air on local television news broadcasts, or on talk shows and game shows (Goldstein and Freedman 2002b). A certain demographic, usually older voters, watches these programs (Rivlin 2008), but the overall exposure is broader; that is, an ad will be seen by your base voters, undecided voters, supporters of the other party, and a large number of nonvoters. What you say on television, then, is often wasted on people who will never vote for you, or never vote at all. With micro-targeting, however, candidates can avoid wasting valuable campaign dollars by directing messages to likely voters and fence-sitters. Doing so is not cheap, and many campaigns (especially in lower ticket races) have not yet adopted it as a primary method of reaching voters. There also are certain normative challenges, including the question of whether it is possible for a candidate to say or frame an issue one way to one group—but then do so differently (playing both

sides of the issue) to another group. This is difficult to accomplish with campaign ads because those ads are public and aired to wide audiences. Another normative concern stems from the purchase and use of credit card data by campaigns, parties, and interest groups; voters might justifiably be uncomfortable with the fact that their personal data is used in ways to influence how they vote in elections.

Like the Internet, micro-targeting probably represents the wave of the future in American elections. Many campaign consultants are powerful advocates of emerging technologies and of efforts to devise new ways of mobilizing, persuading, and educating voters; reflecting this, a growing number of campaigns are investing time and effort in trying to find the best way to maximize the return on their efforts. Television, however, is not a creature of the past. It is likely to remain the primary method of communication for presidential candidates, Senate candidates, and many House candidates (not to mention those running for governor and other statewide and state legislative offices). For political scientists, this means there are still more questions to ask about the effect of political advertising, and many opportunities to look for answers.

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## THE POLITICAL PROFESSIONALS RESPOND

Mike Murphy

Political advertising is as much alchemy as science, so any purely empirical examination of its effects is daunting. Most successful political consultants hold many of the same overall thoughts about the effectiveness and use of political ads, albeit with many caveats based on the type and size of a campaign, the political environment, and the consultants' own unique experiences and beliefs. Those views can be roughly summarized as follows:

- Political paid advertising, particularly television, is the most powerful communications tool that a campaign has.
- The political communications landscape is very noisy and cluttered, and, as a result, huge volumes of simple and direct advertising are needed to break through to voters.
- Targeting of political TV is possible but often not effective because its mass audience makes TV a shotgun instead of a rifle.
- Radio is more targeted but not usually as powerful as TV.

- Social networking, Web ads, and other new media are interesting and growing in effectiveness, but not as powerful or as effective for communications as paid TV ads since many of the most important voters are older (age 55 and older are the most likely to turn out). That said, it is well understood that the landscape is quickly changing with regard to new media.
- Legal disclaimer rules that require long and cumbersome “paid for by” mechanisms in the actual ads make for less effective ads.
- Negative ads, if properly done, can be more effective than positive ads (it is often said that “bad news travels faster”), although this varies widely based on candidate, issue, and the creative quality of a given communication.

The greatest challenge to academic research on the questions surrounding ad effectiveness and impact is that few campaign consultants think the effect of a given television ad can be simply deconstructed along lines of style and type.

Campaigns are complicated, almost organic, organizations where voter perceptions are affected by a swirling and highly interactive combination of ads, candidate images, press reports, spending levels, political environment, issue terrain, and many other factors. Each of these elements affects and, in turn, is affected by the others. Most important, the greatest impact that an ad can have on a campaign often may come less from the viewing of that ad by voters than from its overall effect (if run enough to be seen) on the *entire* campaign. For example: a candidate runs a contrast ad on a small issue not well known to the public, or perhaps airs an attack ad about an unknown but controversial aspect of an opponent’s record. Spending for the ad is enough to penetrate the media “noise,” and that initially small issue becomes a bigger one—that is, it “becomes famous” thanks to the mass media reach of television and radio. The press, voters, the other candidate, interest groups, and various other players start reacting to this new element of the campaign landscape. The dialogue quickly changes, and every actor within the campaign dynamic is instantly affected.

