

Campaign Advertising

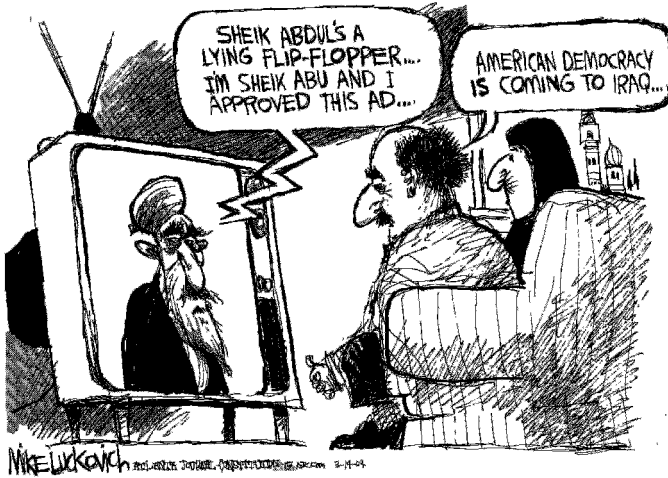
The Whipping Boy of American Politics

AMERICAN-STYLE DEMOCRACY may or may not ultimately take root in Iraq, but Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Mike Luckovich has a point in any case, and it's an important one: For most people, the idea of exporting to an emerging democracy the kind of campaign ads Americans have come to know—and supposedly loathe—is a joke (see cartoon on page 2). The notion that American-style campaign advertising might find a place in a democratic Iraq is simply laughable. Campaign advertising, according to conventional wisdom, is a corrupted form of democratic discourse—something we would be better off without, and something which we need to be on guard against.

In the election of 2004, when all was said and aired, more than three million political spots for candidates up and down the ballot had been broadcast in the nation's 210 media markets.¹ More than \$800 million was spent on television advertising in the race for the White House alone, more than in any presidential campaign in history (Seelye 2004). In all, the presidential candidates and their party and interest group allies broadcast more than one million ads in the 2004 election, well more than twice the number aired four years earlier.

What kind of impact did this campaign advertising have when it came to what citizens thought and knew and how they acted during the course of an election campaign? What difference did the disparate patterns of advertising in 2000 and 2004 make? Did people know more or less about the candidates and their positions as a result of how many ads—or which types of ads—they saw? Did they feel more or less connected to the campaign and the political system in general? And were they more or less likely to vote on Election Day as a result of what they saw?

Our objective in this book is to provide answers to these types of questions, making sense of campaign advertising using data from the 2000 and 2004



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elections, and, in the process, evaluating campaign advertising in the larger context of democratic citizenship. To be clear, this book is not about how campaign advertising influences voters' opinions of candidates or the outcomes of elections. It's about how campaign advertising affects citizens' grasp of the alternatives in a campaign, their evaluation of the electoral process, and their inclination to participate in it.

Damned Spot!

Nobody, it seems, has a kind word to say about the thirty-second spot. Television advertising is a favorite whipping boy of American politics. Campaign ads, according to their many critics, are misleading, manipulative, and mean-spirited. The typical campaign ad—nasty, brutish, and short—is thought to produce citizens who are alienated, poorly informed, and disengaged from the political process. “Campaign ads dumb down the terms of political debate and reduce nuanced policy positions to buzzwords and slogans,” complains a recent critic (Macek 2004). Particular scorn is reserved for negative or “attack” ads, which are thought to debase politics, degrade democratic citizenship, and turn off potential voters.²

Many of these suspicions are enshrined in the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA), the most recent effort to reform the federal campaign finance system. The legislation, signed into law in 2002 and upheld in 2003 by the Supreme Court, requires candidates for federal office to “stand by their ads,” stating explicitly that they approve the ad’s message (just as Luckovich’s Sheik Abu does). Yet no such disclaimer is required for other campaign communications such as print ads or political mail.³

BCRA’s other main provisions were also driven by concerns about television advertising. The law bans parties from raising soft money (contributions not

restricted by source or amount) and prohibits interest groups funded by corporate or union money from airing any television ad mentioning a candidate for federal office within sixty days of a general election (and thirty days of a primary) unless the spot is paid for with regulated “hard money.” BCRA says nothing about the content of direct mail or newspaper advertisements.

