

Negative Political Advertising: A History and
Analysis of its Effectiveness with a Case
Study from Montana

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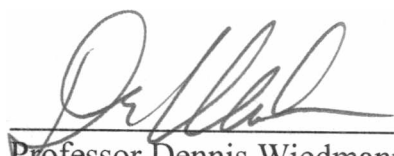
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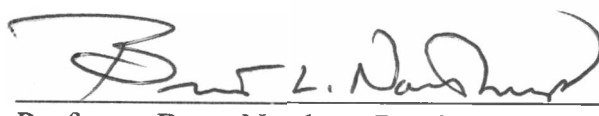
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Abstract

Negative, or attack, political advertisements have been a part of American politics since the country's inception. In fact, the Declaration of Independence was essentially America's first negative political ad. Despite experiencing a brief lull between the late 19th century and the late 1920s, negative advertising has been a constant presence in the American political system, changing according to the technological, political, and governmental modifications over time. Despite their consistency throughout U.S. history, much debate exists regarding the effectiveness of negative political advertisements.

Scholars upholding the demobilization hypothesis on negative political advertising, primarily Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, demonstrate through their research that negative advertisements cause Independent voters to abstain from voting, as they are turned away by the negativity. Conversely, these scholars note an increase in voting by strong partisan individuals. Scholars upholding the stimulation hypothesis on negative political advertising, including Steven E. Finkel and John G. Geer, have found contradictory conclusions to that of the demobilization hypothesis. Finkel and Geer provide research demonstrating that negative advertisements can actually stimulate voter turnout. Additionally, under some scenarios, Finkel and Geer showed that negative political advertisements had no effect on subsequent voter turnout.

The state of Montana, no stranger from the phenomenon of negative political advertising, has experienced a number of tumultuous negative campaigns.

This thesis applies a case study on the use and effectiveness of negative political advertising in Montana, focusing on the 2006 U.S. Senate race between Republican incumbent Conrad Burns and Democrat Jon Tester. The voter turnout was significantly high among Independents as well as partisans in the 2006 election, and negative advertisements were frequently played on Montanans' televisions, radios, and in their local newspapers. The Montana case study demonstrates that negative advertising can result in varying effects depending on the unique political culture of a given state or locality. Ultimately, much research must continue to be conducted to fully understand negative political advertising – a force with no end in sight, sure to be present in future campaigns at all levels of government.

Introduction

It is a political jingle many Montanans know and can recite as if it were a national Coca-Cola advertisement – despite not having heard it in years. Even some of the most politically detached individuals can sing the tune without hesitation. Having been an 11-year-old girl when the “jingle” first aired, I still catch the tune entering my mind occasionally after nearly 12 years.

“Max Baucus does the wishy-washy!” proclaimed a singer, as a cut-out of Montana Senator Max Baucus’ head bobbed back and forth on the television screen, dancing to the tune.

The infamous “wishy-washy” commercial was my first recollection of a political attack advertisement, and its impact on me and other Montanans shows the undeniable power of such ads. It wasn’t until college, when I began to study political science, that I became curious about the effect the advertisement had on me.

As I began to ponder possible honors thesis topics, I knew I wanted to relate my topic to Montana politics. I have always been interested in state politics – even at a very young age – and have become passionate about issues specific to Montana during my time at Carroll College, especially after taking a course on Montana state politics. I worked for the successful Jon Tester campaign in the 2006 U.S. Senate race, which was incredibly close and exceptionally negative throughout its entirety. Additionally, after taking a course in mass media my junior year at Carroll, I became interested in different types of advertising and the

effect they have on individuals. My decision to study the history and effectiveness of negative political advertisements, looking specifically at the 2006 Montana U.S. Senate race, came from the interests I have developed throughout college.

This thesis will begin by examining the history of negative political advertising in the United States, starting from the country's inception to current trends. The second chapter will analyze the scholarly research on the effectiveness of negative political advertising, focusing on two principal theories on the subject. Finally, in the third chapter, this thesis will present a case study from Montana, focusing on the 2006 U.S. Senate race between Conrad Burns and Jon Tester. The case study will introduce a factor of the effectiveness of negative political advertising that current research on the topic fails to examine: the political culture of a given state or locality.

There is nothing wishy-washy about negative political advertisements. They have an impact on American elections.

Chapter One

The History of Political Attack Advertisements in the United States

“Attack ads are viewed by many as the electronic equivalent of the plague.
Few aspects of contemporary politics have been as widely despised.”

– Darrel M. West

The Early Development of Negative Advertisements

Negative political advertisements have been utilized in United States politics since the country's inception (West, "Air Wars" 2). The Declaration of Independence is replete with negative attacks on King George III of England, whom the founding fathers saw as an unfit leader "of a free people" (Mark 19). Indeed, the Revolution was essentially America's first campaign – a campaign to break away from a ruler whom the founding fathers said "has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people" ("Declaration of Independence"). Independence was not a universally accepted concept at the time. As David Mark notes in his book, *Going Dirty: The Art of Negative Campaigning*, "Most historians agree that at the time of the American Revolution, only a sizable minority of Americans supported independence" (19).

As negative campaigning was embedded in the founding documents of the United States, so too were negative political advertisements present in the first American campaigns. The earliest forms of political advertising utilized handbills, circulars, newspaper articles, and cartoons to communicate their message (West, "Air Wars" 2, Mark 20). Newspapers were highly biased and partisan in the late 1700s and 1800s, and fully engaged in political mudslinging (Mark 23). Mark wrote: "The most prominent perpetrators of negative campaign tactics during the nineteenth century were newspapers, which were largely partisan rags. Newspapers reminded voters daily of the reasons why their side should win and, until the 1890s, usually printed the ticket on the editorial page's masthead" (23).

The idea of an unbiased newspaper was an oxymoron in the 19th century.

According to Mark, an early newspaper editor in Baltimore “asserted that it was as unimaginable for a newspaper to be politically neutral as it was for a clergyman to preach Christianity in the morning and Paganism in the evening” (23).

Newspapers called politicians everything from drunken cheats with syphilis to prostitutes of the public trust, as was said of presidential candidate James Blaine in 1884 (Mark 23).

After George Washington won the first two presidencies with little opposition, distinct political parties began to emerge: the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans (Mark 20). With the formation of political factions, candidates began using negative tactics to challenge their ideological opponents (Mark 20). For the first hundred years of campaigns in America, attack advertisements were ruthless and hostile – arguably the worst in the country’s history. Thomas Jefferson, a Democratic-Republican, was accused of being an “atheist, anarchist, demagogue, coward, and trickster” by Federalists in the 1796 presidential election (Mark 20). Additionally, Federalists called Democratic-Republican supporters “cut-throats who walk in rags and sleep amid filth and vermin” (Mark 20). The Democrat-Republicans, not immune from the name-calling, played upon Americans’ fears of centralized power and monarchies, portraying John Adams as “British” or “pro-French” (Mark 20).

Adams won the presidency, and with the dirty campaigning fresh in his memory, signed the Sedition Act into law (McCullough 536). According to David

McCullough, author of *John Adams*, “Under the Sedition Act anyone openly criticizing the president ran the risk of being fined or sent to prison” (536).

However, campaign advertising increased in negativity during the 1800 presidential election (Mark 20). A New York newspaper described incumbent Adams as a “person without patriotism, without philosophy, and a mock monarch” (Mark 21). Federalists viciously attacked Jefferson, who was Adams’ vice president in accordance with the rule that the second-place candidate be given the vice presidency, as being a “mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father ... raised wholly on hoe-cake made of coarse-ground Southern corn, bacon and hominy, with an occasional change of freccassed bullfrog” (Mark 21).

The 1828 election reached a new level of political brutality. In fact, Kerwin C. Swint, author of *Mudslingers: The Top 25 Negative Political Campaigns of All Time*, considers the 1828 election the dirtiest campaign of all time. John Quincy Adams won the 1824 election over Andrew Jackson not by the popular vote, but by obtaining more Electoral College votes (Mark 21). Jackson’s campaign accused Adams as having an “illegitimate office” (reminiscent of George W. Bush’s victory in the 2000 election) (Mark 22). Additionally, Jackson proponents called Adams “The Pimp” amid allegations that he persuaded a woman to have an affair with a czar during his time as ambassador to Russia (Mark 22). Adams was also portrayed in an 1828 handbill as chasing away an old crippled soldier asking for assistance (West, “Air Wars” 2).

Adams' campaign engaged in attack advertising as well, creating a circular which accused Andrew Jackson of "ordering other executions, massacring Indians, stabbing Samuel Jackson in the back, murdering one soldier who disobeyed his commands, and massacring Indians" (West, "Air Wars" 2). One editorial cartoon depicted Jackson hanging a man in a noose and read, "Jackson is to be president and you will be HANGED" (Mark 22).

The families of presidential candidates also found themselves in the bull's-eye of attack ads in 1828. For Jackson's wife Rachel, the attacks may have led to her untimely death (Mark 22). Adams' campaign broke a story that at the time of her marriage to Jackson, Rachel's divorce from her former husband was not final (Mark 22). Her health and demeanor deteriorated after the reports surfaced, and just days after Jackson won the presidency, she passed away (Mark 22). Although Adams' wife Louisa escaped the grim fate of Rachel Jackson, she did not escape negative campaigning. Jackson supporters accused her of having premarital relations with her husband (Mark 22). These early attacks on candidates' family members seemed to make the subject "fair game" for future campaigns.

