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Negative Political Advertising,  
Negative News Coverage  
A CONNECTION?

by

Karrie Cook

*Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for degree*

*of*

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## Introduction

Although negative advertising and negative news coverage of candidates is not a new phenomenon there is a perception among the news media that the number of negative ads has increased in the past decade (1984-1992), especially in the past five years. This perception has led reporters to increase their coverage and scrutiny of such ads, while at the same time showing them repeatedly on news casts. There are many reasons given as to why the number of negative ads and negative election reports may have increased, including more consulting companies, changes in election process in the 1960s, independent political groups spending more money on ads and simply because they may actually work.

In this paper I will show the connections between the media's perceptions of negative advertising by candidates and their coverage of campaigns. In doing this I will present the reasons for these perceptions and responses to them through studies that have been undertaken. I will make the argument that negative advertisements may not be increasing in numbers, but may be getting more negative and persuasive thus gaining newsworthy status. The perception by the media that the number of negative ads that are aired has risen, may be fueled by the increased coverage and attention that is given to such ads. Thus it may be the media themselves that have led people to believe that negative advertising is more common than it used to be. Drawing attention to such ads may also be just what the candidates want and it may be helping, not hurting their campaigns. Although studies comparing negative advertising and news coverage are not abundant, with the studies that have been done there is some evidence to support this connection.

## Background

Negative advertising in the form of comparing candidates and name-calling was not invented in the last few elections. It has been used often by challengers whose aim is to discredit the incumbent and get elected. The first truly memorable negative television advertisement was the "daisy-girl spot" produced by Tony Schwartz for Lyndon Johnson's campaign in 1964. Since then negative ads have been aired, but it has not been until the last decade that people perceived them to be more imposing and frequent. (Garramone, 1984)

Negative coverage of campaigns and candidates is also thought to have increased due to such factors as the lengthening of elections. According to Patterson (1993) in his book Out of Order, the media is not cut out to take over the position of the political parties in getting candidates nominated during the conventions. The introduction of primary elections in the late 1960s made the campaigns much longer and put more burden on the press to educate voters, not just report on the candidates who were chosen. Patterson (1993) says this has led to the increase in coverage of who is winning or losing in the polls and is a possible reason they look for blunders and shortcomings of candidates to expose their weaknesses to the public. According to Patterson (1993) "The press can raise the public's consciousness, but the news itself cannot organize public opinion in any meaningful way." (p.36)

In the past, the perception was that negative advertising would only result in a backlash toward the sponsoring candidate. This idea has been studied and found to be somewhat true depending on the race, but it is also possible that it will evoke negative feelings toward both the target and the sponsor. (Merritt, 1984) But negative advertising has also come to be thought of as an effective tool for reaching the voters and increasing their

recall, as well as imparting more information about issues. (Kinsey & Perloff, 1992) Of course the perceived effects depend upon how truthful and persuasive the ad is seen to be. (Garrazone, 1984)

Also in the past, the duty of the media was to discuss parties more than exploring the effectiveness of a particular candidate, according to Patterson. (1993) He also said that in the 1960 campaign the reporting of candidates arguments were straightforward and they were given opportunities to give their views, but by the time the 1984 elections came about the news was firmly rooted in the game strategy, which looked critically at candidates and all of the things they did and said, and only gave play to short clips of speeches. Patterson (1993) also explains that the coverage of polls and winners and losers increased from the 1960s to the 1990s. One-third of the stories were about winners and losers in 1984. Patterson (1993) said the events of 1984 were compressed and reporters asked questions about the candidates actions and then attached intentions linked to the strategy of the campaign to them. Not only were actual speeches cut, but news coverage had become focused on the game. (Patterson, 1993) By the 1992 election the time given for sound bites in a newscast had decreased from 14.4 seconds in 1984 to about 9 seconds. (Moshavi, 1992 p. 27) Policy issues don't have the controversial nature and entertainment value that journalists look for, Patterson noted. (1993) The more a single issue is talked about without any new twists, the less it will be covered by the media. Unless an issue is new or has a great deal of flair or significance, coverage decreases because news must include novel things, such as negative ads or why a candidate is slipping in the polls, and it must avoid being too repetitious. (Patterson, 1993)



