



CANDIDATES BEGIN AD CAMPAIGNS FOR 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Even though Election Day is nearly five months off, President Bush and Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., are already spending millions of dollars on television and radio advertising, hoping to reach the majority of Americans who will learn about the candidates in 30-second commercials.

With the explosive growth of television during the 1950s and '60s, the role of campaign ads has increased in significance in American elections.

One of the first ads appeared in 1952 with Republican candidate Dwight Eisenhower's animated commercial, "I Like Ike," produced by the Disney Studio. Eisenhower reached over 19 million TV viewers, while his opponent endured arduous campaign tours to meet voters. Eisenhower won the election by a landslide.

By the 1960 presidential campaign between Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy and Republican candidate Richard Nixon, nine of every ten American homes owned a television set, making the campaign ad an extremely popular and effective means to communicate with voters.

Since those early campaigns, the format of the ads has changed dramatically. For instance, candidates in the 1950s and '60s would buy up to 30 minutes of television airtime for a commercial. Today, candidates purchase anywhere from 15 to 60 seconds to run their commercials.

Though the format and style of ads has evolved, their main purpose continues to be to summarize and reinforce public impressions of the candidates, positive or negative.

The Bush/Kerry Ad Fight

Analysts expect the 2004 presidential campaign to be one of the most expensive and perhaps negative, as the two lead candidates, Sen. John Kerry, a Democrat from Massachusetts, and President George W. Bush, a Republican, battle to woo voters. Though the campaign season is just beginning, Kerry and Bush have already begun saturating the airwaves with ads.

Since the Democratic challenger is less well known, the president's media strategy has sponsored commercials intended to undermine the image Kerry has worked to carefully craft in his ads.

For instance, a recent 30-second spot titled "Pessimism" -- an apparent rebuttal to Kerry's "Optimists" ad -- critiques the senator's comments that America's economic recovery is the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

"Pessimism never created a job," a narrator says over an image of a sour-faced Kerry. Then, President Bush defines *himself* as the optimist: "I'm optimistic about America because I believe in the people of America."

At least 70 percent of the 17 ads President Bush aired between March and June were critical of Kerry, according to the nonpartisan Campaign Media Analysis Group. By contrast, Kerry ran ten ads of which 75 percent highlighted his own life or agenda. Roughly 25 percent of those ads directly criticized President Bush, the group estimated.

Evaluating political ads

So, how should voters evaluate these ads?

The first thing to do is watch for the candidate's personal approval of the ad, as a way to ensure the message was not created by another group that does not represent the candidate.

Due to the new McCain-Feingold law -- which set rules on raising and spending campaign funds -- the presidential candidates must run a statement or appear in their own ads long enough to say, "I approved of this message." The idea is that candidates will take responsibility for what they claim in their ads, and engage in fewer attacks, or "mud-slinging," against their competitor.

The campaigns have already spent a record \$100 million on television ads between March and early June, primarily in "swing" states, where it is hard to judge whether the president or Kerry will win.

Exaggerated or Misleading Claims?

Brooks Jackson, who analyzes political ads for FactCheck.org, finds that many of the campaign ads more or less "stick to the facts, though selectively and with a bit of puffery."

In one Kerry ad, called "Lifetime," a narrator provides basic facts about Kerry's early life and highlights of his achievements in the Senate, including "his decisive vote" for an economic plan in the 1990s that "created 20 million new jobs."

Jackson calls the "decisive vote" a "dubious claim" and points out that "many factors led to the economic boom of the 1990s," not just Kerry's vote.

The Bush reelection campaign has engaged in its own "puffery" or fact selection. One ad, called "Doublespeak," quotes various newspaper comments chiding Kerry for his "doublespeak," or flip-flopping, on his stance on the Iraq war and other issues.

While the quotes are accurate, Jackson notes, the commercial omits the fact that nearly all the quotes are from editorials, not news reports. "In other words they are opinions, not facts," Jackson states.

Both camps argue that their ads are positive and accurate. Which communications strategy will ultimately be successful? We'll know come November.

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