With the right strategy, such a change can be very helpful in framing the campaign and controlling the public dialogue that can have a huge impact on the outcome. Often, an ad that is less effective *per se* but deals with an issue that people care about will do more to determine the winner than a well-done individual ad on a topic that does not impact the main debate. To be sure, political ads can also vary widely in their creative quality. Some ads are poorly done and therefore mightily ineffective. The skill and experience levels of political ad-makers vary widely and are important factors in determining the “street” effectiveness of any ad—something that is hard to control for in an empirical test. Unlike medicine, incompetent ad-making spin doctors operate in a commercial “wild west” with lax professional

standards; moreover, they often stay busy in their professional recklessness for a long time, resulting in large numbers of client casualties along the way.

Nevertheless, what really drives campaigns is the direction in which the loud public debate between candidates is pushed. Voters have a limited attention span, candidates have limited resources, and elections take place in finite time. Thus, bandwidth is limited and controlling the debate is crucial. Advertising is a key strategic tool in achieving that objective by forcing advantageous topics, and doing so with ads that frequently are sensational and negative in tone. The press is a key player here. Since the 1950s, the press has become increasingly focused on the *process* of politics, more so than its substance. Reflecting this, ads often are covered as stories in their own right and even used by campaign staffs to get press attention for their candidate. Issues that are pushed by ads, especially when they are negative, may move to the center of the debate and be amplified in volume both by press attention and, even more so, when the other side decides to run a “response” to the original attack.

It is said in professional consulting circles that a good consultant will do something with his or her campaign early one day that allows him or her to control the important actions of *both* campaigns on that day—or, even better, for the entire week or month or, in a perfect scenario, the entire campaign period. The point, then, is less the ads themselves and the specific viewing experience surrounding them and more the message strategy of the campaign as a whole, of which paid ads are the most important and effective tool. It is true that campaign ad-makers spend a lot of time and effort trying to make their ads effective in a search for the greatest bang for the media buck. Better an effective ad that can do its job for 900 rating points than a less effective ad that requires 1,400 rating points to be noticed. Polling, ad-test focus groups, and other research technologies are used by campaigns to help achieve this goal. But it is understood among top campaign professionals that too much linear interpretation of ad-testing results can mislead and prevent ads that may work better “on the street” than in the focus group from being used. Ad effectiveness “over-think” is widely seen as a potential danger to a strategically well-run campaign.

Finally, it is true that spending levels are important. Volume counts. But often the key distinction is the type of race in which the ads are being run, and the result is not always linear. In a presidential campaign, it is generally believed that press attention is more powerful than advertising. No candidate has the budget to run saturation ads in every state; instead, campaigns must deal with a huge amount of press attention, both negative and positive. Voters receive a lot of information through the media filter that campaigns both fear and need. About a dozen swing states get major buys for paid ads, however, and this can obviously have an impact

on voter decision making. Under such circumstances, resource planning becomes critical. Campaigns choose which states to invest in, hoping to catch the opponent in a situation where he or she can be out-resourced in a given situation.

In statewide campaigns for U.S. Senate, governor, or down-ballot offices such as state treasurer or attorney general, paid ads are vitally important. Often they are the largest information source in the campaign—the crucial big megaphone that candidates use to influence voters. In races for local office, ads can be less effective in part because many candidates cannot afford saturation advertising. This is especially true of candidates from districts in suburban or urban areas located near a top-twenty television market. Local cable is possible and can be effective if cable system boundaries dovetail with local political districts, but in these places the (shrinking though still very powerful) big hammer of local broadcast advertising may be out of a candidate's financial reach. Paid phone calling and direct mail is frequently used instead, which can also be effective but is usually not as powerful as television ads run at a heavy level.

Academics face a challenging task in evaluating how political TV ads really work through an ad-by-ad typology. Paid ads are only a part, albeit a hugely powerful part, of the complex and highly interactive dialogue shared by voters, candidates, and the press in the communications whirlwind of the modern political campaign.

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## THE POLITICAL PROFESSIONALS RESPOND

David B. Hill

Franz, in his overview of political advertising research—and particularly in his take on negative, or attack, ads—is primarily concerned with whether this genre of communications is effective in persuading voters. Consultants know it is effective, even without benefit of the correlational analyses and experimental studies that Franz describes. But the working consultant has to contemplate much more than simple effectiveness. In this essay I offer the reader some insights into the complexity surrounding the use of negative advertising.