In 1860, the presidential contest between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas saw the addition of physical appearance as grounds for attack in advertisements ("HarpWeek"). Lincoln was called the "Illinois Ape," while Douglas was ridiculed for being short (Mark 22, "HarpWeek"). Defending one's reputation became as much a part of campaigning as was sabotaging an opponent's character. HarpWeek.com, the Harper's Weekly Web site, wrote,

“The Lincoln camp spent considerable time on damage control, countering rumors that their candidate was a deist, a duelist, or a Know-Nothing, that he had voted against supplying American troops during the Mexican War, and that he had maligned the good name of Thomas Jefferson.”

The Civil War made the presidential campaign of 1864 particularly heated between candidates Lincoln, a Republican, and George McClellan, a Democrat (“HarpWeek”). Dirty campaigning on the McClellan side often focused on race. McClellan supporters said “lives were being sacrificed for degraded negro slaves” (Mark 23). Lincoln followers who opposed slavery were dubbed “Black Republicans” and were said to advocate “racial equality and race mixing” (“HarpWeek”).

A Period of Civility in Campaign Advertising

At the conclusion of the 19th century, negative campaigning lulled for a period of around two decades, essentially for the first time in American political history (Mark 24). However, a number of significant changes occurred in the late 1800s and early 1900s: Candidates began campaigning on their own behalf, newspapers became less partisan, and politicians began to utilize radio advertising as a method of campaigning (Mark 24). Prior to the late 1880s, politicians did not advocate for themselves (Mark 24). Rather, newspapers did the majority of the campaigning for candidates (Mark 24). This trend changed when Benjamin Harrison utilized the tactic of “front porch” campaigning for the presidential election of 1888, which involved making speeches and chatting with voters (Mark

24). The self-supporting approach spread quickly, as Democratic presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan conducted the first “whistle-stop campaign,” meeting voters in numerous states over thousands of miles by train travel (Mark 24). Mark writes of the change, “When candidates became their own advocates, rules of decorum demanded at least a slightly higher level of rhetoric than the unvarnished criticisms that appeared in partisan newspapers – the theory that undergirds the twenty-first-century requirement that federal candidates stand by and endorse their own ads” (24).

The evolution of newspapers from partisan to nonpartisan media outlets also contributed to the increasingly civil period in campaign advertising (Mark 24). Rather than being partisan promoters and what Mark describes as “central political institutions” in U.S. society, newspapers adopted a new, nonpartisan model designed to objectively report the news (24).

It was during this time period that political parties in the U.S. were most powerful (“No Place” 21). Dennis W. Johnson, author of *No Place for Amateurs*, described political parties, stating, “In the earlier decades of the twentieth century, political parties were the main agents for elections, providing the funds and all-important workers; parties were also the training ground for candidates” (21). Where newspapers had been the main agents of political campaigns, political parties and the candidates they trained and supported took over. Those early political parties, looking to gain supporters and votes for their candidates, avoided

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damaging their reputations by engaging in mudslinging and nasty attack advertisements.

In 1924, radio became a major component of political campaigns and advertising as President Calvin Coolidge spoke over the airwaves (Mark 25). The event was considered radio's political unveiling, as it was the first significant use of radio by a politician (Mark 25). Radio gave candidates the opportunity to reach a greater number of constituents in a much more personal fashion than ever before. According to Mark, candidates did not want to be associated with negative political attack advertisements, and thus refrained from such behavior. He writes, "Like candidates' appearances on the campaign trail, their radio voices would be connected to political ads, making them somewhat more hesitant to bitterly attack political opponents – at least directly" (Mark 24). Radio became an essential tool for political parties and campaigns, continuing until the advent of television in the early 1950s (Mark 25).

The 1930s and the Advent of Modern Media Campaigns

This rosy period of civilized campaigning ceased in 1934, when what Mark describes as the "first modern negative media campaign" occurred in the California gubernatorial contest between Democrat Upton Sinclair and Republican incumbent Frank Merriam (25). Sinclair, author of the famous exposure of the food industry, *The Jungle*, posed a fierce threat to Merriam, and the Republicans launched a monumental media attack on their foe. Greg Mitchell, author of *How Media Politics was Born*, wrote of the campaign, "What was new in 1934 was a

political party's utilization of media experts from outside the party apparatus, the manipulation of the print media to promote a wholly negative campaign, and the first use of motion pictures in a campaign" (38). The Sinclair-Merriam contest also became the most expensive campaign on record – nearly tripling the amount spent in the presidential campaign between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover two years earlier, when the GOP spent upward of \$10 million (Mitchell 38).

With two months remaining before Election Day, Sinclair was the predicted winner (Mitchell 38). Republicans recruited the help of political consultants outside of the GOP, who used Sinclair's novels as ammunition to discredit him (Mitchell 38). Quotes taken from Sinclair's novels were transferred into cartoons, and nearly 3,000 were printed in newspapers across California (Mitchell 39). Hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent on radio attack advertisements, courtesy of the GOP's advertising agency, Lord & Thomas (Mitchell 39). Most notably, the Merriam campaign utilized moving pictures for the first time in history, marking the advent of television advertising in politics. In newsreel-style clips, nice-looking couples and elderly women were recorded endorsing Merriam, but were merely actors hired to read a script. Mitchell wrote, "Disheveled, wild-eyed citizens with thick accents stood up for Sinclair" (40). A Lord & Thomas manager admitted to hiring "the scum of the streets to carry placards: Vote for Upton Sinclair" (Mitchell 39). The attack campaign proved successful, with Merriam defeating Sinclair just two months after he was the favored candidate

(Mark 27). Mark concluded, "The race served as the opening salvo for modern campaign media wars, attack ads, smear campaigns, and professional war strategists" (27).

Negative Advertising and the Threat of Communism

In the 1940s, campaigns began using the impending Cold War to attack liberal candidates as being disloyal to the U.S. and unpatriotic (Mark 28). In 1944, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was accused by his opponent, Thomas Dewey, of having ties to the leader of the American Communist Party, Earl Browder. Browder encouraged his supporters to vote for Roosevelt, leading Dewey to further accuse Roosevelt as being "indispensable to Earl Browder, the ex-convict and pardoned Communist leader" (Mark 29). Nevertheless, Roosevelt won the White House for a fourth term.

As U.S.-Soviet relations withered in the 1950s, the Republican Party used Communism as an assault tactic against the Democrats, who had won control of Congress and the White House with the election of Harry Truman in 1948 (Mark 29). Mark writes, "The GOP launched a relentless campaign to portray the Democrats as soft on Communism" (29). The strategy worked in a number of campaigns. For example, Republican John Marshall Butler circulated a photo of Maryland Senator Millard E. Tydings having a conversation with Browder (Mark 30). Tydings, who appeared to be "listening intently" to Browder, lost by seven percentage points to Butler (Mark 30). "At a time of rampant Communist

hysteria, the photo helped sow seeds of doubt in the minds of free state voters,” said Mark (30).

Negative Advertising in the 1960s and the Advent of Negative Advertising in Television

An important change was occurring that would plunge negative campaign advertising into an entirely new realm: the widespread use of television advertising by political candidates, where candidates’ physical appearance would have heightened importance. Gary A. Donaldson, author of *The First Modern Campaign*, wrote: “By 1960, candidates would campaign on television, travel on jet airplanes to speaking engagements, and engage in long and drawn-out primary campaigns. By then, the candidates’ images had gone a long way toward replacing campaign issues” (viii). Television had been utilized in campaigns prior to 1960. Dwight Eisenhower had political television ads in 1952 and 1956, but they portrayed him speaking to crowds and “being presidential,” noted Donaldson (46). The medium was not used as an important campaign tool until 1960.

John F. Kennedy employed television as a means of gaining recognition in states beyond New England where he was relatively unfamiliar to voters (Donaldson 46). Prior to the use of television, candidates felt primaries were relatively insignificant, demonstrating the importance of television advertising in primaries (Donaldson 46). Now politicians could reach thousands of voters far from their home states. Within a ten-year span, television ownership by

Americans jumped from 11 percent in 1950 to 88 percent in 1960 (Donaldson 112).

Politicians increasingly found ways to take advantage of the use of negative advertising in television. Lyndon Johnson launched a nasty television assault against GOP opponent Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential campaign (Mark 40). Issues took the backseat to attacks on Goldwater, who according to Johnson would “destroy Social Security, end government programs to aid the poor, and potentially launch a nuclear war that could endanger all humanity” (Mark 40). The 1964 campaign was host to one of the most memorable negative advertisements in U.S. history (Jamison, “Packaging” 198). Goldwater, who had “joked about tossing a nuclear weapon into the men’s room of the Kremlin,” was attacked by Johnson for being a danger to mankind (Mark 47). An ad was aired during a popular NBC program, *Monday Night at the Movies*, showing a young girl picking petals off a daisy, counting each petal (Mark 46). When she reached ten petals, she was interrupted by an announcer’s voice, which began counting down from ten (“Classic Political Ad”). The camera zoomed in on the young girl’s eye, and at zero, the screen was filled with a giant nuclear mushroom cloud (“Classic Political Ad”). The ad became known as “Daisy Girl,” and fed on the fears of Americans that the innocence – indeed, the very lives – of their young children could be destroyed by politicians with nuclear ambitions.