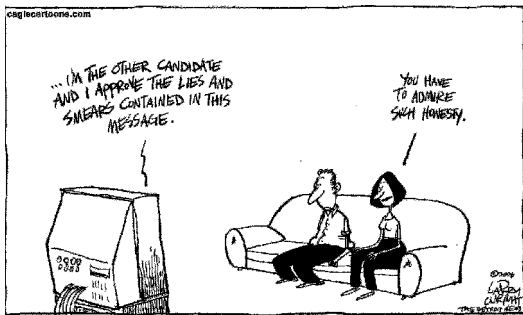
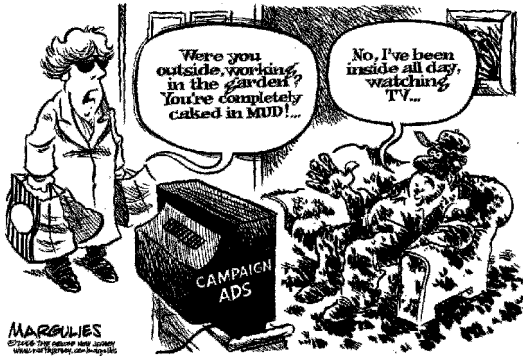
So there would seem to be something wrong, something suspect, something inherently troubling about TV political advertising, which Madison Avenue pioneer David Ogilvy once called “the most deceptive, misleading, unfair and untruthful of all advertising” (Zhao and Chaffee 1995, 42). Richard Lau and Gerald Pomper argue,

In the pre-television era, the mass media were thought to have minimal political effects, largely reinforcing attitudes and commitments, but television has apparently changed all that. When skillfully used, television’s multiple modes of communication and powerful ability to orient attention can invite strong, unthinking negative responses in low involvement viewers (2004, 2).

Consider the following proclamation from an editorial in a small newspaper in Maine:

Those who defend negative campaigning do so on the basis that an opponent’s public record, positions and behavior are legitimate objects of critical evaluation during an election campaign. And so they are. The trouble is that in a 30-second ad there is little room for anything resembling honest discussion. What viewers usually get are out-of-context distortions and worst-possible-light references to an opponent’s record, more often than not raising pointed questions about the motives and integrity of the person under attack. . . . If a sustained diet of attack ads merely convinces voters that all politicians are crooks, liars, incompetents and cheats, who really does win in the end? The losers are left with reputations in tatters and the survivors inherit an institutional position that they have spent an entire campaign thrashing. The truth is it doesn’t work. The truth is that we all lose.⁴

Finally, consider the following editorial cartoons for additional evidence of the extent to which such negative perceptions of campaign advertising are embedded in the political culture and popular discourse. No campaign ad writer would contemplate accusing a political opponent of kicking a cat, but that is precisely the kind of thing that cartoonists believe, and the conventional wisdom suggests, a campaign ad writer might do (if only to stay in practice).



We hold a different view, and our argument in this book is a simple one: When it comes to campaign advertising, the conventional wisdom is wrong. We see no convincing theoretical reason why television advertising should be expected to have such a deleterious effect on American democracy. Far from being the bane of democratic citizenship, there are good reasons to believe that political ads may actually educate, engage, and mobilize American citizens. To be sure, we do not expect these effects to be massive; as decades of research on political communication have demonstrated, the impact of campaign messages of any type is likely to be relatively marginal. Nevertheless, at a time when citizens are assailed for being politically uninformed and electorally disconnected, campaign ads may serve an essential democratic function, one that should be recognized by political scientists and the general public alike.

Our “priors” on this topic and the arguments we make are similar to those John Geer (2006) has made in his excellent and comprehensive examination of negativity in presidential advertising over

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the past four decades. Geer's book focuses on the content of ads and on negativity in presidential elections. Here, we employ data that enable us to take a more comprehensive look at the use and targeting of ads in all sorts of contests, and that allow us to develop measures of ad exposure to test the effect of advertising on voter turnout, voter knowledge, and a range of other political behaviors.

We begin our examination by taking a more detailed look at what the critics of political advertising have in mind when they take aim at the most widely used tool of campaign communication in American politics today.

The Case against Campaign Advertising

Three strands of criticism in particular are leveled at campaign advertising. First, as suggested by the editorial cartoons and enshrined in the BCRA provisions, television advertising is seen as a debased form of campaign discourse that should be distinguished from loftier forms of communication, such as stump speeches, debates, convention addresses, and in-person appearances. This distrust of television advertising often seems to reflect an older, more general distrust of the mass media as a forum for political communication. Indeed, one can detect the vestiges of an old and menacing "hypodermic" model of media influence, in which mass communication was thought to have potentially huge persuasive effects, getting "under the skin" in a variety of direct, indirect, and even subliminal ways.

