The Dynamics of Negative Political Advertising: History, Thematic Designs, and Effectiveness

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The Dynamics of Negative Political Advertising: 
History, Thematic Designs, and Effectiveness

by

Erik J. Bolinder

During the last decade, political observers have marked a trend in political advertising toward more negative attacks on opponents. Many of these attacks have been criticized as untrue, unfair, and sometimes unethical. Many journalists have started analyzing the advertising campaigns as much as the candidates themselves. Major newspapers such as the Los Angeles Times and Washington Post have devoted daily columns to the analysis of negative political advertisements during a campaign. This report examines the dynamics of negative political advertisements by exploring their history, thematic designs, and effects on voting behavior. Although most political experts agree that negative political advertisements may be an effective tool in winning votes for the sponsor, the reverse, or the boomerang effect, is possible. This report also demonstrates the possibility of such an occurrence by examining negative political campaigning in the 1990 race for Congress in Utah’s third congressional district.

Introduction

Throughout our nation’s history, politicians have often engaged in negative political campaigning. Even the respected and highly revered George Washington was attacked and distressed by stories that he was a dolt, a thief, and a philanderer who offered his beautiful slave woman to Mount Vernon’s visitors. Upon winning the race for the presidency and entering the White House, Thomas Jefferson said, "I am the target of every man’s dirt" (Pfau and Kenski 1990, 5).

The emergence of newspapers in the late 18th century--some owned and operated by political party leaders themselves, and most openly endorsing specific political views--fueled the development of negative political campaigning. The newspapers became the "voices of the political party that controlled them" (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland 1991, 4). Abraham Lincoln was attacked in his campaigns as an ape and depicted in political cartoons as a clown and a fiend. During the 1884 presidential campaign, Grover Cleveland survived vicious newspaper attacks and political cartoons that claimed he fathered an illegitimate child (Pfau and Kenski 1990, 5).

The development of electronic media in the 20th century raised the level of negative political advertising to a new high. Radio and television opened up a new and larger audience for candidates, especially on a national level. As Pfau and Kenski point out, "those new channels of communication were viewed as more potent vehicles for political persuasion and for transmitting negative messages" (1990, 6).

The first television campaign advertisements were aired during the 1952 presidential campaign. A Madison Avenue marketing consultant, Rosser Reeves, produced commercials for Eisenhower and the Republican Party. Reeves, already well known for his success in selling Anacin and M&M chocolates through television commercials, used the same principles that worked so well for those products to sell Eisenhower as a candidate. Reeves narrowed the campaign to three major themes: the Korean War, corruption, and rising taxes. Just as he stuck to simple themes in his product commercials,
Reeves had Eisenhower recite simple statements centered around one of the three themes for each commercial (Diamond and Bates 1988, 56).

During the early years of television, few negative political advertisements were featured. However, the Eisenhower campaign aired one of the first: an antiwar statement. "Two soldiers are pictured discussing the meaningless [sic] of war on a Korean battlefield, and when one is suddenly killed, the other futilely charges the enemy while an off-camera voice booms, 'vote Republican!'" (Sabato 1981, 169). Negative advertisements became far more institutionalized on television during the 1964 presidential campaign:

It produced the most famous, and possibly the most effective, negative political commercial ever shown, a message that was so controversial that the Johnson campaign pulled it after one showing. The so-called 'daisy' spot...introduced the sights and sounds of spring surrounding a little girl picking flowers. It ends with a vivid nuclear explosion as President Johnson intones off camera about the stakes in the presidential election (Pfau and Kenski 1990, 7).

Today, negative political advertising has become commonplace among local, state, and federal campaigns. Estimating that a third of all television spot commercials in recent campaigns have been negative, Sabato says increased negative advertising is the single most obvious trend in campaign communication (1981, 165). Over 450 million dollars were spent in the 1986 House and Senate races and over 50 percent of that amount was on negative political advertising (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991, 3). To understand why this proliferation of negative political advertisements is occurring, one must look at the dynamics of today's negative political ads. This report will discuss the thematic designs and use of negative political advertisements, examine the effectiveness of negative ads on voting behavior, and study the possibility of the boomerang effect resulting from negative political campaigns by examining the impact of negative campaigning on the 1990 race for congress in Utah's third congressional district.