Consultants pondering an attack ad have a lot of things to think about, including their own client's feelings about the genre. On several occasions in my career, a candidate has sat down with the consulting team during an early planning session and declared spontaneously that he or she doesn't want to do negative ads at any time during the campaign. In taking this stand, the candidate effectively succumbs to the pleadings of editorial boards and other "good government" advocates. There once were organized and active "clean campaign pledge" initiatives that would

attempt early in a campaign cycle to get every contestant to sign a pledge eschewing negative ads, although I haven't seen much of them lately. And in GOP primaries, there's still always someone going on about Ronald Reagan's so-called Eleventh Commandment not to speak ill of other Republicans.

Consultant reactions to candidates wanting to prohibit negative ads invariably involve a lot of eye-rolling and whispered suspicions regarding ulterior motives. There is often the feeling that said candidate must be worried about his own "skeletons in the closet" (perhaps some that even his own consultants are unaware of) that an opponent might bring out during back-and-forth responses to attacks. Occasionally a candidate will challenge an opponent to sign a bilateral pledge not to go negative, hoping to avoid some bloody assault that he knows is coming. A candidate may also allow his more civilized spouse, who worries about the family image at the country club, to influence campaign strategy and tactics. Or the candidate feels that running negative ads will cut into the number of positive image ads that most candidates really like—feel-good ads that highlight their accomplishments and show them walking and talking with adoring voters or family members in gauzy commercials shot on the same film used by Hollywood, being transformed in the process into near-matinee idols.

Consultants rarely argue at the outset with candidates who want to ban negative ads, unless they actually threaten to sign a "clean campaign" pledge that would limit the options available for later on in the campaign. No, the consultant just smiles at the conflict-avoider and waits until the negative ad is necessary; the need for persuasion is diminished when a candidate looks over a poll and sees that she is trailing. And if the candidate still wants to avoid negative ads, you agree in principle and then proceed to explain how you'll do comparative ads instead (wink, wink). Everyone is happy. Franz accurately captures the spirit of this sleight of hand in his discussion of comparative versus negative ads.

There is one relatively new development now facing attack campaigns—the federally stipulated regulation that requires the candidate to state on air, "I approve this message." The point of this requirement was ostensibly to leverage a point I just made: that many candidates hate negative ads, or at least say they do, and may not want to appear on camera saying they approve of an attack. In my view, this has not really reduced the number of negative ads, although it has inspired a lot of creative ways and means of diverting the sting of the approval. Some candidates put the disclaimer at the beginning, followed by a second or two of black, or the insertion of something positive before the negative content unrolls—anything to build a firewall between the candidate and the objectionable material.

The optimal production style for negative (or even comparative) ads also is becoming more complicated, requiring greater thought and finesse. The reason for

this is that voters are catching on to the method and means behind attack ads and, as a result, these ads are becoming harder to pull off with aplomb. Once upon a time, the negative ad had some or all of the following ingredients: scary, from-the-dungeon music for the soundtrack; grainy black-and-white photos of your opponent, a few of which may have been "enhanced" to make him or her look fatter; and visuals of a few scandal headlines clipped from news sources, perhaps read aloud by someone who sounded like an angry judge at sentencing. And there you were—the perfect recipe for a negative ad of the 1980s and 1990s.

In the new millennium, that stuff doesn't seem to be working the way it once did. Now, when I play a spot of that genre in a focus group, most often people just start laughing out loud, like I am showing them a *Saturday Night Live* or Comedy Channel spoof on politics: "Jane, you miserable slut, get that garbage off my TV."<sup>1</sup> Or else they get mad. One guy in Florida stormed up to me after a dial test of a slyly negative ad, with a hardback copy of *War and Peace* under his arm for reading while he waited for the group to begin, and got in my face, literally inches from my nose, snarling, "I know what you are up to and I don't like it!"

That's a problem. Voters recognize what we're up to these days and it makes producing effective attack ads more challenging than ever. Because of "ad-watch" columns<sup>2</sup> in the newspaper, YouTube parodies and critiques of ads, and an electorate that includes too many people who have successfully completed Psychology 101 and one or two communications courses, the audience is on to our tricks. They hear the ugly music and see the grainy photos for what they are.