Republicans were caught off guard by the substantial television attack campaign waged against their candidate, and a precedent was set for future

campaigns (Mark 40). The smear ads appeared to work, and although they were by no means the only reasons for Goldwater's defeat, Johnson won by an overwhelming 16 million votes (Mark 41). An interesting trend was set by the "Daisy Girl" advertisement: Although it only played one time on commercial television, much of its publicity came from the news media hype that followed on evening news programs (Mark 47). Mark stated, "In a sense, the ad served as a precursor of the 'free media' effect the Swift Boat Vets would have forty years later, when the group's spots, purchased on an initially small budget, attacked the military record of Senator John F. Kerry" (47). It was clear that negative advertisements – especially those that pushed the line – would receive publicity beyond their paid air-time.

The Johnson-Goldwater contest was significant also because it was the first mass media campaign that strayed from party identification (Jamieson, "Packaging" 193). In her book, *Packaging the Presidency*, Kathleen Hall Jamieson noted that in campaigns prior to 1964, a politician had "capitalized on the numerical advantage his party has in voter registration and party preference by stressing that he is a Democrat" ("Packaging" 193). Johnson's campaign marked a shift in negative advertising, where appealing to all Americans was critical and party identification was less significant (Jamieson, "Packaging" 193). This change is seen most clearly in a Johnson ad dubbed "Confession of a Republican" (Jamieson, "Packaging" 195). The ad depicted a Republican actor who chose to stray from his party, unable to support the Republican candidate, Goldwater

(Jamison, "Packaging" 195). Jamieson notes, "The ad is important for its defiant break from the conventions of propositional discourse" ("Packaging" 194).

Post-Watergate Advertising

After Nixon's resignation from the presidency, many Americans felt a sense of betrayal from their government and their elected officials. Candidates were faced with a new challenge, as Jamieson notes: "In a year in which it was widely perceived that the honesty of a presidential candidate and his commitment to constitutional government were on the line, campaign advertising had to find a way to communicate the trustworthiness of the candidates" ("Packaging" 329). Candidates would have to develop advertising strategies that would distance themselves from politics and Washington corruption, and focus on their character and the character of their opponent.

Between 1964 and 1972, few changes occurred in negative advertising. The most apparent theme, according to Jamieson, was the "increasing use of carefully scripted, professionally produced ads in which the candidates themselves often neither appeared nor spoke." This trend would cease in 1976, when the idea of an unidentifiable or invisible power figure would be associated with corruption and deception (Jamieson, "Packaging" 329). Jamieson writes, "What we see in 1976, in fact, is a generalized return by both Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford to direct, old-fashioned, personal appeals and the emergence of persons-in-the-street giving personal testimony and low-key, factual, neutral reporter ads as prime vehicles of attack" ("Packaging" 330).

The advertising goals of Carter and Ford in 1976 were comparable (Jamieson, "Packaging" 346). The campaigns would begin by focusing on the "human" qualities of their candidate, then on their leadership skills, and finally on their future plans (Jamieson, "Packaging" 346). Many aspects of the candidates' character, as well as their policy plans, were portrayed as widely divergent from Nixon's shortcomings during the Watergate cover-up (Jamieson, "Packaging" 361). Later, the Carter and Ford campaigns would shift toward their opponent, focusing on the differences between the candidates and "cutting" their opponent "down to size" (Jamieson, "Packaging" 346).

The producers of attack ads in the 1976 campaign made them with a cautious tone, recognizing that the election was based on the character of the candidates (Jamieson, "Packaging" 364). For example, Ford's ads replayed the doubts of others and then moved to a straightforward reporting of "facts." "These ads encouraged public scrutiny of the details of the Carter dream," wrote Jamieson ("Packaging" 364). Carter's ads were similarly guarded. In one particular ad, Carter addressed the camera with an air of humanity noting, "7.8 percent unemployment is what you arrive at when incompetent leaders follow outdated, insensitive, unjust, wasteful economic policies" (Jamieson, "Packaging" 366). His message, although negative, was aimed at portraying his competence and compassion for others.

Issue Advocacy Advertising Explosion in the 1990s

In the mid-1990s, issue advocacy advertisements increased in the U.S. (Tracey). According to Evan Tracey, chief operating officer of TNS Media Intelligence, a political and media research company, issue advocacy advertisements are the “fastest growing segment of political ad spending.” Issue ads were defined by a 1976 Supreme Court ruling in *Buckley v. Valeo*, which in a footnote stated that if an ad does not expressly advocate for or against a candidate, it is not required to “disclose the source” (Jamieson, “Interview”). Additionally, the group or individual behind an issue advocacy campaign can spend unlimited funds (Jamieson, “Interview”). The issue advocacy rules were intended to allow a greater number of issues to be relevant in elections (Jamieson, “Interview”).

Jamieson, who was interviewed on issue advocacy ads on a PBS special, noted that, “In practice, it is able to set the agenda, that is, focus on issues that might not otherwise be the focus of the campaign, shift the balance of discourse by putting more money behind some messages than others, and when it is coherent and behind a party, create a sense on the part of the electorate of the ideological grounding of that party” (“Interview”).

In 1995, a court case between the Federal Elections Commission (FEC) and the Christian Action Network (CAN) led to a surge in issue advocacy advertisements (West, “Issue Ads”). The FEC felt that CAN violated election laws by not registering as a political action committee, and thus “did not comply with federal rules on disclosure of electioneering activities” in advertisements

criticizing Bill Clinton's stance on gay marriage, noted Darrell West, author of *Issue Ads: 1992 Christian Action Network 'Clintons for a Better America.'*” CAN won the case based on the Buckley v. Valeo stipulation that if a group did not advocate for a particular outcome in an election, it did not have to name itself in the advertisement. “Judge Turk argued that nowhere did the ad specifically mention the November election, tell people they should vote, or ask them to cast a ballot against Clinton,” noted West (“Issue Ads”).

After the ruling, issue advocacy ads increased dramatically (West, “Issue Ads”). West noted, “Recognizing that the current system had big loopholes, groups in quick succession announced plans for issue ads” (“Issue Ads”). Today, issue advertisements have a heightened presence in the political arena. In the 2008 presidential race, more than \$800 million is expected to be spent on issue advocacy ads alone (Tracey).

The Advent of the Internet in Negative Campaigning

The Internet revolution has drastically changed politics and the realm of negative political advertising. Negative advertisements have adopted new formats as the Internet blossomed in the late 1990s and through the beginning of the 21st century. Whether by allowing candidates to raise record-breaking amounts of money or by enabling average citizens to send political messages to millions of viewers, the internet has significantly altered the way political campaigns are conducted.

“Part of the Web’s appeal has been its unbridled nature, and it is showing that it can act as a back alley – where punches can be thrown and things can be said that might be deemed out of place, even if just at a particular moment, in the full light of the mainstream media,” said Jim Rutenberg of the *New York Times*. Campaigns can launch attack ads that will reach millions, yet won’t necessarily gain the stigma they might have in the mainstream media (Rutenberg). Rutenberg notes, “A Web ad, unlike a television commercial, does not fall under new election rules requiring candidates to appear in their own advertisements to voice approval of them.”

Lax rules on Internet political advertising allow candidates, organizations, and Web sites to push the boundaries with accusations made about candidates (Rutenberg). For example, in 2004 a popular news Web site dubbed *The Drudge Report* posted a claim that investigations were underway regarding a supposed affair of Senator John Kerry (Rutenberg). The report, according to CNN political director Tom Hannon, completely lacked proof (Rutenberg). Mark discusses lax Internet advertising requirements, writing: “Candidates are free from the stricture of having to endorse their own Internet spots, which is mandated for radio and television political commercials. As a result, ads that run exclusively on the Internet are often longer and more hard-hitting than those featured on television” (220).

Political advertising on the Internet is becoming increasingly important. This, according to *New York Times* journalist Adam Nagourney, is partially due to

the proliferation of cable television, which has minimized the influence of political ads on television. Today, any individual can create their own political attack ad, post it on Youtube.com, and gain thousands, if not millions, of hits to their video. Additionally, as Nagourney notes, individuals can create “viral attack videos,” which he says are “designed to set off peer-to-peer distribution by e-mail chains, without being associated with any candidate or campaign.”

A Web video paid for by the Bush-Cheney campaign in 2004 attacked Senator Kerry for being connected to special interests, a claim he repeatedly denied (Mark 220). By way of e-mail, the Bush-Cheney campaign sent the video to six million allies of their campaign (Mark 220). According to Mark, “It picked up so much traction that the Kerry campaign felt compelled to respond with an Internet counterattack” (220). Many Internet attack advertisements, such as the video discussed above, are intended to rally party supporters (Mark 220). This allows many of the ads to be longer in duration than the typical television or radio advertisement, which are shown in 15, 30, or 60 second time slots. Mark notes of Internet video ads, “Because those viewing the ad are already likely interested in the political race at hand, they are more apt to sit through and watch the entire show” (Mark 220).

“Campaigns are now studying popular Internet social networks, like Friendster and Facebook, as ways to reach groups of potential supporters with similar political views or cultural interests,” wrote Nagourney. The wildly popular Web site Facebook.com contains evidence of the new genre of negative political

advertising. Any person can join the social networking site and create groups attacking particular campaigns or candidates. For example, more than 902,000 individuals joined a Facebook group dubbed “Stop Hillary Clinton: One Million Strong Against Hillary” (“Stop Hillary”).