Definitions

An understanding of the term "political advertisement" in the context of this discussion is important. A political advertisement may be defined as a message supporting a candidate or issue that has been paid for by the campaign or supporters of the candidate or issue. Political advertising generally falls into the following four basic categories:

1. **Polispots** - Television and radio commercials that run from 1 to 5 minutes in length.
2. **Newspaper Ads** - These range from tiny classified in rural weeklies to full page displays in big city dailies.
3. **Direct Mail** - Mass mailings of computer generated letters carefully targeted to prospective voters.
4. **Vertical Media** - This is campaign paraphernalia like bumper stickers, buttons, yard signs, banners, key chains (Young 1987, 66).

Most of the research used in this report focusses on the analysis of the first category: polispots.

The term "negative political advertisement" should also be defined. Kaid and Johnston offer an appropriate definition:

Negative ads and positive ads are generally distinguished by their relative emphasis on the sponsoring candidate and his or her opponent. Negative ads focus on criticism of the opponent, while positive ads focus on the 'good' characteristics, accomplishments, or issue positions of the sponsoring candidate (Kaid and Johnston 1991, 53).
Thematic Designs

The negative political advertisements of today have increased in complexity and sophistication from just three decades ago. As shown in Table 1, Johnson-Cartee and Copeland identify a number of standardized-thematic designs that have emerged in negative political campaigns (1991, 72). Five overarching thematic designs are considered: being your own worst enemy, the people against you, transfer, us against them, and disparagement humor. A variety of subcategories are also listed.

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**Thematic Designs of Negative Advertisements**

**Being Your Own Worst Enemy**
- Your Ad in Their Negative Spots
- Your Political Gaffes
- Your Political Experience
- Your Political Character
- Your Flip-Flops on the Issues
- Your Past Promises and Pitiful Performances
- Your Voting Record (Actual Voting or Whether You Voted)
- Your Choice for Vice President
- Your Decision Not to Debate

**The People Against You**
- The Voters Turn Against You
- The Home Constituency Turns Against You
- The Party Faithful Reject You
- Your Own Party Primary Opponents Attack You

**Transfer**
- Your Comrades and Supporters
- Events that Happened on Your Watch
- Historical Comparisons
- Paid Political Help

**Us Against Them**
- The Cowboys vs. The Yankees
- Us Against Foreigners
- Class Warfare
- The anti-Washington Mentality

**Disparagement Humor**

**Being Your Own Worst Enemy.** Sometimes political candidates become their own worst enemies when their opponents use their past performances or words against them. A candidate's record, character, and important decisions often become the targets of attack. Even the lack of a past performance becomes suspect. A candidate is sometimes criticized for the fact that he or she has little political experience for the office he or she is seeking.

**The People Against You.** From time to time almost every candidate will encounter a degree of rejection from those perceived to be on the same side of the fence—usually the same political party or the same geographic area. Attack statements made by opposing candidates in the same party during primary campaigns are often used against a candidate. Negative statements may also be made by those living in the same hometown or state as the candidate. An opposing candidate will sometimes capitalize on this rejection and attempt to make it look like even the opponent’s closest allies are turning against him or her.

**Transfer.** The character of a candidate’s supporters may sometimes be a liability. If groups or individuals who are unpopular or have unaccepted views support a specific candidate, this fact may be used against that candidate as an attack on the candidate’s own views or character. This technique is called transfer. This approach may also be used to tie the candidate to a negative event that occurred during his or her term in office like a depression, a war, or an outbreak of civil unrest even though the candidate may not be specifically responsible. Furthermore, if a candidate resembles an unpopular personality from our history, an historical comparison may also be made.

**Us Against Them.** The us against them approach may often be compared to the David and Goliath story. A picture is often painted of a candidate siding with an immense, threatening bully from the outside. Perhaps this is most often accomplished by painting the opponent as a Washington insider with big bucks who cares more about his or her status inside the beltway rather than the welfare of the people back home. This approach sometimes pits the working class against the upper class or rural folks against "city slickers." In industrialized areas like Michigan or Ohio, candidates have used their opponents’ relationships with foreign industrialized countries like Japan as a threat to their own security and well-being. The us against them approach always depicts one candidate as the home team (and often the underdog) and the opposing candidate as the outsider.

**Disparagement Humor.** A candidate may use humor to attack his or her opponent’s intelligence, voting record, or honesty. Disparagement humor is defined as humor that "disparages, belittles, debases, demeans, humiliates, or otherwise victimizes" others (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991, 122). Disparagement humor has a long history in American politics stemming back to early political cartoons depicting candidates with exaggerated distinguishing physical characteristics. Research indicates that the most popular strategy in negative ads appears to be humor or ridicule (Kaid and Johnston 1991, 60) often combined with another thematic design.

