



## CANDIDATES GO NEGATIVE IN CAMPAIGN ADS

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*In this election year, politicians are utilizing negative advertising to reach voters, despite the risk that such tactics tend to annoy the very people they are trying to impress.*

With the elections only weeks away, politicians are using negative advertisements to cast doubt in voters' minds about their respective opponents.

And because control of Congress is at stake, this year's crop of negative ads are sparing no punches and leaving nothing to the imagination.

### **Going negative**

A negative political ad is one in which the focus is not on the positive aspects of a candidate but rather on the negative aspects of a candidate's opponent.

Even though many Americans claim to have a strong distaste for negative ads, political experts contend that they are more effective than positive ads.

"People sometimes tune out positive ads but a negative ad draws more attention," said Henry Kenski, a professor at the University of Arizona and the director of Senator Jon Kyl's, R-Ariz., Southern Arizona office. Kenski is a co-author of "Attack Politics: Strategy and Defense."

Going negative in a campaign can have unintended consequences and, in some cases, can actually backfire. According to Kenski, this can happen in two ways: when the claim that is made in the ad is excessively negative, or when the person making the claim is not credible.

"When people are turned off and the [ad] has gone over the top, the claim is not credible," Kenski said.

### **Willie Horton and Daisy Girl**

A classic example of an effective negative political advertisement is the Willie Horton television ad from 1988. In the ad, presidential candidate George H.W. Bush successfully portrayed his opponent, then-Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, as soft on crime.

The ad detailed how Horton, a convict in a Massachusetts prison, escaped and murdered two people due to Dukakis' policy of allowing prisoners to go on weekend "furloughs."

The ad was denounced by some as unfair to Dukakis because it insinuated that, if elected, he would let prisoners out of jail. However, it also garnered a tremendous amount of media attention and helped shape the public's negative perception of Dukakis.

Perhaps the most infamous political ad was Lyndon Johnson's Daisy Girl television spot.

Shown in 1964, during one of the darkest periods of the Cold War, the ad showed a young girl picking the petals off of a daisy before being obscured by video of a nuclear mushroom cloud explosion.

The ad was extremely effective in portraying Johnson's opponent, the hawkish Senator Barry Goldwater, in a negative light by playing on the public's fear that he would start a nuclear war if elected.

Despite the fact that it was only shown once, the Daisy Girl ad permeated the news media after its airing.

### **The 2006 elections**

Even though there is no presidential election this year, negative political ads are still playing throughout the country.

In Florida's 22<sup>nd</sup> House District, Democratic state Senator Ron Klein has attacked his opponent, Republican Representative Clay Shaw with a TV ad that features the mother of a U.S. soldier serving in Iraq slamming Shaw for his support of the war.

In Tennessee, the Republican Party ran an ad against Democrat Harold Ford so loaded with innuendo that even Ford's Republican opponent, Bob Corker, denounced it.

John Geer, a political science professor at Vanderbilt University, told NPR that the commercial made "the Willie Horton ad look like child's play."

In Kenski's opinion, this year's ads have reached a new low in terms of negativity. He said he believes that politics have become "more negative" in recent years and that this "makes it more difficult to pull together and run the government down the road."

But Kenski also noted that often the effectiveness of a negative political ad has little to do with its likeability.

"We know from psychological research that people are more likely to remember a message in a negative ad than in a positive ad," he said, even if the viewers are disgusted by it.

Despite the fact that Americans don't particularly care for negative political ads, candidates have discovered that they are effective at planting seeds of doubt about their opponents, and may even make people excited for Election Day, if only because it means an end to the barrage of annoying commercials.

-- *Compiled by David Schultz for NewsHour Extra*

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