Individuals can also create entire Web sites or blogs, a sort of “online diary,” devoted to attacking particular candidates (Nagourney) (“Blog”). “Democrats have set up decoy Web sites to post documents with damaging information about Republicans. They described this means of distribution as far more efficient than the more traditional slip of a document to a newspaper reporter,” wrote Nagourney. These Web sites and blogs can be particularly troublesome, according to Mark. Bloggers rarely check facts before posting attacks on candidates, and rumors are quick to generate and spread across the World Wide Web (Mark 223).

Conclusion

Negative campaign advertising was utilized by the Founding Fathers of the United States and is still a significant trend in politics today, frequently reinventing itself after periods of historical and technological changes. Early attack advertising, most frequently seen in biased newspapers, was incredibly harsh and arguably embodied the most negative advertisements of all time. Despite reaching a lull at the turn of the 20th century, negative advertising was revived in modern media campaigns, which included the utilization of outside advertising agencies and consultants. The advent of television in the 1950s

reshaped the realm of politics, especially in negative advertising. More Americans can now see candidates being attacked than ever before. As cable television diluted the impact of televised political ads and the Internet boomed in the late 1990s, a new form of negative advertising was created. Long gone are the days when it took large amounts of money and influence to create a viable attack ad that would reach a national audience. Today, any person with access to a computer is capable of creating an attack advertisement that can reach millions of individuals. Negative advertising in politics is a trend that will continue through time, changing as new technological mediums are adopted and as historical events impact the way politicians and the electorate view the world.

Despite being a constant presence in U.S. politics, many individuals wonder exactly what constitutes a negative political advertisement, and question whether or not negative political advertising is an effective means of gaining votes. The following chapter will seek to define negative political advertising, and examine the relevant theories pertaining to the effectiveness of negative advertising in politics.

Chapter Two

The Effectiveness of Negative Political Advertising

“Campaigns are not designed to be “feel-good” exercises; they are pitched battles for the control of government.”

– Steven E. Finkel and John G. Geer

What is Negative Political Advertising?

Negative, or attack, political advertisements are a frequent topic of discussion among media pundits, especially during election years, yet are seldom given a succinct definition. A number of scholars have attempted to define negative political advertising. Larry Sabato, a political scientist at the University of Virginia, described negative advertisements, as recorded by Won Ho Chang, Jae-Jin Park, and Sung Wook Shim, authors of *Effectiveness of Negative Political Advertising*, as those which negatively package the truth by “attacking the opponent’s character and record rather than supporting one’s own,” and those containing a “negative tone or substance.” A very similar definition is offered by David Mark, author of *Going Dirty: The Art of Negative Campaigning*, who characterizes negative campaigning as “the actions a candidate takes to win an election by attacking an opponent, rather than emphasizing his or her own positive attributes” (2). Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, authors of *The Interplay of Influence*, define attack ads as those serving the function of discrediting a challenger, which is “usually accomplished by casting suspicion on an opponent’s campaign theme or by raising doubts about an opponent that can be corroborated by news channels” (245).

However, definitions of negative advertising are rarely clear or complete (West, “Air Wars” 46). Darrell M. West, author of *Air Wars: Television Advertising in Election Campaigns, 1952-1992*, observed the broad nature of definitions of negative advertising. “Observers often define negativity as anything

they do not like about campaigns,” writes West (“Air Wars” 46). “Defined in this way, the term is so all-encompassing as to become almost completely meaningless” (West, “Air Wars” 46).

The definitions of negative political advertisements are all relatively similar, varying only slightly among scholars. However, two distinct camps have emerged in the study of negative political advertising. Whereas agreement exists on the definition of negative political advertising, much debate exists regarding whether negative political advertising is positive or negative, beneficial or detrimental, moral or immoral. In one camp, negative advertising is viewed pessimistically or cynically. For example, David Ogilvy describes political advertising as “the most deceptive, misleading, unfair and untruthful of all advertising” (qtd. in Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 724). Dennis W. Johnson, author of *No Place for Amateurs*, describes the cynic’s perspective on negative advertising as well. Johnson notes that some negative advertising crosses the line of decency and morality. “They are evasive and misleading, untruthful, replete with hyperbole and innuendo, they kindle voters’ resentment, suspicion, or envy, or they manipulate personal tragedy for political gain,” writes Johnson (“No Place” 135).

In another camp, negative advertising is viewed not negatively, but positively or neutrally. Mark expands on this approach, writing: “To office-seekers, criticizing an opponent’s voting record is comparative advertising, while spotlighting a rival’s marital infidelity or woeful personal finances is perfectly

appropriate because it raises character issues for voters. What constitutes negative campaigning is usually a matter of perspective; tactics that to one voter seem misleading, mean-spirited, and immoral can impart to another important and relevant information about how the candidate would perform under the pressures of public office” (2). Additionally, negative advertisements can have positive effects within an electorate (Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 723). Paul Freedman, Michael Franz, and Kenneth Goldstein, authors of *Campaign Advertising and Democratic Citizenship*, describe political advertisements as being “rife with both informational and emotional content” that “actually contributes to a more informed, more engaged, and more participatory citizenry” (723). These ads, say Freedman, Franz and Goldstein, produce voters who are “more interested in the election, have more to say about the candidates, are more familiar with who is running, and ultimately are more likely to vote” (723). Johnson elaborates on the positive features of negative advertising, noting that they can be “hard-hitting, factual, determined attacks against their candidates’ opponents” (135).

The Effectiveness of Negative Political Advertising

In the last twenty-five years, negative advertisements have been utilized more frequently in political campaigns (Chang, Park, and Shim). The increased use of negative advertising suggests that campaign strategists believe such ads will help win votes (Chang, Park, and Shim). However, according to Won Ho Chang, Jae-Jin Park, and Sung Wook Shim, authors of *Effectiveness of Negative Political*

Advertising, “Many researchers have conducted studies, but the results are inconsistent.” Paul Freedman and Kenneth Goldstein discussed the inconclusive research on the effects of negative advertising, noting that there are two primary hypotheses regarding such advertising’s effectiveness: the demobilization hypothesis and the stimulation hypothesis. The demobilization hypothesis argues “that negative ads undermine political efficacy and depress voter turnout,” while the stimulation hypothesis states that “such advertising may have an invigorating effect on the electorate” (Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein). The remainder of this chapter will analyze various studies that have been conducted on the effectiveness of negative political advertising.

Research Demonstrating the Demobilization Hypothesis

The demobilization hypothesis is triumphed by Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, authors of *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate*. Ansolabehere and Iyengar argue that attack advertisements, specifically those shown on television, have created a division in America between the politically apathetic and the politically loyal (1). Negative advertising causes voters who tend to be Independents to stray from voting, and increases voting among “loyalists” who tend to vote on a consistent partisan line (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, “Going Negative” 3).

To study the effectiveness of negative advertising, Ansolabehere and Iyengar analyzed 34 U.S. Senate campaigns in 1992 (“Going Negative Excerpt”). Senate races were classified as being either “negative,” “mixed,” or “positive”

(Ansolabehere and Iyengar, "Going Negative Excerpt"). If attack advertisements were utilized by both candidates, the race was considered to be negative (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, "Going Negative Excerpt"). Mixed campaigns stem from races in which "one candidate relied on positive and the other on negative messages, or if both candidates used a fairly even mix of positive and negative messages" (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, "Going Negative Excerpt"). Conversely, a positive campaign was considered if both candidates utilized positive advertisements that did not attack the other candidate but attested to their personal strengths and qualifications (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, "Going Negative Excerpt").

Ansolabehere and Iyengar found that of the 34 states studied, 15 were considered as having negative Senate campaigns, accounting for more than "62 percent of the voting age population" ("Going Negative Excerpt"). Twelve states, accounting for 33 percent of the eligible voters, were considered positive campaigns (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, "Going Negative Excerpt"). And twenty-five percent of the voting age population lived in six states that had mixed Senate campaigns (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, "Going Negative Excerpt"). Races that were close were increasingly negative (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, "Going Negative Excerpt"). "The tighter the contest, the meaner the campaign," noted Ansolabehere and Iyengar ("Going Negative Excerpt").

Campaigns which were considered to be positive had "high" voter turnout, at 57 percent of the registered voters (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, "Going Negative

Excerpt”). Mixed campaigns, by comparison, saw voter turnout drop to 52.4 percent, nearing five percentage points lower than the positive-campaign turnout (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, “Going Negative Excerpt”). Ansolabehere and Iyengar write, “Turnout in the negative races was down even further, to 49.7” (“Going Negative Excerpt”).

Three primary explanations are offered by Ansolabehere and Iyengar for the lower voter turnout produced by negative campaigns. First, people who watch negative advertisements may renege on their support for the candidate being attacked (Finkel and Geer 576). Secondly, people who are exposed to negative advertisements will develop negative feelings toward both candidates involved in the ad, despite one being attacked by the other (Finkel and Geer 576). Steven E. Finkel and John G. Geer, authors of *A Spot Check: Casting Doubt on the Demobilizing Effect of Attack Advertising*, note of this finding, “According to this view, there is a backlash against the sponsor of the advertisement, as well as fallout for the candidate under attack” (576). Finally, Ansolabehere and Iyengar argue that negative advertising decreases voter turnout because individuals’ ideas about politics in general are affected by the negative content of an ad (Finkel and Geer 576). Ansolabehere and Iyengar note: “Negative campaigning may diminish the power of civic duty and may undermine the legitimacy of the entire electoral process. Campaigns that generate more negative than positive messages may leave voters embittered toward the candidates and the rules of the game” (“Going Negative Excerpt”).