**Using Negative Advertisements.** A basic understanding of how negative political advertisements are designed leads to two more important questions: when are they used and who uses them the most? Kaid and Johnston analyzed 830 television spots from eight presidential campaigns to examine the answers to these questions. Findings from
their study dispel some of the conceptions of the use of negative advertisements.

Although many have charged that negativism drastically increased during the 1988 election cycle, Kaid and Johnston found that the level of negative advertisements in 1988 was the same as that of the two previous years (1991, 57). As shown in Figure 1, the 1964 election year still holds the record for the amount of televised negative advertisements. After that year, a steady increase over time in negative advertising has taken place.

Kaid and Johnston also found that neither incumbents nor challengers have a monopoly on the use of negative political advertisements (1991, 58). As shown in Figure 2, the use of negative political ads are very similar between these two groups.

Sometimes one political party will blame the other for excessively using negative advertisements. Kaid and Johnston found that no strong relationship exists between political party and the use of negative ads (1991, 58).

**Figure 1**

**Negative Televised Presidential Ads**

![Graph showing negative televised presidential ads from 1960 to 1988. The graph indicates a steady increase over time.]

As shown in Figure 3, Democrats have used only slightly more negative political ads than Republicans.

Kaid and Johnston also studied the difference between the appeals of negative and positive advertisements (1991, 59). They found that, contrary to critical opinion, negative ads did not rely much more on emotional appeals than positive ads. As shown in Table 2, emotional appeals were used in 89 percent of all negative ads and in 86 percent of all positive ads. Additionally, negative ads contained logical appeals more often than positive ads, but positive ads were more likely than negative ads to use ethical appeals.

The Effectiveness of Negative Ads

Determining the effectiveness of negative political advertising on voting behavior is hindered by the limitations of studying the effects of political advertising

Figure 2
Electoral Position In Pos/Neg Ads 60-88

Percent

Legend
Positive
Negative

Incumbent
Challenger

Electoral Position

in general. Because so much simultaneous activity occurs during a campaign, it has been difficult to isolate the effectiveness of one specific activity like political advertising. The effectiveness of political advertising on television is still largely undetermined:

Kay Israel did a 1983 study of the existing academic literature on political advertising and found little that went beyond the standard textbook conclusion offered by Bernard Berelson of the University of Chicago in the pre-television 1940s. Berelson wrote that 'some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions, have some kinds of effects.' For this cautious adagio we are tempted to say to Berelson, 'Thanks a little' (Diamond and Bates 1988, 351).

More conclusive research suggests that people pay attention principally to messages that reflect their preexisting views (Diamond and Bates 1988, 351). For example, those who have already chosen to vote for Bush are the most attentive audience for Bush campaign

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3**

**Political Party in Pos/Neg Ads 60-88**

Legend
- Positive
- Negative

ads. Conversely, those who oppose Bush are less attentive to a Bush ad or will listen to the ad, argue with it in their minds, and then reject it.

In the case of political campaigns, the "some kind of people" (as previously mentioned by Diamond and Bates) the experts say they are trying to reach are those who are not highly partisan or who have not decided on a candidate:

Campaign specialists function on the basis of their research, which suggests that highly partisan individuals are best reached by direct mail or limited circulation print advertising, whereas television ads are most effective with the body of the U.S. electorate who are not partisan and are thus persuadable (Kern 1989, 6).

Perhaps politicians are addicted to using television advertising in campaigns because it enables them to reach thousands and even millions more people than they otherwise could. But why use negative messages? As Ehrenhalt indicates, although the effectiveness of political advertising in general is still

---

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appeals</th>
<th>Positive Ads (n=588)</th>
<th>Negative Ads (n=242)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>logical</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotional</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ethical</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ethical</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in question, most experts agree that negative messages are more influential than positive messages:

> While there is room for argument about whether negative ads will damage the political system in the long term, there is no argument about their short-term impact, they work and they win elections. Voters pay attention to them (Ehrenhalt 1985, 2560).

Democratic pollster, Mark Mellman explains the success of negative political ads as follows:

> One of the fundamental facts of psychology is that negative information is processed more deeply than positive information. People say they hate the stuff, but that’s not the point. The point is, they absorb the information (cited in Pfau and Kenski 1990, 3).