## Negative Advertising

Attacking an opponent or an opponent's issues and behavior have been a part of the election process since the United States decided to have a two party system. (Patterson, 1993) The first implied negative ad was made by Andrew Jackson in 1828, (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991) but there is a perception that during the 1980s attacks became more frequent. Although negative advertising has not been thoroughly explored and defined, it has been defined by Surlin and Gordon as "advertising which attacks the other candidate personally." (Garrazone, 1984) According to James and Hensel (1991) "it is the perception of maliciousness and the perceived violation of fair play standards which, when combined with the perceived negative intent of the ad, (impute inferiority, denigrate or destroy the competitor's image), serves to differentiate negative comparative advertising from its milder cousin (comparative advertising)." (p. 55) Kaid and Johnston (1991) defined these ads as those which focus on criticisms of the opponent. (p. 53) Merritt (1984) also had a narrower definition that only included advertising that focused primarily on degrading perceptions of the rival. It should be kept in mind that each definition may be the cause of different results in an experiment or survey due to those ads that would be included or left out. This should be kept in mind and studied further to come to a concrete definition that is applicable to most campaigns. But of course the problem remains that not all campaigns are the same, some use negative ads more than others and some are more effective and credible than others.

From the 1984 presidential election to the 1992 presidential election there has been a perception among many media outlets that the number of negative ads is increasing and it is their duty to warn voters. This perception has led to increased coverage and scrutiny of

candidates ads and their truthfulness. In a study carried out by Kaid and Johnston (1991) concerning the negative versus positive ads between 1960 and 1988 they found that the numbers haven't changed all that drastically. After analyzing 580 television commercials spanning eight presidential elections they found that "the number of negative advertisements has increased since the 1970s but has held steady in the last three presidential campaigns." (p. 57) Beginning in 1980, the use of successful negative ads by independent groups such as the National Conservative Political Action Committee also made them seem more prevalent. (Kaid & Johnston, 1991) The results show that 37 percent of the ads were negative in 1988, which was only slightly higher than the 36 percent in 1980 and 35 percent in 1984. (Kaid & Johnston, 1991, p. 57)

Others have also thought that negative advertising has increased throughout the 1980s. Curtis Gans, the director of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, thought that mudslinging represented "60-70% of all political ads" in 1988. Not only did reporters think the ads had become more prevalent, voters were also convinced. A 1988 *Newsweek* poll found that 64 percent of the voters thought the ads were more negative. (Kaid & Johnston, 1991, p. 53) But, even though the media may perceive the advertising of candidates to be more negative, Patterson (1993) agreed that candidates actually use more positive ads than negative ones.

The reasons Kaid and Johnston (1991) use for the perceived rise are given in terms of the 1988 election. They include the fact that Bush's negative ads may have been better than Dukakis's, or they only aired the best ads. The most significant reason was "the news media in 1988 gave an extraordinary amount of air time to discussing the candidates' negative ad

campaigns, leaving viewers with the impression that the campaign was much more negative than in previous years." (Kaid & Johnston, 1991, p. 63) Suggesting that it is the press's emphasis on the ads that helped to shape the perceived increase. (Kaid & Johnston, 1991) Garramone (1984) says the perceived proliferation of negative ads may not only be due to an increase in the total number of political advertisements but the willingness of political action committees to use such ads. Kinsey and Perloff (1992) said one of the reasons these ads may seem to have proliferated is because consultants are convinced they work so they produce them.

Negative advertising is used for several reasons according to John Nugent in Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991), they are often cheaper to produce, they can undo a positive campaign, and people are more willing to vote against than for something. Also he said that "negative ads are a form of gossip, and word-of-mouth publicity multiplies the message. A by-product of negative advertising is the free media play, decrying but repeating, an attack." (p.30)