An important finding in Ansolabehere and Iyengar's research is the effect that negative advertising has on Independent voters. Finkel and Geer wrote of Ansolabehere and Iyengar's findings on depressed voter turnout, "These effects are strongest among political Independents, whose lack of attachment to the political process is reinforced by the negative tone of many contemporary campaigns" (574). Finkel and Geer note a particular statistic found in *Going Negative*, which found an 11 percent decline in "vote intentions" during the 1992 presidential election (574). Additionally, Finkel and Geer note that "aggressive turnout" in an election fell by two percent in negative campaigns, and rose two percent in campaigns which were considered positive (574). Overall, Finkel and Geer report, Ansolabehere and Iyengar's study attributes a "5 percentage point swing in vote intentions that could be attributed to advertising tone" (575). The demobilizing effect of negative advertisements proposed by Ansolabehere and Iyengar has implications for political candidates. Strategically, negative ads can be used in close contests when candidates desire the votes of hard party-line voters, but do not want the uncertainty of Independent, ticket-splitting voters (Brians and Wattenberg 893).

Ansolabehere and Iyengar arrived at three primary conclusions based on their research. First, "campaign advertising has contributed significantly to the disappearance of the nonpartisan voter," they write ("Going Negative" 146). Next, they conclude that "negative campaigns contribute to the general antipathy toward politicians and parties" (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, "Going Negative"

113). Finally, Ansolabehere and Iyengar state that attack advertising presents “a serious threat to democracy” (“Going Negative” 112). Based on their conclusions, Ansolabehere and Iyengar recommend implementing policy which would regulate negative advertising at the federal as well as state level (Finkel and Geer 575).

Similar results to that of Ansolabehere and Iyengar were found by researchers Kim Fridkin Kahn and Patrick J. Kenney, as detailed in their article, *Do Negative Campaigns Mobilize or Suppress Turnout? Clarifying the Relationship between Negativity and Participation*. Kahn and Kenney studied U.S. Senate campaigns and focused on newspaper and magazine ads, rather than television advertisements (similar to Ansolabehere and Iyengar’s study).

The conclusions of Kahn and Kenney most closely relate to Ansolabehere and Iyengar’s study, yet still demonstrate a degree of complexity and uncertainty regarding the effects of negative political advertising. The effect of a negative ad, according to Kahn and Kenney, depends on whether it is considered “appropriate and useful” or “improper and unseemly” (878). Thus, when information is presented in a manner considered acceptable, the amassing of relevant information increases an individual’s likelihood to vote in an election (Kahn and Kenney 878). However, when the information is considered unacceptable, the opposite effect takes place (Kahn and Kenney 878). “Voters often choose to ignore information when it focuses on tangential topics or is presented in a strident and harsh manner that even political professionals feel is mudslinging. In these circumstances,

people are disgusted by the nature of campaign discourse and choose to stay home on Election Day,” write Kahn and Kenney (887).

Most closely related to Ansolabehere and Iyengar are Kahn and Kenney’s research results pertaining to Independent voters. Independents are less likely to vote when campaigns go negative (Kahn and Kenney 887). These voters, say Kahn and Kenney, have “less interest in politics” and “less knowledge about politics” (887).

Based upon their conclusions, Kahn and Kenney comment that it is not the voters they are necessarily concerned about in the realm of negative advertising (887). “It appears that voters are quite capable of deciding whether campaigns adequately prepare them to cast a ballot on Election Day,” write Kahn and Kenney (887). Rather, the researchers are troubled by the continual and increasing use of negative advertising tactics by politicians and the political consultants who shape the nature of their campaigns (Kahn and Kenney 887). Turnout is depressed by immoral and unreasonable attack advertisements, and Kahn and Kenney question whether politicians and consultants understand this idea (887). Kahn and Kenney offer a message of action to citizens: “Rather than stay home out of disgust on Election Day, citizens need to press candidates, reporters, and editors for explanations concerning the conduct of campaigns” (887).

Research Demonstrating the Stimulation, and Null, Hypotheses

Steven E. Finkel and John G. Geer studied the effect of attack advertising, compiled in their piece, *A Spot Check: Casting Doubt on the Demobilizing Effect*

of Attack Advertising. Their research offered a different conclusion to that of Ansolabehere and Iyengar. “We find that attack advertising does not influence either overall turnout rates or individual self-reported votes. Similarly, we find no demobilizing effect for negative advertisements among Independent voters,” conclude Finkel and Geer (573). While the researchers do not entirely disagree with Ansolabehere and Iyengar, noting that “this process could explain why some individuals’ abstain from voting in a given campaign,” they do ascertain that there are “equally or compelling reasons why attack ads may stimulate voter participation” (Finkel and Geer 577).

Finkel and Geer provide three principal reasons which can in part explain why negative advertising might stimulate higher voter turnout. First, Finkel and Geer write, “Negative advertising conveys a significant amount of policy and retrospective performance information to voters, and it is a truism that more knowledgeable voters are more likely to participate” (577). By offering information to the citizenry, Finkel and Geer conclude that political advertising – whether negative or positive – will mobilize individuals to the polls (577). Secondly, it is asserted that because negative advertisements often contain unanticipated or “non-normative” information, voters can more easily distinguish between candidates’ positions and issues (Finkel and Geer 577). Positive advertisements, by comparison, give individuals less distinguishable and unexpected information, and according to Finkel and Geer, “lead to more abstentions as a result of voter indifference” (577). Finally, Finkel and Geer state

that “negative advertisements may produce stronger emotional and affective responses than positive ones” (577). Individuals may be excited by negative messages appealing to their emotions, and be influenced to vote for a particular candidate. Additionally, Finkel and Geer note that negative advertisements may increase “the degree to which the voter cares about the outcome of the election” (577). Ads that arouse individuals may cause them to seek more information on a particular candidate or issue, and as noted in the first reason given by Finkel and Geer, informed individuals are more likely to vote (577).

Finkel and Geer conducted their own study on the effectiveness of negative political advertising by examining nine presidential elections between 1960 and 1992 (579). To discern the tone of advertisements, the researchers examined each advertisement individually, coding it based upon the issues involved (e.g., the economy) (Finkel and Geer 579). The advertisements were labeled negative, if the ad attacked an opponent, or positive, if the ad upheld the candidates’ personal record or character (Finkel and Geer 579). Additionally, Finkel and Geer used an equation to measure tone: “Our specific measure of tone is the difference between the percentage of positive issue and trait appeals and the percentage of negative issue and trait appeals made in advertisements run by the two major party candidates” (580). Finally, the researchers used data from the National Election Studies (NES) to utilize other factors in the research, including education, age, and income (Finkel and Geer 583).

Finkel and Geer reached several important findings. At the aggregate level, they found that irregular patterns exist within the data from 1960-1992 (Finkel and Geer 582). The 1992 election, for instance, provoked a five percent increase in voter turnout over the 1988 election (Finkel and Geer 582). "In fact," write Finkel and Geer, "of the eight paired elections in the series, turnout and tone move in opposite directions five times, and moved in the same direction only three times" (582). This shows that support for decreased participation is far from decisive. On an individual level, Finkel and Geer found that: "Advertising tone has essentially no effect on turnout in the electorate, once strength of partisanship, standard demographic variables, and media exposure are controlled. When potentially intervening variables are introduced in equation, the effect of advertising tone declines even further" (584). Finkel and Geer note that slightly decreased levels of effectiveness are related to campaigns with a negative advertising tone (586). However, "negative tone is also associated with higher levels of concern about the outcome of the election," note Finkel and Geer (586). Effectively, this neutralizes the impact of advertising found between differing advertising effect equations (Finkel and Geer 586). This is a "null hypothesis," in that the tone of advertising, due to a divergence in results from one equation to another, appears to have no effect on turnout (Finkel and Geer 591).

When analyzing their results on Independent voters, Finkel and Geer found a diverging outcome from that of Ansolabehere and Iyengar. Rather than decreasing voter turnout among Independents, Finkel and Geer's research found

that Independent voter turnout slightly decreases when the tone of advertisements becomes more positive (586). Independent voter turnout was higher in campaigns which were considered negative (Finkel and Geer 586). This research presented a very different conclusion on the effectiveness of negative advertising than that of Ansolabehere and Iyengar.

An important difference to note between the Ansolabehere and Iyengar study and the Finkel and Geer study is that one primarily focused on U.S. Senate campaigns, while the other focused on presidential elections. Ansolabehere and Iyengar hold their hypothesis and conclusions true for presidential campaigns, yet Finkel and Geer noted an important distinction between the two (Finkel and Geer 591). Finkel and Geer state that there is a possibility for Ansolabehere and Iyengar's conclusions to apply in particular scenarios, but not in the case of presidential campaigns (591). "Presidential contests," write Finkel and Geer, "in contrast to congressional or state-level elections, are high-stakes, high-stimulus affairs where the sheer volume of information available might mobilize voters, independent of marginal differences in the information's overall tone" (591).

