

Negative Political Commercials: A 1988 Snapshot

By Peter B. Orlik

Though perceived as a child of television, the practice of attacking one's opponents via negative advertising is at least as old as political handbills. Indeed, American historian Henry Adams has called much of politics itself *the systematic organization of hatreds* — so it should be no surprise that direct vituperation is the stuff of which a good deal of political advertising is made.

Certainly, the electronic media have given negative approaches a new, and perhaps tailor-made form. "Our communications are now geared to quick takes," asserts New York Governor Mario Cuomo. "You call them bites in radio and television. That requires that you be simple and if you're going to be simple, negativism is one of the simplest of all emotions. Hate, I think is easier to project than love. Everybody responds to it. Everybody understands it. Quickly. And I think that's where the answer is. If you've got to communicate in 28 seconds, then negativism is probably a good bet" ("Campaigning according to Cuomo," 1986).

Nevertheless, clear front-runners often avoid launching negative political announcements because they do not wish to be perceived as bullies. A long-shot candidate, conversely, can exploit negative advertising with much greater safety because he or she can play the role of underdog who is only trying to get a fair hearing. But no matter who employs them, negative attacks are almost never made by the actual candidate; instead, they are assigned to other voices while the candidate profits from, but stays above, the fray.

PACs have impact

The unrestricted growth of PACs (political action committees) in the United States has also given impetus to negative advertising. This is because PAC money is more likely to be used to *defeat* someone rather than to *support* a candidate, who, if named, might have to publicly account for PAC funds as political contributions. Yet, even without the influence of such special interest groups, negative advertising would

remain part of the radio/television landscape because the challenger's inevitable burden is to demonstrate that the incumbent has done something *wrong*.

Many political consultants argue that responsible, accurate, and relevant negative advertising does make a contribution by informing the public of inconsistencies, failures, or abuses of which they should be aware. That this information is provided as part of an effort to elect the defendant's opponent does not, by itself, make the practice wrong, unprincipled, or misguided. As long as the criticism is valid and verifiable and meshes with the accuser campaign's overall strategy, there is no fundamental reason why negative advertising should not remain an option. The negative radio spot (presented on page 3), from a 1988 state legislature campaign, sticks to the facts and exposes opponent vulnerability without resorting to personal vilification.

Surrogates left to make negative attacks

As stated earlier, candidates themselves try to remain dignified by letting their surrogates articulate the negative attacks. In the spot shown on page 3, for example, Walberg's opponent is not even identified in the soundtrack. In certain circumstances, however, candidates make points with the voters by showing they have the conviction to at least associate themselves with the charge's thrust. See the script on page 4. If the political commercial (or *polispot* as it is known in the trade) is well fashioned, the candidate can still appear statesmanlike—and candid as well.

Up to now, we have focused on attacker strategies. But what strategies should the attacked candidate pursue? Roddy and Garramone (1988, p. 418) suggest two fundamental procedures that may be employed: positive and negative. "In positive-response commercials," they write, "targeted candidates make no reference to their opponents' attacks, but instead, present their own arguments about the topic of the attack commercial." This avoids any intimation of mudslinging while still helping to set the record straight. In the positive-response spot presented on page 5, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's 1988 campaign answers his opponent's charge that Free Trade is a sell-out by citing newspaper editorials that laud Mulroney's Free Trade efforts.

This is a positive attack response because challenger John Turner, the perpetrator of those charges, is never mentioned, nor, for that matter, are the charges themselves.

Focusing on opponents

"In negative-response commercials," on the other hand, explain Roddy and Garramone, "targeted candidates call attention to their opponents' perversion of the truth and present their own arguments about the topic of the attack commercial. This response strategy is labeled negative because, by claiming that opponents have distorted the truth, candidates are disparaging those opponents." (p. 418) In the latter half of their campaign, the Mulroney forces turned from the positive to the negative response in an attempt to get unfavorable polls moving their way. Thus, in the spot presented on page 6, we find John Turner and his charges both identified and assaulted.