## **News Coverage**

The perceptions of an increase in negative advertising and the harm they do have led the media to cover the ads more heavily, in keeping with their responsibility to the public to provide information about candidates. The coverage was intended to help voters make informed choices in electing officials. This coverage also lent itself well to the media's attention to new, interesting and controversial events and issues. It also boosted the negative tone of newscasts toward candidates and the game politicians play. (Patterson, 1993) During the 1960s and 1970s the campaigning time was lengthened to include the primaries through



the McGovern-Fraser report. This report's effect on reporters was not intended, when it ended up calling for open party caucuses and a primary election. The political party leaders no longer decided who would be nominated at the conventions to campaign for the general elections. This move was intended to give the voters more control over the election process, but it put a greater burden on the press to not only report on candidates, but to help the public understand how politics worked so they could decide which candidates were the most qualified and who they should vote for in the primaries. (Patterson, 1991) This caused the media to dig more into the lives of candidates to give voters more information. That digging has come to include their advertising and its claims. (Patterson, 1991)

"A voiceless candidate has become the norm," according to Patterson (1993) and the policy stories have decreased from 50 percent to less than 20 percent. (p. 73-74) The length of time for a newscast is 22 minutes and the length of time for sound bites according to Patterson, (1993) has shrunk from 42 seconds in 1968 to less than 10 seconds in '92. Another reason for the increased concern with the game is that during the 1960s reporters became more important as celebrities through television. With increased fame, reporting became more aggressive and the press began to scrutinize politicians because they needed to obtain the most interesting news to keep their popularity. (Patterson, 1993) An interpretive style of reporting was advanced in the 1970s and 1980s according to Patterson (1993) thus allowing reporters to tag speeches with what they thought was meant by the politicians. A study of the 1984 election claimed that 10 percent of the election stories contained overtly disdaining comments and it continued to rise in the 1988 and '92 elections. (p. 84) Although most campaign reporting may be objective the consequences for candidates is far from

neutral because reporters have the option to pick what they will cover and what angle they will take. (Ansolabehere, Behr & Iyengar, 1993; Patterson, 1993)

When news is focused on mistakes made by candidates it may cause voters to take it out on the candidate when they vote. But voters do not like to be told that something they may think is secondary, is more important than it really is. According to Kathleen Hall Jamieson, news reports that focus on mistakes are like attack ads because "both are driven by the same deconstructionist dynamic: Find the wart; make the wart stand for the whole. Both are products of a culture of disbelief." (Patterson, 1993, p.157)

These perceptions were addressed in a survey taken in 1992 by Editor & Publisher magazine, of advertising directors and editors of 73 daily newspapers with a response rate of 43 percent. "Well over half (57%) of the advertising directors think political advertising has become more negative in the past five years, in contrast to the 10% who think it has become less negative." (p. 47) It was also expressed that almost one-third of the editorial staffs in the study ran stories or editorials that evaluated the claims in both television and newspaper advertising. (Fletcher & Ross, 1992)

"Gradually, reporters started paying more attention to commercials. Even before the ads became the subject of news coverage, they influenced coverage indirectly. Reporters and editors seemed to consider a campaign more newsworthy once it aired commercials." (Bates, 1990, p. 15) This has led to commercials being the news and reporters spending time tracking political ads and using consultants as sources. "Kiku Adatto of Harvard found, network news programs showed candidate ads 125 times during the 1988 general election campaign (in 1968, ads had made the network news only twice), and a few ads (in 1988)

actually got more TV news play than paid play." (Bates, 1990, p. 16) Adatto also found that the reporters questioned the ads' accuracy 8 percent of the time and the newscast was used in the rest as free advertising. (Bates, 1990) Many reporters thought that the 1988 election was the most negative in presidential election history and they wish they had been more critical. Although this view is popular it is not shared by historians. (Bates, 1990)

This illustrates that the politicians, who if they are skillful and have independent groups that support them, or use a skillful consultant, can control what the press covers about them. With the candidates trying to get their issues heard and shorter sound bites in newscasts they can still have some leverage with the use of negative ads that may be shown. Ads are seen by many consultants as a good way to strike emotions and talk about issues. They also think ads have a considerable effect on voters. (Kinsey & Perloff, 1992) In Kinsey and Perloff (1992) their survey results showed that consultants are much more likely, than political journalists, to believe that the best way to reach voters is to appeal to their emotions. But both consultants and journalists conceded that negative ads exert a powerful impact on voter attitudes, and consultants believed that people will remember the negative information better. (Kinsey & Perloff, 1992)