Based on their conclusions, Finkel and Geer caution against the suggestion of Ansolabehere and Iyengar to implement policies regulating negative campaign advertising (592). The research (including their own), is inconclusive, say Finkel and Geer, and many more studies must be conducted to ascertain the true effects of negative advertising on voter turnout (592). Finkel and Geer write: "As social scientists, we must guard against accepting too quickly a politically appealing

hypothesis. In our view, much more definitive evidence is needed before we ask policymakers to make potentially unwarranted changes in existing electoral laws” (592). Although the researchers do not champion negative campaign tactics, they note that it can be a beneficial phenomenon in a democracy (Finkel and Geer 592). In its essence, competition requires not only discerning the good attributes of one’s self, but also sharing the limitation of one’s opponents (Finkel and Geer 592). “Competition between political candidates promotes the public good,” note Finkel and Geer (592). “Campaigns are not designed to be ‘feel-good’ exercises; they are pitched battles for the control of government” (592).

Similar results were found by researchers Craig Leonard Brians and Martin P. Wattenberg, detailed in their article *Negative Campaign Advertising: Demobilizer or Mobilizer?* Based on data from the NES survey between 1992 and 1996, Brians and Wattenberg found that those candidates who engaged in negative advertising were not adversely affected by decreased turnout at the polls (891).

The 1992 NES survey asked a question regarding the content of advertising during the 1992 election (Brians and Wattenberg 896). “The most common response was a broad statement that there was too much negative campaigning,” wrote Brians and Wattenberg (896). Additional data from the survey indicated increased voter turnout coinciding with viewers’ complaints of frequent negative advertising, rather than the demobilization effect Ansolabehere and Iyengar would predict (Brians and Wattenberg 896). Showing the inconclusive nature of election data regarding the effects of negative advertising, Brians and Wattenberg write,

“Throughout the analysis in this section, we will see that the 1992 data support a mobilization effect for negative ads, whereas the 1996 data show no significant influence of ads on turnout” (896).

The NES surveys studied by Brians and Wattenberg also lead them to believe that Independent voters are not necessarily demobilized by attack advertising. Brians and Wattenberg note of the data, “In 1996, there was a substantially higher turnout rate for independent leaners who recalled negative ads rather than no ads, but among pure independents there was slightly lower turnout” (896). The difference is so slight, they say, there is no way to decisively state that Independents are demobilized by negative advertising (Brians and Wattenberg 896).

Conclusion

Much like the diverging opinions of scholars regarding the definition and nature of negative political advertising, it appears that researchers have failed to find agreement on the effectiveness of negative advertising. The demobilization hypothesis is embodied by the work of Ansolabehere and Iyengar, who state that “negative or attack advertising actually suppresses turnout ... We would even go so far as to say that negative advertisements may pose a serious antidemocratic threat” (Kahn and Kenney). Other researchers have found slightly varying, yet similar conclusions to that of Ansolabehere and Iyengar.

However, the stimulation hypothesis has gained relevance in recent years, with studies conducted by Finkel and Geer, as well as Wattenberg and Brians.

These researchers arrived at very different conclusions than those advanced by proponents of the demobilization hypothesis. Finkel and Geer provide research demonstrating that negative advertisements can actually stimulate voter turnout. Additionally, under some scenarios, Finkel and Geer showed that negative political advertisements had no control over subsequent voter turnout, suggesting that the effects of negative advertising are void.

Inconclusiveness dominates the realm of negative advertising – from its definition to the scholarly research conducted on its effectiveness. “Many social scientists have researched negative ads but have come up with few definitive answers,” writes Johnson (“No Place” 135). As Finkel and Geer make certain, the realm of negative political advertising is in need of further research in order to make any decisive conclusions regarding its effectiveness.

The inconsistent conclusions that varying researchers have found in studying the effects of negative political advertising suggest that perhaps other elements or factors are at work which have not been included in their studies. The following chapter will provide a case study in negative political advertising from Montana, specifically focusing on the 2006 U.S. Senate election between Republican Conrad Burns and Democrat Jon Tester. Whereas the researchers in this chapter have a national focus, either examining U.S. Senate elections across a variety of states or presidential elections, the case study from Montana will offer an opportunity to explore views within one specific state. Chapter Three will focus on the unique political culture of Montana, suggesting that the effectiveness

of negative political advertisements might be influenced by the distinctive culture of a given state or locality.

Chapter Three

Montana: A Case Study in Negative Political Advertising

“Over the campaign's final six weeks, we will be hit by ads so nasty they will make the current spots look like valentines. Expect an onslaught of these vile ads and snarky direct mail pieces that will accuse Republican U.S. Sen. Conrad Burns and his Democratic opponent, Jon Tester, of everything under the sun.”

– Charles S. Johnson

Introduction

Negative advertising, like it or not, is part of the American political system. Montana is no exception. Negative political advertising has been utilized in many political campaigns in the Big Sky State. Take the 2002 U.S. Senate race between Democratic incumbent Max Baucus and Republican Mike Taylor, for example.

The television commercial dubbed “Boogie Nights” became one of the most memorable uses of negative advertising in Montana’s political history (Wilson 6). The commercial featured Taylor, a weak candidate with little financial support, in a beauty shop infomercial “massaging a man’s face with lotion, dressed in 1980s-style disco clothing, wearing gold chains and sporting a full beard,” noted Craig Wilson, a political scientist at Montana State University-Billings (6). “Disco music was added to the commercial, and a voice-over said he had run a student loan scam and been forced to pay more than \$27,000 in government fines” (Wilson 6).

The Montana Democratic Party paid \$100,000 for the commercial, which was so damaging it prompted Taylor to drop out of the race (Wilson 6). Taylor thought the ad was meant to portray him as a homosexual, and called it “personal slander of the vilest kind” (Wilson 6). Although the ad was not the sole factor for Taylor’s departure, its impact was monumental – and unparalleled in the history of negative advertising in the state. The *Billings Gazette* called the ad “negative campaigning at its worst, distracting voters from the real issues,” noted Wilson (qtd. in Wilson 7). Additionally, the *Wall Street Journal* went so far as to state

that the Boogie Nights ad was the “political commercial which had the most impact” (qtd. in Wilson 7). Taylor, angered by the negativity utilized by the Democratic Party as well as Baucus’ refusal to admit he had run a negative campaign, stated, “Can we have a viable democratic process when it’s okay to not just criticize your opponent, but outright destroy them” (Wilson 10)?

The Boogie Nights commercial is just one example of negative advertising at work in Montana. A closer look at negative political advertising in Montana demonstrates that the political culture of a given state or locality might contribute to the effectiveness of campaign advertising.

Montana politics, elections, and residents are unique. This chapter will analyze the state’s politics, focusing on an election which demonstrates the effectiveness of negative advertising. This chapter will first analyze Montana state politics and how it differs from many other states in the union. Next, this chapter will analyze the 2006 U.S. Senate race between Republican incumbent Conrad Burns and Democrat Jon Tester – a contest markedly different than the Baucus-Taylor election – discussing the negative advertising utilized and the subsequent voter turnout. The Baucus-Taylor race demonstrated the powerful effect of a single negative advertisement on an already weak candidate. While it showed an instance when a negative advertisement had a significant effect on a candidate, because Taylor was a weak and unlikely victor before the ad aired, it is not a good example of the true impact of negative advertising. The Burns-Tester race, however, featured two strong candidates competing in a tight race. Either

candidate was seen as having a chance of winning, up to and including Election Day. The race offers a beneficial case study in the effectiveness of negative political advertising on the outcome of elections. Finally, this chapter will conclude by discussing how Montana demonstrates that theories on the effectiveness of negative advertising can vary in differing states and localities, depending on the unique political culture of the area.

Montana: A Unique Political Culture

Montana is a state of abundant terrain with relatively few people living among great natural wonders. Its geography makes Montana the fourth largest state, but just 957,861 inhabitants are spread across those 147,046 square miles (“Mt.gov”). While the national state average of people per square mile is 80, Montana can muster only six individuals per square mile (“Mt.gov”).

Additionally, Montana has very little racial diversity. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, Caucasians represented 92.7 percent of the Montana population (“Mt.gov”). The largest minority group in Montana are Native Americans, who account for six percent of the population (“Mt.gov”).

Due in large part to its vast size, sparse population, and lack of diversity, many consider Montana to be a politically isolated state – cut off from the national political frenzy. Additionally, many would expect low political competition and voter turnout in the state. Party competition theory suggests that Montana would be a one-party state for several reasons. Charles M. Bonjean and Robert L. Lineberry, of the University of Texas at Austin, state in their article, *The*

Urbanization-Party Competition Hypothesis: A Comparison of All United States Counties, “Urban structures are conducive to the existence of competitive party systems,” and, “there is a progressive transition to semi-competitive and non-competitive (one-party) systems as areas are located along an urban-rural ecological continuum” (305). Due to factors such as population, the geographical size of a state, population density, and heterogeneity, a state’s party competition will vary. Because Montana is a large isolated state with a small population, low population density, and little heterogeneity, research would predict it to be a one-party state.