The sophistication of both the thematic designs and the technology itself has added to the effectiveness of negative ads:

> More politicians, including incumbents, are inclined to use negative and comparative message strategies, partly because they know that some consultants can demonstrate which messages work and which don’t, and partly because they know that their opponent has the same strategic opportunity and technology at his or her disposal (Pfau and Kenski 1990, 4).

The conclusion that negative political advertising is more effective than positive political advertising is rarely argued. However, negative ads could still have undesired effects. Using negative advertising strategies could be a "damned if you do and damned if you don’t" situation.

**The Boomerang Effect**

One of the undesired effects of negative political advertising that has been researched and documented is the boomerang effect:

Negative political advertising may achieve its intended effects, but it may also produce boomerang effects. A strong attack on a candidate, if perceived by the audience as untruthful, undocumented, or in any way unjustified, may create more negative feelings toward the sponsor, rather than toward the target (Garramore 1984, 251).

The 1990 race for Congress in Utah’s third congressional district may provide an example of the boomerang effect. Since its creation in the early 1980s, the third congressional district has maintained the reputation of being one of the "nation’s most Republican congressional districts" (Barone and Ujifusa 1991, 1253). Election results from the past decade substantiate that reputation. As shown in Table 3, voters from Utah’s third congressional district voted overwhelmingly in favor of Republican Ronald Reagan over Democrat Walter Mondale in the 1984 presidential election and in favor of Republican George Bush over Democrat Michael Dukakis in the 1988 presidential election (Barone and Ujifusa 1987, 1207; 1989, 1233).

Results of the past four congressional elections prior to 1990 also show a heavy domination by the Republican party. As shown in Table 4, the smallest margin of victory between Republicans and Democrats in these races occurred in 1986 when Republican Howard Nielson received 67 percent of the vote and Democrat Dale Gardiner received 33 percent of the vote (Barone and Ujifusa 1987, 1208). Nielson received 77 percent of the vote in 1982 and 75 percent of the vote in 1984 (Barone and Ujifusa 1985, 1363). In 1988, Nielson received 67 percent of the vote while his opponent, Democrat Robert Stringham, received only 31 percent of the vote. Election results like these led experts to believe that the congressman elected in 1990 to replace retiring Nielson would "surely be chosen in the 1990 Republican primary" (Barone and Ujifusa 1989, 1233). Why then were the results so completely...
different in the 1990 race for Utah's third congressional seat? Democrat Bill Orton beat Republican Karl Snow by almost as large a margin as the Republicans have been beating the Democrats--Orton received 58 percent of the vote while Snow only received 36 percent. These results may be linked to the negativity of the campaign.

Polls conducted by Bardsley and Neidhardt Incorporated (of 300 registered voters, margin of error +/- 5.7%) and reported in the Salt Lake Tribune November 4, 1990 showed Snow leading Orton in September by 43 to 31 percent with 26 percent undecided. By the middle of October, Snow still led by 50 to 35 percent with 12 percent undecided. But, by the first day of November Snow's lead shrunk to 44 percent over 38 percent for Orton with 14 percent undecided--a race too close to call.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vote for President in Utah's Third Congressional District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Candidate's Political Party (General Election)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>1984 Vote</th>
<th>1988 Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>153,584</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>43,293</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The race was characterized as by far the most negative campaign in the history of the district and perhaps the most negative in the history of Utah politics. Most attacks between Snow and Orton occurred during October:

Neither candidate will emerge from the campaign unwounded. Orton was questioned about tax penalties he owed on a vehicle he brought to Utah from Oregon years ago. Snow has been plagued with allegations about the depth of his involvement with penny-stock swindler Michael Strand (Adams 1990, 1B).

Despite the negative campaigning and the fact that Snow's lead was dwindling, local analysts still predicted the usual Republican victory:

Snow [will win]--not by an avalanche--but comfortably, and Orton's political career is over almost before it began. Scandal aside, it is the most Republican district in the nation (Lythgoe 1990, 1E).

| Table 4 |
|------------------|------------------|
| Utah's Third Congressional District Campaign Election Results 1982-1988 |
| Election | Candidate | n | % |
| 1982 general | Howard Nielson (R) | 108,478 | 77 |
| | Henry Huish (D) | 32,661 | 23 |
| 1984 general | Howard Nielson (R) | 138,918 | 75 |
| | Bruce Baird (D) | 46,560 | 25 |
| 1986 general | Howard Nielson (R) | 86,599 | 67 |
| | Dale Gardiner (D) | 42,582 | 33 |
| 1988 general | Howard Nielson (R) | 129,951 | 67 |
| | Robert Stringham (D) | 60,018 | 31 |