## Connections

Roger Stone, a senior Bush advisor, summed up the goals of consultants who worked to get Bush elected in 1988. "We are running a campaign designed for network TV. That means only one message a day, and getting it out early enough to get on the networks and major media markets that night." He also said all of the ads were tested in "focus groups" and for every message there was usually a positive and a negative commercial. (Pfau &

Kenski, 1990, p. 46) The Republicans were able to set the agenda for this campaign and also avoid the economy issue by overplaying national security, crime and patriotism. (Pfau & Kenski, 1990, p. 56) Tom Fielder, the Miami Herald's state and national political editor said, "The candidates know any negative ad will get a strong reaction from the press." (Fisher, 1992, p. 40) With these reactions from both sides of the issue agreeing that negative advertising affects news coverage, it is up to the press to decide the best way to handle ads. Although the press coverage may not be positive, candidates still work to get attention and free media time, and their negative ads have helped bring about a connection between advertising and coverage.

Since candidates and their consultants think they know how to get free coverage from the media, the media need to be careful that they are not merely replaying the messages sent out by candidates. That is why some suggestions to make coverage more analytical, such as repetition of warnings on newscasts to create more awareness, have been brought up. It is hoped that it will affect people the same way the repetition of negative ads influence voters, by making them more memorable. Another suggestion has been to take away coverage of candidates who air negative ads to discourage these tactics. (Bates, 1990) With the media's belief that negative ads are on the rise and their coverage is lacking, they have swung into full force to combat the evil effects that such ads may have on voters. They try to mitigate the effects by analyzing and reporting on the ads. This may be helpful if the ads contain false information, but if they are just using them as a novel part of the campaign, people will still be seeing the ads and make decisions from them. It is believed that voters recall the negative information quite well and this recall may be reversed by the news, but it may also



reinforce their perceptions and recall to show the ads on the news. Of course more study to determine if political ads have actually become more negative is needed through content analyses and perception surveys, but it actually seems that an increase in the number of negative ads is all in the minds and reports of reporters.

News coverage of negative advertising may have increased, making people believe ads are more prevalent than in previous elections by drawing attention to them. But the evidence shows that negative advertising has not actually increased, but the media's attitudes about what is acceptable campaigning has, and their acceptance doesn't include negative ads. As Colford noted in 1986 "What's one man's negative is another's putting out an opponent's record. . . at least these ads give rise to ideas." (p. 3) The media's perceptions have led to more coverage. These perceptions and attitudes also affect what reporters cover and what they leave out of the news, although news may not be negative, its effects are not neutral.

The perceptions consultants, and the candidates they represent, have about the opposition play heavily on what type of campaign they will run and how much or how little negative advertising to do. This may mean they think it will work in their campaign so they produce negative ads, or they may fear a backlash so they don't use negative advertising. With the increase in consulting firms in the 1980s and their perceptions that negative ads are more memorable and can work, they continue to be used to present issues and to point out an opponent's shortcomings. Although as Stone pointed out, "Voters will tell you they don't like negative ads, but they retain the information so much better than the positive ones." (Stone, 1986) They have found that by using an independent sponsor for the ad it can help to keep the backlash to the sponsoring candidate, from occurring or at least reduce it.



(Garrazone, 1985; Kaid & Boydston, 1987) The increase in independent committees who sponsor ads has also been a factor in the perception of increased negative ads, since they are more likely to produce negative ads than the candidates.

Although reality and perceptions about negative political advertising may not be parallel they affect each other and what can be accomplished through their existence. For example if the media didn't perceive them to be a problem that was proliferating they wouldn't bother to use them as news items. If they didn't use them, the impact of the ads might not be as great. By putting them on the news they are lent credibility no matter what the newscaster is saying, even if they are replaying the commercial to point out the lies.

As Walter Lippman said, "The press is no substitute for institutions. It is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of the darkness into vision. Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and interruptions." (Patterson, 1993, p. 207)

Negative advertisements should not go unchecked by the media, but the use of ads as part of newscasts gives them more recognition. This extra time given to ads can increase their validity to some voters and increase their recall. Since advertising and news only give voters selected glimpses of the political realm, journalists need to be made aware of the tactics politicians use and the effect their reporting of the negative ads, may have. Their perceptions have led to increased cynicism of politicians and their ads, which is a good start, but the reality may be that they are doing exactly what the candidates want.