Similarly, the center periphery hypothesis suggests that citizens in rural societies are less likely to participate in politics and vote in elections because they are at the edge, or “periphery,” of society. Cut off from the national political scene, they feel detached from national issues – which citizens on the periphery feel have little relevance to their lives. A sense of being different and cut off from “Washington D.C. politics” is, in fact, present in Montana culture. However, the political culture in Montana is atypical of what many would expect – having strong political competition, significantly high voter turnout, and a consistent alignment with national voting trends. Montana is far from the periphery of American politics, and is so largely because of its unique political culture.

The geography and inhabitants spread across Montana are far from fitting a “one size fits all” mold. “Montana is actually composed of three geographical regions, each with a separate political subculture based on a distinctive economy,

pioneering population, and perspective on the role of government and the rights and obligations of citizens,” writes James J. Lopach, a University of Montana political science professor (15). The three regions found in Montana are the western region, the Hi-Line region, and the southern region (Lopach 17). The diverse political regions of Montana are largely connected to the historical settlement of the state.

The western region of the state was largely settled by urban, ethnic workers who came to Montana as miners. These workers intermixed with southern migrants, and created the Democratic voting blocks still evident in western regions of the state. The area had a strong Catholic base, and was home to many labor unions. East of the Continental Divide, settlers were comprised of rural, northeastern ranchers coming from northern industrial and northeastern states. These individuals formed the large Republican strongholds still evident in current Montana politics. The Hi-Line region of Montana has changed in its political leanings over the years. Until 1930, Hi-Line residents voted almost exclusively for Republicans. After a series of droughts in the region, as well as the Depression, both of which severely affected ranchers and farmers on the Hi-Line, residents called out for government assistance to save their livelihoods. The region went from being solidly Republican to an area more prone to even party competition, often voting Democratic.

Montana was a fiercely competitive political arena even before it became a state. The state has intense Republican and Democratic strongholds – evident in

the diverse groups that settled the state. Montana also has a large group of Independent voters, known for splitting their tickets and having weak partisan ties. Many counties across the state are “up for grabs” in every election, having the possibility of either going to the Democratic or Republican parties.

Montana: A Moralistic Political Culture

All of these factors contribute to the unique political culture inherent in Montana. Political scientist Daniel Elazar offers a theory pertaining to state political cultures, classifying them into one of three categories: individualist, moralistic, or traditionalist cultures (Gray and Hanson 22). Virginia Gray and Russell Hanson write of Elazar’s theory in their book, *Politics in the American States: A Comparative Analysis*, “The values of each subculture were brought to this country by the early settlers and spread unevenly across the country as various ethnic and religious groups moved westward” (22).

Montana fits primarily into the moralistic political culture, with smaller sects of individualist culture found in the western portion of the state. Butte, a western mining, unionized, and working class city, supports an individualist culture. Individualist cultures have lower voter turnout, which is evident in lower levels of turnout in the western portion of Montana where pockets of individualist culture exist. Moralistic states frequently demonstrate high voter turnout and participation – as confirmed by Montana (Gray and Hanson 23). Between 1960 and 2006, voter turnout in Montana had an astonishing average of 73.5 percent (“Sos.mt.gov”). By comparison, the national voter turnout average between 1960 and 2006 was

47.8 percent (“National Voter Turnout”). The eastern portion of Montana, a strong moralist region of the state, boasts incredibly high voter turnout. Between 1980 and 1996, the eastern Montana counties of Treasure and Sheridan reported between 85 and 90 percent average voter turnout in presidential elections (“Sos.mt.gov”). Charles A. Johnson of the University of Kentucky writes in his article, *Political Culture in American States: Elazar’s Formulation Examined*, “According to Elazar, where the moralistic culture is prominent, innovative activity should be high because of a common concern for the popular welfare” (500). Johnson continues, noting, “Concern for popular participation in the commonwealth is identified by Elazar as a dominant characteristic of the moralist political culture; hence, popular participation is encouraged by the state” (“Political Culture” 500). Western counties, by comparison, had voter turnout generally between 65 and 70 percent (“Mt.gov”). “In the individualistic culture, the innovative activity is dependent on citizen demand,” noted Johnson (“Political Culture” 500). “The citizen,” he writes, “is neither encouraged nor discouraged in participating in state politics” (“Political Culture” 500).

Moralist state residents are intolerant of corruption in government, and have high expectations of what is “good” in politics. Oftentimes, moralist state citizens are suspicious of those connected with wealth, and want politicians to be free of party influence, believing politicians should work for the good of the commonwealth, not the good of the party or wealthy interest groups. The government’s primary role is to advance the good of all citizens – who in turn

have a duty to participate in elections. An example of the largely moralist culture present in Montana are the term limits placed on state legislators by constitutional initiative (CI) 64 – a reflection of citizens’ distrust and suspicion of politicians (“Sos.mt.gov”). CI 64 limits state elected officials from holding office for more than eight years in a 16 year period (“Sos.mt.gov). Additionally, the 1972 Montana Constitution requires all state meetings to be open to the public and the media, so government officials cannot conduct their business in secret.

Individualist states, by comparison, emphasize the marketplace, believing that government should have a limited role. Corruption in government is tolerated because politics is thought to be inherently dirty. Traditional states, by comparison, do not expect ordinary citizens to participate in politics. Rather, the political and party elite are expected to govern.

Montana’s unique political culture is reflected in the state’s elections, and offers insight into the effect of a state’s culture in the phenomenon of negative political advertising. The 2006 U.S. Senate race between Conrad Burns and Jon Tester, featured in the following section, demonstrates a very negative race between two strong candidates, and offers insight into the effectiveness of negative political advertising in light of the unique political culture of the state.

Negative Advertising in Burns v. Tester Race

Negative advertisements overwhelmed the airways leading up to the 2006 U.S. Senate race between Republican incumbent Conrad Burns and Democratic rival Jon Tester. Burns, a former livestock auctioneer from Billings, had served in

the Senate since 1988 (Johnson, “Tester Leading Burns” A1). Tester, an organic farmer from Big Sandy, had been a Montana state senator since 1998 (Johnson, “Tester Leading Burns” A1).

The Democrats hit Burns hard with attack advertisements, hyping allegations of ties to disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, from whom Burns had collected nearly \$150,000 (Dennison, “Latest Tester Ad” B1). Blaine Harden of the *Washington Post* wrote: “Statewide television ads, paid for by the Democratic Party, pounded away last fall at Burns’ ties to the lobbyist, half a year before Democrats even had a candidate. In the senator’s first television ad of the 2006 campaign, he had to play defense, declaring Abramoff ‘never influenced me’ ” (A1). Also frequently mentioned in attack ads were Burns’ connections to “big oil” and the government contracting company Halliburton (Dennison, “Latest Tester Ad” B1). For example, in one television ad, Tester stated: “It’s time we stand up to oil company giveaways, no-bid contracts for Halliburton, and billions in pork, including bridges to nowhere – all saddling our kids with more and more debt. This won’t get me contributions from Jack Abramoff, but it’s sure the right thing to do for Montana” (Dennison, “Latest Tester Ad” B1). The Democrats’ negative ads emphasized the idea that Burns had “lost touch with Montana” and had been in Washington for too long (Johnson, “Tester Leading Burns” A1).

Interestingly, much of the negativity surrounding Burns in the 2006 election came from his own actions. The Democratic Party capitalized on Burns’ politically incorrect utterances, framing his mishaps as a political issue and

featuring his mistakes in negative advertisements. For example, Democrats hired staffers to follow Burns and record him at every campaign stop. In one instance, Burns shouted at firefighters in a Billings airport for doing what he called a “piss poor job” (Johnson, “Burns Puts Foot” B1). According to an incident report filed, Burns proceeded to point at one firefighter, saying: “See that guy over there? He hasn’t done a goddamned thing. They sit around. I saw it on the Wedge fire and in northwestern Montana. It’s wasteful. You probably paid that guy \$10,000 to sit around. It’s gotta change” (Johnson, “Burns Puts Foot” B1). The event caused considerable controversy, and showed how a candidate’s own words could haunt him in the press. Particular attack ads featured Burns’ criticism of the firefighters throughout the remainder of the campaign, and flyers detailing the tirade were circulated to voters (Johnson, “Burns Could Never Escape” A1).

Tester was not free from negative attack ads, with Republicans airing a number of commercials depicting Tester as “weak on terror” and dubbing him an “extremist” and “radical” (Dennison, “Tester Ad Selective” B1). In one of the most memorable ads featured in the 2006 campaign, Tester came under attack for his signature flat-top haircut (McNamer A8). The ad pictured an actor dressed as Tester’s barber, who called him “a liberal who is trying to cover up that fact with a conservative haircut,” and finished off by adding that Tester is a “chintzy tipper” too (McNamer A8). The ad gained national attention, and reporters went so far as to interview Tester’s real barber, Bill Graves. Unhappy with the ads, Graves said

in reference to the Iraq War: “Something like \$65 billion was just appropriated to fight that war. And they want to talk about a haircut” (McNamer A8)?