This model—rooted in fears about the role of the media in the rise of fascism during World War II and the spread of communism in its aftermath—was largely undermined by subsequent scholarship that demonstrated minimal media impact on people's political attitudes and behavior (Berelson et al. 1954; Lazarsfeld et al. 1948). Nevertheless, the torrent of criticism of campaign advertising bespeaks a lingering suspicion that, left unchecked, these nefarious and misleading political messages will infect, confuse, and corrupt the American public.

To be sure, there clearly are features that set television ads apart from other forms of campaign communication. First, when a candidate is on the stump or at the podium, there are few questions about who is doing the speaking, and this fact may provide some degree of a constraint on the kinds of claims candidates make. "I'm not questioning Governor Bush's heart," Al Gore was quick to point out during an October 2000 stump speech, "I'm questioning his priorities."⁵ Television ads, in contrast, are produced and paid for by a variety of players; it's not always clear whose message is being presented, as an ad produced by a candidate can be almost indistinguishable from one made by a political party or interest group. As a result, the gloves may be more likely to come off on television than on the stump.

Another important difference between campaign ads and other campaign activity is that citizens must actively seek out exposure to other sorts of campaign

communications. Even media coverage of candidate speeches is something that citizens must make an effort to encounter. By contrast, television advertising comes to them. Citizens see campaign ads when they are watching television—often television that has little to do with the candidates and campaigns.

As a result of these differences, whatever one thinks of the BCRA “stand by your ad” provisions, they do reflect an important point: Television advertising is indeed a distinct form of political communication, and what makes television advertising distinct has implications—both good and bad—for democratic citizenship.

These concerns are closely related to a second strand of criticism: that there has been a change in the nature of campaigns in recent years, and that campaigns and campaign ads have grown increasingly negative. Such claims have become a predictable staple of campaign reporting for more than two decades.

Writing about the 1980 presidential contest between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, for example, chief *New York Times* political reporter Adam Clymer quoted Lois Haines of Goshen, Ohio: “People are being turned off by dirty politics, our country did not start out that way.” And second-grade teacher Patricia Williams complained that “there’s an awful lot of mudslinging” (Clymer 1980).

Eight years later, in an article about the 1988 contest between George Herbert Walker Bush and Michael Dukakis, Paul Taylor and David Broder bemoaned “the most negative—and among the most effective—presidential campaigns waged in the television era” (Taylor and Broder 1988). In 1992, writing about the race between Bill Clinton and incumbent President George H. W. Bush, chief *New York Times* political writer Richard Berke grumbled, “the view from America’s living rooms is not a pretty one” and “the campaigns are leaving unmistakably depressing images” (Berke 1992). And, in 2006, current chief *New York Times* political writer Adam Nagourney kept up the tradition with an article titled “New Campaign Ads Have a Theme: Don’t Be Nice” (Sept 27, 2006).

Is television advertising really to blame for the sorry state of campaign discourse? “Anybody who blames television for the practice of opponent-bashing betrays an innocence of the history of American politicking,” notes television critic Walter Goodman. “Candidates have in fact become noticeably more polite in the last 150 years” (Goodman 1989). There is a long and proud tradition of campaign mudslinging in American elections. As the *Washington Post*’s Dana Milbank observes

Implicit in the media coverage is an assumption that we’ve turned our backs on some golden era of high-minded campaigning. But when, precisely, was that age? Was it before Thomas Jefferson’s opponents called him ‘a mean-spirited low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed Indian squaw’? Or was it after the pols called Abe Lincoln (who engaged in many nasty attacks during the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas Senate campaign debates) ‘the original gorilla’ and mocked his ‘hideous apelike form’? (Milbank 2000)

Exactly. Negativity in American political campaigns is nothing new. Election campaigns have always been hard-hitting, muddy affairs. “Nobody ever said democracy is supposed to be a tea party,” election analyst Richard Scammon once quipped. “It’s rough, it’s bawdy, it’s brawling, it’s crude, and it’s almost always been that way” (Taylor 1988). Indeed, candidates and their supporters historically were just as vituperative, just as misleading, and just as mean-spirited in speeches, pamphlets, and broadsides as their modern counterparts have been in their television spots (Jamieson 1996).