Because of the public's increasingly cynical response to disparaging ads, many political ad-makers are turning more often to humor to carry a negative message. This strategy has the advantage of giving a nod and a wink to the viewer who sees attack ads as comedic. And, to boot, an old consultant once told me that if you can ever get voters laughing at your opponent, you've got him or her on the ropes. My friend Mike Murphy once discovered in the opposition research file that a conservative Tennessee congressman had used taxpayer dollars to pay for several car washes for the fancy leased car he was using. Murphy crafted an attack ad against the congressman when he tried to upgrade to a seat in the U.S. Senate in a GOP primary. The ad featured a deadpan car wash operator shouting, "Another super-deluxe for the congressman!" as the car started trundling through the tunnel. Then the announcer lampooned the use of tax dollars paying for a car wash. Murphy's client was a moderate, but the fiscal conservative he smacked ended up getting hosed. People were guffawing at the hypocrisy of his misfeasance.

In addition to the credibility of a negative message, campaigns must also worry about the endless cycle of attack and counterattack that frequently ensues. Every

consultant worth his or her salt knows that you must respond to an attack. And, generally, the best response is to make a counter-charge. You say that your opponent voted to raise taxes. He responds that you let a little old lady die by not getting her her Social Security check on time. You respond that his divorce file has innuendos of spousal abuse. He brings up that public records show that your child has multiple arrests for marijuana use. And so it goes. It's a vicious and wild ride. And in this day and age of campaign finance restrictions, the more money you spend on rebutting attacks, the less time you have for building name identification and cultivating a positive image.

In some ways, the "all negative, all the time" campaign favors an incumbent or well-known personality who already has an identity and doesn't need to spend as much time and money establishing her persona and bona fides. A newcomer who gets pulled into the grips of a response and counter-response campaign is distracted from the business of establishing her identity. As a result, attack campaigns may ultimately be more advantageous to incumbents, especially where levels of ad spending are limited.

Negative ads also depend on good opposition research. The best research comes from independent sources like the media because you can say, "According to the *Daily Gazette*, Representative Doe has the worst attendance record of any member of Congress." Knowing the raw data that he has the worst record is not as good as saying that independent sources confirm he is often absent; with the latter, you get third-party credibility. The problem with trying to use this approach today is that media outlets are slashing budgets for investigative reporting, so it's harder to get the media to provide the basic grist for negative messaging. Now, campaigns can do the research that newspapers once performed and put the results on a dedicated attack Web site like "TheTruthAboutSenatorDoe.com," perhaps accompanied by some crude Web ads of two minutes or less. The media may then look at these attacks and comment on them in blogs, and eventually the essence of the attack ends up in a "real" news story that a campaign can exploit in an ad that's good enough for broadcast TV. But that ad and the content on which it is based might never have been developed without the investment made in the attack Web site and the research it contained. The moral is that it sometimes takes months to develop the factual and substantive content of a negative ad. It's not something that just happens by walking into a studio with a desire to do damage. Proper attacks require serious preparation to be effective and persuasive.

<sup>1</sup>For those too young to remember, this was Dan Ackroyd's typical response to an editorial point (usually from the liberal side of the spectrum) made by Jane Curtin in the show's "Weekend Update" segment during the 1970s.

<sup>2</sup>See Bennett (1997); Tedesco, Kaid, and McKinnon (2000); Frantzich (2002); Richardson (2008); and West (2009) for overviews of media efforts to monitor ads for accuracy and fairness. Academic research to date reports a mix of effects and noneffects on voters from ad-watch efforts by the media; for example, see Cappella and Jamieson (1994); Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1996).