Both sides of the 2006 U.S. Senate race utilized negative advertisements frequently. Reporter Charles S. Johnson wrote in the remaining six weeks of the campaign: “We will be hit by ads so nasty they will make the current spots look like valentines. Expect an onslaught of these vile ads and snarky direct mail pieces that will accuse Republican U.S. Sen. Conrad Burns and his Democratic opponent, Jon Tester, of everything under the sun” (Johnson, “Campaign Nastiness” B1). The candidates and their political parties were not the only contributors to the race’s attack onslaught. Outside interests paid a good bit of attention to the Montana race because of the likelihood that either Democrats or Republicans could gain the majority in the U.S. Senate. Noelle Straub of the *Missoulian D.C. Bureau* wrote: “The magnetic Montana Senate race has attracted hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of TV ads produced and paid for by outside national groups seeking to influence the judgment of voters. While Sen. Conrad Burns, R-Mont., his Democratic challenger Jon Tester and the two parties have blanketed the airwaves with their messages, some outside groups – many based in Washington, D.C. – have also stepped into the state with their own ads” (B1). The outside interests who created negative ads in the 2006 U.S. Senate race in Montana included the Free Enterprise Fund, the National Rifle Association, the Public Campaign Action Fund, and VoteVets.org (Straub B1).

Polling Data

As the particularly negative race between Burns and Tester came to a close, it was left to Montana voters to decide who would be their next U.S. senator. Ansolabehere and Iyengar's research appeared to be consistent with the Montana race, showing, "The tighter the contest, the meaner the campaign" ("Going Negative Excerpt").

With one month remaining before the election, Burns and Tester were "about even," according to Johnson ("Poll" A1). The October 2006 Mason-Dixon Polling & Research poll showed Tester having a three percent lead over Burns (Johnson, "Poll" A1). However, nine percent of voters reported being undecided, and Tester's lead was within the four-percentage-point margin of error (Johnson, "Poll" A1).

The October poll also reported positive, negative, and neutral name recognition by the individuals polled. "Burns had 42 percent favorable name identification, 43 percent unfavorable and 15 percent neutral," wrote Johnson ("Poll" A1). By comparison, Tester "had 43 percent favorable name identification in October, 33 percent unfavorable and 24 percent neutral," Johnson wrote ("Poll" A1). Delving further into the data, twenty-seven percent of voters polled stated they were casting their vote "against a candidate," of whom "65.5 percent were Tester supporters and 34.5 percent Burns backers," said Johnson ("Poll" A1).

With the election incredibly close in the final moments, it was unclear who would emerge the victor. Ultimately, Montanans chose to dismiss their senior

senator, picking Tester – but by a narrow margin. Tester had 3,562 more votes than Burns, out of 411,061 total votes cast (“Mt.gov”). Wilson told Johnson shortly after the election, “I think the single most important factor overall was the Abramoff issue going on so long” (“Burns Could Never Escape” A1). A poll conducted by Wilson at Montana State University-Billings found that of those polled, 73 percent “rated the Abramoff and ethics issue as a problem for Burns” (Johnson, “Burns Could Never Escape” A1). Wilson was not alone in his views on the significance of the Abramoff issue. Jerry Calvert, a political scientist specializing in Montana state politics at Montana State University, told Johnson: “I think the long-term hammering on Burns on the ethics issue, beginning last year with television ads and unremitting ads taking him on over Abramoff were a major factor. It was sort of carpet-bombing the viewers (with that issue) the last couple of weeks” (“Burns Could Never Escape” A1). Noting exit polls, Calvert said that over half of those polled (58 percent) felt that Burns’ ethical standards were not high (qtd. in Johnson, “Burns Could Never Escape” A1). Additionally, Wilson noted that Burns’ own words criticizing firefighters may have been the “dagger in the heart” for his campaign. Wilson said to Johnson: “It brought in outside groups (like the International Association of Fire Fighters). In a close race, that could have made a difference” (“Burns Could Never Escape” A1).

The negative attacks launched against Burns appeared to have an effect, at least by heightening the issues which Montanans believed to be important. While the most memorable attack ads waged against Burns focused on ethical issues,

memorable negative ads against Tester sometimes focused on non-substantive issues like his hairstyle. The negative advertisements were by no means the only factor in Burns' defeat. However, they appeared to have an effect on Montana voters – many of whom are Independents and ticket-splitters. Voter turnout did not appear to be affected by the negativity of the campaign, with 63 percent of registered voters casting ballots in the election (“Sos.mt.gov”). Turnout in 2006 was almost ten percentage points higher than the previous two non-presidential election years, with 54.5 percent voter turnout in 2002 and 53 percent voter turnout in 1998 (“Sos.mt.gov”).

Additionally, there is evidence that eastern Montana counties with highly moralistic cultures went from a majority of citizens voting for Burns in 1994, to voting in increasing numbers for Jon Tester in 2006 (“Sos.mt.gov”). For example, in 1994, 62 percent of the voters supported Burns, whereas 35 percent voted for Democrat Jack Mudd in Yellowstone County (“Sos.mt.gov”). By comparison, in 2006, 49 percent of voters cast ballots for Burns, whereas Tester garnered 47 percent of the votes in Yellowstone County (“Sos.mt.gov”). Both the 1994 and 2006 elections were non-presidential, off-year elections. Yellowstone County went from voting overwhelmingly for Burns in 1994 to just narrowly voting for him in 2006 (“Sos.mt.gov”).

In Sheridan County, another moralistic eastern Montana region, similar results are evident. In 1994, Burns won 68 percent of the votes, whereas Mudd received only 30 percent (“Sos.mt.gov”). In 2006, however, Tester garnered a

majority of Sheridan County votes, winning just over 50 percent of the vote (“Sos.mt.gov”). Burns, by comparison, won 45 percent of Sheridan County votes (“Sos.mt.gov”). There was a 23 percent decrease in ballots cast for Burns in 2006 compared to the 1994 election in Sheridan County (“Sos.mt.gov”).

Yellowstone and Sheridan counties demonstrate two eastern Montana regions with strong moralist strains which altered their voting behavior drastically in two off-year elections. Moralists’ tendency to be wary of political connections to wealth and interest groups and their intolerance of corruption in politics may have been a contributing factor to the change in voting, for Burns in 1994 and then Tester in 2006. This data suggests that the political culture, not party affiliations, altered the outcome of the 2006 U.S. Senate election in Montana.

**Conclusion: The Effectiveness of Negative Political Advertising in
Varying Political Cultures**

Negative political advertising has taken root in American campaigns. From the country’s inception, it has been utilized by American politicians, and continues to be an ever-present force in elections. While the tactics employed in negative advertising have evolved with historical changes and as technology has advanced, negative advertising itself has no end in sight.

Despite its frequent utilization, research is largely inconclusive on the effectiveness of negative political advertising. Scholars upholding the demobilization hypothesis, such as Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar,

have found that negative advertisements cause Independent voters to abstain from voting, as they are turned away by the negativity. Conversely, these scholars note an increase in voting by strong partisan individuals. Scholars upholding the stimulation hypothesis, by contrast, including Steven E. Finkel and John G. Geer, have found contradictory conclusions to that of the demobilization hypothesis. Finkel and Geer provide research demonstrating that negative advertisements can actually stimulate voter turnout. Additionally, under some scenarios, Finkel and Geer showed that negative political advertisements had no control over subsequent voter turnout.

The contradictory research present in the study of negative political advertising suggests that perhaps scholars are missing an element in their research. Research on the effectiveness of negative political advertisements has primarily focused on national trends – either U.S. Senate races in a number of states or presidential elections. However, little research has been conducted on the effect of negative advertising in local and statewide political races. While the conclusions found in this thesis are not definitive research results, they point to an important finding that is worthy of further consideration.

States and localities encompass unique political cultures, stemming from their settlements and the political cultures present. The United States is a vastly diverse nation, with each state embodying very different cultures. Even within states, cultures can vary in different cities and regions, and thus be affected differently by negative advertising. In Montana, a largely moralist state, negative

advertisements attacking Burns on his ethical mishaps may have been enough to sway voters in traditionally Republican-leaning counties. Corruption in politics is not tolerated by moralist cultures, and this proved effective in the 2006 campaign. The individualist political cultures in the state, which are more aware and tolerant of corruption in politics, are traditionally found in Democratic-leaning counties, proving to be insignificant for Burns. In fact, the Democratic center of the state, located in Butte, is the most individualistic cultural area in Montana.

In addition, the moralist culture inherent in Montana boasts consistently high voter turnout. The negative tone of the 2006 U.S. Senate race did not alter voter turnout on Election Day. No evidence showed that Independents were dissuaded from voting by the negativity.

The advertisements attacking Burns played upon values significant to Montana's political culture, including corruption, morality, and trust in government officials. The success of the Tester campaign demonstrates that when negative advertisements feed into a particular cultural perspective, they can have beneficial effects for the sponsor of the ad, and detrimental effects for the individual under attack. The negative advertisements sponsored by the Burns campaign seemed to ignore important values in Montana's culture. Rather, the most memorable advertisement attacking Tester featured an attack on his hairstyle, an insignificant issue in the lives of Montanans.

The case study in Montana, although not offering definitive conclusions on the effectiveness of negative political advertising, shows that when researching the

topic, more weight must be focused on the unique political cultures being studied. Americans cannot be grouped into one succinct type of people, just as Californians, Europeans, or even Montanans cannot. The political culture of a state or locality essentially can influence how their residents are affected by negative advertising. Montana is just one example which illustrates this theory.

The results found in the case study on Montana suggest that the political cultures present in states and localities can change the way voters are affected by negative campaigning. This idea is largely ignored by contemporary research, and ultimately is worthy of further consideration. Negative political advertising is sure to be present in many future elections; understanding how the phenomenon affects voters is important to understanding the nature of American politics.

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