In the election of 1828, for example, Andrew Jackson “was accused of multiple murders, of extreme personal violence, and of having lived in sin with his wife Rachel.” Jackson’s opponent, John Quincy Adams, “was attacked for his legalistic attitudes and reportedly for having procured young American virgins for the Russian Czar as the primary achievement of his diplomatic career. Adams’s critics mockingly referred to him as ‘His Excellency,’ while Jackson came under attack as an ill-mannered, barely civilized backwoods killer of Indians.”⁶ In the absence of television advertising, Jackson’s and Adams’s supporters were forced to make their case through “election materials such as campaign buttons, slogans, posters, tokens, flasks, snuff boxes, medallions, thread boxes, match boxes, mugs, and fabric images.”⁷

In the introduction to their book on negative campaigns in Senate elections, Lau and Pomper cite the work of Noble Cunningham (1972) on the presidential election of 1800, during which John Adams was denounced as “head of the monarchical party in the United States intent on excluding from office honest Americans, who braved the perils of a long and bloody war.” Thomas Jefferson, on the other hand, was attacked as someone who would “trample those morals that guard the chastity of our wives and daughters from seduction and violence.” Lord Bryce characterized American elections as a “tempest of invective and calumny . . . thick with charges, recriminations, till the voters know not what to believe” (Lau and Pomper 2004, 1). Still, if campaigns in general are not necessarily more negative than they once were, there is evidence that campaign advertising in particular has grown more so in recent decades. Geer (2006), for example, calculates that in 1960, fewer than 10 percent of “appeals” made by candidates in their ads were negative, rising to 30 percent four years later and peaking at 45 percent in 1996 before settling back to 39.5 percent in 2000. Using different measurement approaches (and slightly different pools of presidential campaign ads), William Benoit (1999), Kathleen Hall Jamieson et al. (2000), and Darrell West (2001) all document similar trends. If hard-hitting campaigns are nothing new, the propensity of political actors to deploy such weaponry on television does seem to have increased in recent years. The key question is: with what effect?

This brings us to the third strand of criticism when it comes to advertising, and the one we challenge in this book: that political advertising has a causal and corrosive effect on American citizens and on American democracy. As we saw above, scholars and pundits alike have assailed the thirty-second spot in recent years,

taking campaign advertising to task for producing a disengaged, ill-informed, and alienated electorate that is ill-equipped and disinclined to shoulder the responsibilities of democracy. Implicit—and frequently explicit—in most critiques is the claim that advertising is the culprit for declining voter turnout and increasing political ignorance. Election campaigns are in sorry shape, citizens are worse, and there is a causal connection between the two. As David Broder bemoaned in the aftermath of the 2000 election, “These ads are killing our democracy” (2002).

As we noted above, concerns about political advertising in general and negative advertising in particular led to the 2002 BCRA requirement that every campaign ad in federal elections include a full-screen view or “clearly identifiable photographic image” of the candidate with the candidate’s voice claiming responsibility for the content of the ad. This “stand by your ad” provision had long been advocated by reformers on the assumption that candidates would be less likely to engage in negative attacks if they were required to appear in and take responsibility for the content of an ad. The BCRA provision was added by Representative (and political scientist) David Price (D-NC), who modeled the requirement on a similar regulation in North Carolina law. Price explained in a press release, “The American people are sick of the relentlessly negative tone of campaigns, particularly in presidential races. ‘Stand By Your Ad’ isn’t just about restoring civility to campaigns. It’s also about restoring people’s faith in our political process” (Price press release, Jan 21, 2003).⁸ As a result of these changes, many predicted that campaign advertising, deprived of the oxygen of unlimited party and interest group soft money, would decline in importance. By 2004, the argument went, people were sick and tired of thirty-second spots; Stand By Your Ad meant that the scourge of negative advertising would disappear from the nation’s airwaves. More generally, broadcast ads would give way to the narrowcasting of the Internet and the micro-targeting of in-person, mail, and telephone contacts. Wall Street analysts even went so far as to suggest that those companies who owned local TV stations would see their profits decline because of the steep drop in political advertising revenues. In short, according to the experts, the era of big television advertising was over.

But reports of the death of television advertising have been greatly exaggerated. Television advertising was alive and well in 2004. It started early, it was strategically targeted, and it was as negative as ever. Most of all, there was lots of it. And 2008 promises much more of the same.