During the last days of the campaign--two days before the election--supporters of Snow added more fuel to the campaign’s negative fire. They placed an ad in the *Utah County Journal* showing a picture of Karl Snow with his large family next to a picture of Orton, who is single. Captions under the respective pictures read "Karl Snow and his Family" and "Bill Orton and His Family." Some experts say Snow was "hurt" by the placement of the ad (Barone and Ujifusa 1991, 1253). Orton himself said the ad backfired on Snow:

People called saying they could not vote Republican after seeing that ad. I think it was a miscalculation on their part. They thought that would destroy my campaign by alienating me from the voters. It didn’t work (*Salt Lake Tribune* 1990, 2A).

That advertisement, along with the negative nature of the campaign from the beginning, may have led would-be Republican voters to abandon their party loyalty and vote for Orton.

Figure 4

3rd District Vote Motivation

![Figure 4](image_url)

Legend
- Orton Vote
- Snow Vote

Source: 1990 KBYU/Utah Colleges Exit Poll.
A comparison of the results in the 1990 third congressional elections to all the other elections in the district's history alone would seem to indicate the strength of the boomerang hypothesis. However, an analysis of voters who voted in the primary and general election prove its existence even more solidly. As shown in Figure 4, the 1990 KBYU/Utah Colleges Exit Poll indicates that a large percentage of those who say their vote was a vote against the opponent voted for Orton. Conversely, a much smaller percentage of those who voted for Snow said their vote was a vote against Orton.

The fact that 74 percent of those casting protest votes—a vote against the opponent—were for Orton and against Snow indicates a strong disapproval of Snow as a candidate. There was also a substantial amount of defections among those who voted for the two Republican front runners (Snow and Harmer) in the Republican primary election. As shown in Figure 5, the 1990 KBYU/Utah Colleges Exit Poll indicates that 33 percent of those who voted for Karl Snow in the primary voted for Orton in the general election and 68 percent of those who voted...

**Figure 5**
Primary Votes in General Election

![Primary Votes in General Election graph](chart.png)

Source: 1990 KBYU/Utah Colleges Exit Poll.
for John Harmer in the primary voted for Orton in the general election.

Although it may be difficult to show a direct causal relationship between the Snow family ad and the outcome of the general election in the third congressional district, the race has been characterized by two distinct descriptions: the amount of negative campaigning was far greater than ever before and the results were completely different than ever before. Polls conducted before the placement of the Snow family ad made no indication of a landslide victory for Orton. The negative tone of the campaign together with the Snow family ad could have had the most effect on those in the category of "undecided" in the polls prior to election day and those whose decisions were not solid.

A relationship does appear to exist between the negative campaign in the third district and the vote against Karl Snow. However, too many limitations also exist to use the race as definitive proof of the boomerang theory of negative political advertising. Several other independent variables may have affected the outcome of the election: the negative tone of the Republican primary, Republican party infighting, the personalities of the two candidates, the platforms of the two candidates, and the conservative views of Orton despite his partisanship. Direct empirical research of voter reaction to negative advertisements would need to be conducted to prove the boomerang theory.

The timing of the Snow family ad could also have been a big factor in the outcome of the election. Based on their observations, some professional consultants suggest the following:

a wave of negative ads frequently reduces the attacker's poll standing a few points. But those numbers nearly always bounce back within a few days. Meanwhile, the target of the attack loses considerably more support—and that slippage lasts much longer (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991, 14).

There were not a "few days" to make up for what may have been lost ground from the placement of the Snow family ad.

Conclusions

Although their use has changed over the course of our history, negative political advertisements have always been a part of our political system. This will probably remain true in the future. The craft of developing negative political advertisements—with their many thematic designs and strategies—has evolved into somewhat of a science. However, determining the true effects of negative political advertisements—or political advertisements in general—is still the greatest challenge to political practitioners and communication researchers.

Experts do agree that when it comes to basic messages, which is the goal of most political advertisements, a negative message is usually remembered more than a positive message. So as long as politicians feel the need to advertise their candidacy, the use of negative political advertisements will continue and perhaps escalate. But, negative ads will sometimes cause negative effects. What the sponsor says about the opposing candidate, if it is perceived to be untruthful or unfair, could backfire on his or her own success in a campaign.
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