In their study, in which subjects were exposed to fictitious polispsots, Roddy and Garramone found that, "Viewers evaluated the positive-response commercial more favorably than the negative-response commercial. It might be speculated that viewers prefer candidates to 'take the high road,' that is, ignore attacks and not indulge in mudslinging tactics. But the negative-response commercial was more effective in

discouraging voting for the [original] attacking candidate" (p. 425). As if to validate these findings, that is exactly what later transpired in the Mulroney campaign. For the first half of the contest, the electorate responded unenthusiastically toward Mulroney as he reacted positively to Turner's attacks. But his prospects improved dramatically when he adopted a negative-response strategy. Voters may have "liked" his later ads less, but they were of much greater help in his ultimate victory.

Indeed, if any lesson is to be learned from 1988 North American election campaigns, it is the necessity to counterpunch when assaulted by the other side. Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was an apt pupil in this regard; U.S. Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis was not. The Dukakis campaign waited far too long to challenge directly the charges leveled by its Republican opponents. Instead, it relied on image commercials plus a peculiar series of "packager" spots, which showed Bush advisors portrayed by actors talking about their fraudulently imaged candidate and how they planned to distort Dukakis' record. The technique was so oblique, however, that many viewers didn't understand it and some mistook it for another Bush message. "Viewers want a sense of two people running," lamented Democratic pollster Harrison Hickman. "They are not interested in how the sausage gets made" (Battaglio, 1988).

Failure by the Dukakis campaign to respond quickly to Bush's "Revolving Door" commercial (presented on page 7) and the "Boston Harbor" attack, in which the governor was accused of doing nothing about water pollution, critically wounded the Dukakis effort. As political reporter Michael Riley observed, "Dukakis spent the fall on the defensive rather than taking charge of the agenda. He entered the campaign a blank slate, and Bush scrawled all over him. (*Time*, 1988).

For candidates under attack, 1988 apparently demonstrated that, while avoidance of direct retaliation may be the high-minded thing to do, high-mindedness is only feasible for unbeatable incumbents. Even then, unless that incumbent is so beloved by constituents that attackers are automatically perceived as deranged, negative or negative response options must remain readily available in the broadcast campaign arsenal.

References

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- Campaigning according to Cuomo. (1986, November 10). *Broadcasting*, p. 121.
- Riley, M. (1988, November 21). Anatomy of a disaster. *Time*, p. 38.
- Roddy, B., and Garramone, G. (1988). Appeals and strategies of negative political advertising. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 32, 415-427.
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A 'Negative' Spot that Sticks to the Facts

SFX: CHILDREN PLAYING OUTSIDE;
SCHOOL BELL RINGS.
FADE CHILDREN SOUNDS UNDER AND OUT.

ANNCR: School's just about out for the summer and it's time for report cards. Let's take a look at Tim Walberg's report card. Subject: quality basic education for Lenawee County schools. Tim Walberg's grade:

SFX: RUBBER STAMP HITTING - VOOMP.

ANNCR: Failed! Walberg has opposed basic teacher certification. Subject: improving Lenawee County schools. Tim Walberg's grade:

SFX: RUBBER STAMP AGAIN.

ANNCR: Failed! Walberg voted against computer skills and drop-out prevention programs. Subject: affordable college education. Tim Walberg's grade:

SFX: RUBBER STAMP AGAIN.

ANNCR: Failed! Tim Walberg opposed funding for public universities and colleges. Subject: Protecting our children. Tim Walberg's grade:

SFX: RUBBER STAMP AGAIN.

ANNCR: Failed! Walberg voted against tough child abuse legislation. Hasn't Tim Walberg failed the children of Lenawee County long enough? Isn't it time we flunked Tim Walberg? In November, defeat Tim Walberg! Paid for by the Michigan Democratic Party.

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