## Notes

1. According to the United States Election Project, 61.7 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot in 2008. The last presidential election with that level of turnout or higher was 1968. See [http://elections.gmu.edu/voter\\_turnout.htm](http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm).
2. Information on the Wisconsin Advertising Project can be accessed at <http://wiscadproject.wisc.edu>.
3. The Wisconsin Advertising Project tracked only the top 75 markets in 2004 for congressional races, compared with the top 210 markets in 2008. For ease of comparison, I looked only at the top 75 markets in each year.
4. In 2006, roughly 26 million people reported watching the network evening news on a daily basis—down from 34.5 million in 1997. These figures were accessed from the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism at [www.journalism.org/node/1363](http://www.journalism.org/node/1363).
5. Alternatively, one might argue that candidates will be forced to increase their ad buys in a fragmented media environment because more ads are needed to break through to viewers. This assumes, of course, that candidates will continue to view television as a worthwhile investment, important enough to spend even more money seeking out a tougher-to-reach and dwindling audience.
6. Readers should note that I look almost exclusively at televised political advertising. For some research (of which there is comparatively very little), on the effects of radio ads, see Geer and Geer (2003); Overby and Barth (2006).
7. This latter effect is called "priming." See Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004; also chapter 7 in this volume.
8. This is often called the "minimal effects" model; that is, the effect of a campaign is believed to be small and likely to matter only when the election is close (Holbrook 1996; J. Campbell 2000). Moreover, a close election is seen as mainly the consequence of factors outside the campaign, such as an open seat when an incumbent retires, national (especially economic) conditions, and exogenous events such as a scandal. See chapter 1 in this volume for further discussion.
9. Goldstein and Freedman were not the first to use survey data to investigate such questions (see, e.g., Atkin and Heald 1976). A major limitation of this earlier survey-based scholarship, however, is that exposure was operationalized using respondents' recollection of the advertising they had seen or heard—an approach that makes causal relationships difficult to disentangle. For example, does advertising recall lead to higher turnout, or are those more likely to vote paying greater attention to campaign ads in the first place (Franz et al. 2008a, 32–33)?
10. See [www.electionstudies.org](http://www.electionstudies.org).
11. Because advertising and voter canvassing efforts both tend to be heaviest in the most competitive states, it is possible that what appears to be an effect of ads is actually

a campaign effect more generally. By looking at noncompetitive states with limited exposure to battleground media markets (for example, voters in New Jersey who live in the Philadelphia market) but few contacts (because the campaign doesn't want to waste resources in a state that it has no chance to win), that potential problem can be eliminated.

12. Shaw combined weekly tracking polls in the states to get a measure of a candidate's change in support at various points during the campaign.
13. Franz and Ridout (2010) noted, for example, the unprecedented advertising advantage of Obama over McCain in 2008. No previous presidential candidate in modern elections had such a resource advantage over his opponent.
14. This number is from the author's review of advertising data in 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2008, when the project tracked ads in the top media markets for House, Senate, and presidential elections. Of the nearly 5 million ad airings in these five election cycles, more than 1.5 million were attack ads.
15. In 2006, for example, 63 percent of respondents in a *Newsweek* poll (see [www.orspub.com](http://www.orspub.com)) reported that Republican candidates' ads were "too negative," while 61 percent said the same about ads for Democratic candidates. Nearly 70 percent indicated that neither Democratic nor Republican ads "provided useful information."
16. The loophole was known as the *magic word distinction*. If parties and groups avoided the use of certain action words (such as "vote for" or "vote against") in their communications, the ads were considered issue advocacy and not candidate advocacy. This simple distinction resulted in a proliferation of ads that urged viewers to contact or write elected officials and urge them to take a particular stand on an issue. While the content of the ads was generally perceived as involving candidate advocacy, the lack of a specific exhortation on how to vote classified them as being outside the scope of federal election laws. The same distinction does not apply to candidate ads, since federal election laws consider any and all expenditures by candidates' campaigns as designed to affect election outcomes.
17. These data are from the Wisconsin Advertising Project.
18. See also Geer (2006, 141–143), who demonstrated that across presidential elections turnout rates fell at about the same time that negativity was going up. He offered this only as a two-way plot, however, not as proof of the demobilization hypothesis. See also Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner (2007) for a review of the literature on the relationship between attack advertising and turnout.
19. For more evidence that citizens learn from campaign ads, see Atkin and Heald (1976); Faber and Storey (1984); Zukin and Snyder (1984); Hitchon and Chang (1995); Kahn and Kenney (2000); Valentino, Hutchings, and Williams (2004). See Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner (2007) for a review of the literature on the specific effect of negative advertising on learning.
20. For example, see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 2001); Hetherington (2005).