By the time the 2008 presidential nominees have been selected (earlier this season than ever before), the airwaves will have been saturated with campaign advertising that first started almost a year earlier. In fact, the first presidential election ad of the 2008 cycle—a primary ad for Republican candidate Duncan Hunter—was broadcast in Iowa in January 2007 (followed closely by ads for Republican Mitt Romney of Massachusetts). By Election Day, hundreds of millions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of ads will have flooded targeted media markets in competitive states. Should we be concerned?

Hand-wringing over the state of American democracy—and confidence about particular causes and cures—is certainly a longstanding tradition, and hand-wringing over political advertising clearly is in vogue. The claims and concerns of the media and some policy makers are clear. But, as we show in the next chapter, past scholarly research provides a mixed bag of fodder for advertising's critics and ammunition for its defenders. Ultimately, the debate over political advertising—both among scholars and among pundits—is plagued by a paucity of empirical evidence and an inadequate theoretical understanding of how advertising actually influences what citizens know and how they act politically. It is these gaps that we seek to fill.

Plan of the Book

If the central theme of this book is that campaign ads can have beneficial—if often unintended and unexpected—effects, a second theme is that the study of advertising and media effects more generally poses interesting and important methodological challenges, and that answering the most enduring and most important questions often involves searching for new methods and new data.

Our aim in this study is to provide a more comprehensive, theoretically rich, and methodologically rigorous account of the role of campaign advertising in American democracy than has been possible before, one that takes seriously past research on election campaigns, vote choice, media effects, and public opinion, but one that moves beyond prior work with new data and new methods. To do so, we combine traditional survey research with a comprehensive source of ad tracking data. These data, collected and coded by the Wisconsin Advertising Project, show which ads appeared in a given election campaign, how often these spots were broadcast, and where they were aired.

These data allow us to investigate the political impact of exposure to campaign advertising with far greater precision than has been possible to date. Ultimately, they enable us to identify the ways that campaign ads—despite their reputation as the no-good outlaws of American electoral politics—actually serve to enhance democratic citizenship.

In Chapter Two, we put televised political advertising into theoretical perspective and outline a framework for understanding how advertising in general and negative advertising in particular influences what citizens know and how they act. We use this framework to address a series of important questions and to review previous research, much of which has been inconclusive or has reached inconsistent conclusions. We develop a series of hypotheses about advertising effects, addressing questions such as whether citizens learn from ads, whether ad exposure increases campaign engagement, and whether and how campaign ads affect political efficacy, trust in government, and voter turnout. In answering these questions, we are guided by the assumption that ads may have both direct

and indirect effects on attitudes and behaviors, and that there may be important heterogeneity when it comes to who is most affected by campaign ads.

Perhaps the primary reason for the inconclusive state of the scholarly literature on campaign advertising is a lack of adequate data, along with disagreements about methodological approaches to the study of advertising effects. In Chapter Three, we review and critique previous methods of studying campaign advertising, and we introduce our own approach to the measurement of advertising exposure. We use these data to derive important lessons about political campaigns and how and where advertising is targeted. We focus on the importance of competition and geographic targeting for determining the volume and mix of ads that citizens encounter.

In Chapter Four, we introduce data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project. Since 2000, the Wisconsin Advertising Project has gathered, processed, coded, and made available to the scholarly community tracking data originally collected by TNS Media Intelligence/Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG). These tracking data represent the most comprehensive and systematic collection of political advertisements ever assembled for a given election. Finally, we describe how advertising tracking data can be processed, coded, and merged with various sorts of survey and election data to create reliable individual-level measures of relative exposure to advertising.

In Chapter Five, we employ our data on the content and targeting of political advertising as a “dependent variable” and seek to explain the factors that influence campaigns’ use of advertising. In this chapter, we generate some important lessons about the use of advertising that guide our analysis and, we hope, will guide the analysis of others testing the effects of advertising empirically.

In Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, we look at a series of ancillary or spillover effects of advertising on the attitudes and behavior of American citizens. These effects are not necessarily those intended by campaign strategists, but they are no less important from the perspective of American democracy. We look closely at the impact of aggregate ad exposure on political participation and citizen engagement, exploring what effects ads have when it comes to campaign interest, political knowledge, and voter turnout; and we investigate whether these effects are the same for everyone or if they vary systematically.

In Chapter Nine, we turn our attention to the role of negative or “attack” advertising, asking whether these ads in particular have the kinds of negative effects on democracy that critics have suggested. We conclude in Chapter Ten with observations about the role of campaign advertising in American democracy, the nature of the ad war in 2004, and the future of campaign advertising in American elections.