## Conclusions

Given the evidence and arguments in this paper it can be concluded that negative

advertising is not new in the realm of political campaigning, but it probably has not increased in the 1980s. It is the perceptions of the media that appear to have changed as well as their coverage and scrutiny of such ads. Since the media have picked up on the ads as news items their coverage has increased during the 1980s. This coverage is what makes the ads seem more pervasive and mean. The television media have been especially involved in this change in perception, because they can use the ads as video footage in their reports. This makes the report seem more realistic when people see the ad and hear the announcer impose their view of how mean, nasty and negative the ad is while telling viewers not to believe everything they see. Although scrutiny is part of the role reporters have come to play, especially in politics, this type of criticism is usually one reporter's opinion and does not help the voters at all in the process of choosing a candidate to elect.

The newsworthiness of ads has come about with the improvements of television and the ads themselves. Basically this means that the ads have become more professional through the hiring of consultants who make them and the news media has picked up on these changes to use them as part of their coverage of campaigns. Reporters may think they are doing voters a favor by showing the ads to point out the indiscretions, but in reality the repetition of the ads increases people's recall of them, especially the pictures. The voters may not even remember what the reporter had to say about the ad. Although the negative ads have become more sophisticated and most likely more negative, this doesn't mean they are produced more often, it just means people notice them more and the news reports are especially effective in making them more noticeable.

With more consultants and more political action committees contributing to the

negative ad pool it may seem that they have increased, but they may just be more effective. With the polling that is done on issues these types of ads are what seem to work in getting people's attention and also are more fully recalled than positive "feel good" ads. Even though people may say they dislike the ads because of their negative slant it doesn't mean they won't remember them. Also I think the public has something to do with these changes in perceptions, especially if they are the ones being polled about what they want to see and hear more about during a campaign. As has been noted in several of the articles and books, more information is given about issues in most negative ads than in most positive ones. If it is issues people are asking to hear about then they are getting negative advertising to fill that spot. This puts the burden on the public and the press to decipher which ads are accurate and which are deceptive, but that is part of the price they pay for asking to hear more about the issues.

Since the evidence available points to the fact that negative ads have not increased, but the media thinks they have, this leads members of the public to also think the increase has occurred. It is doubtful that the political system of campaigning and using an opponents' shortcomings as a way to get elected will change, this means that the political election system will increasingly be based on negative information and issues may seem more black and white than they are, when presented in ads. Also candidates and their consultants may use more negative advertising in the future if it seems to work, so although studies have been conducted that show it hasn't increased yet, this doesn't mean it won't happen. In the political scheme the perception by the news media that negative campaigning has become more prevalent ultimately has an impact on how far a negative ad can go in degrading a

candidate. If it is seen as too mean it will probably backfire against the sponsoring candidate or his side even if it was produced by someone else. Politicians will continue to try to make themselves look more capable than their opponents through the use of negative advertising. Although the political system may seem to be riddled with deception and the use of negative ads are probably contributing to this perception, they are used because they are memorable. Another problem that the negative ads contribute to is making every issue seem black and white with only two sides and a good and bad guy. The campaign is also turned into a game through negative ads, with one making an attack and then the other making a counter-attack. This brings campaigning down to a level of a childish game of who is better or worse and who is going to do the most harm to the country.

With negative ads to give information the candidates want the public to hear and the news media trying to look out for the interests of the public the conflict will not disappear. The candidates know that they have very few chances to be heard and they will use every key they can to get their information into the media. With the information presented in this paper it seems that the news media is simply a pawn that the politicians use in their campaign strategies and negative advertising has become a key to getting free media time. The media should be wary when using information from candidates by making sure that they are not simply repeating the message from the candidates and those who try to get them elected.

If the ads are informational and true in nature then people can get what they need to know about candidates from them, but they can also use the background that the reporter gives to get a fuller picture of an issue. I think the perceptions of the news media are not

going to reduce the number of political ads that are negative, nor are they going to change what people see, but I think they should be curious and give the public more information than a repetition of the ad. If politicians want to take their chances with a negative ad they are free to do so, but the press does not need to get involved except maybe to make it less attractive to candidates to air negative ads, by cutting off their coverage.



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