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Ad Messages

Candidates do not choose their advertising messages lightly. Most campaigners develop commercials based on game plans that outline the desired targets of the campaign as well as the themes and issues to be addressed. Candidates often test basic messages through polls and focus groups.

Ronald Reagan's campaign manager Ed Rollins said in reference to the 1984 campaign against Walter Mondale: "We made some fundamental decisions . . . to take [Mondale] on the tax issue . . . to try to drive [his] negatives back up. . . . The decision was to go with two negative commercials for every one positive commercial. . . . Let me say the commercials clearly worked, we drove [Mondale's] negatives back up again, the tax thing became the dominant issue at least in our polling, and it helped us get ready for the final week of the campaign."¹

As campaigns have opened up and nominating battles have become common, the strategic aspect of electoral appeals has emerged as a major determinant. Candidates face more choices than at any previous point in American history. A system of presidential selection based on popular support places a premium on these decisions. Campaigners who pursue the wrong constituencies, go on the attack prematurely, or address noncrucial issues end up in political oblivion.

For these reasons, it is instructive to look at ad content and style of presentation with an eye toward strategic behavior. Do ad messages vary by party? How have candidates' presentations changed over time? Are there differences in electronic appeals at different stages of a campaign? What messages are communicated via Internet ads and candidate Web sites?

Ad Content

The classic criticism of American ads was written by Joe McGinniss following Richard Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign. Nixon entered that race with a serious image problem. His previous loss in 1960 and public impressions of him during a long career in public service led many to believe he was a sour, nasty, and mean-spirited politician. His advisers therefore devised an advertising strategy meant to create a "new" Nixon. McGinniss, who had unlimited access to the inner workings of Nixon's advertising campaign, described the strategy: "America still saw him as the 1960 Nixon. If he were to come at the people again, as candidate, it would have to be as something new; not this scarred, discarded figure from their past. . . . This would be Richard Nixon, the leader, returning from exile. Perhaps not beloved, but respected. Firm but not harsh; just but compassionate. With flashes of warmth spaced evenly throughout."²

The power of this portrait and the anecdotes McGinniss was able to gather during the course of the campaign helped create a negative impression of political ads that has endured to this day. For example, Robert Spero describes the "duping" of the American voter in his book analyzing "dishonesty and deception in presidential television advertising."³ Others have criticized ads for being intentionally vague and overly personalistic in their appeals.

Political commercials do not have a great reputation among viewers either. A CBS News/*New York Times* survey during the 1988 presidential general election asked those exposed to ads how truthful they considered commercials for each candidate. The George Bush ads and Michael Dukakis ads scored the same: Only 37 percent felt they were mostly truthful. The remainder believed that campaign commercials were either generally false or had some element of falsehood. Even more interesting were overall beliefs about the impact of television ads. People believed that ads were most effective in influencing general feelings about the candidates, and least effective in the communication of substantive information. Fifty percent said ads made them feel good about their candidate, whereas only 25 percent said ads had given them new information about the candidates during the fall campaign.

Citizens also believe that contemporary campaigns are more negative than in the past. When asked whether the 1988 race had been

more positive, more negative, or about the same as past presidential campaigns, 48 percent of the respondents said it had been more negative. But 1988 was the high point in terms of voter views about negativity. In 1992, 36 percent felt that the presidential race was more negative than past contests. In 1996, just 11 percent believed that the race had been more negative than in the past.⁴

Studies of the effects of ads have rarely paid much attention to the dimensions of evaluation. Many criticisms of commercials have failed to define the elusive notion of substance or distinguish it from image-oriented considerations. This problem notwithstanding, several efforts have been made to investigate the content of ads and assess the quality of the information presented to viewers.⁵ In keeping with the interest in issue-based voting and recognizing the centrality of policy matters to democratic elections, much of the work on ad content focused on the treatment of issues. In light of popular beliefs about the subject, it is surprising to note that most of the research has found that ads present more substantive information than viewers and journalists generally believe.

Richard Joslyn wrote a major 1980 study of 156 television spot ads aired during contested general election campaigns. He measured whether political issues were mentioned during the ads. His research revealed that 79.6 percent of presidential ads mentioned issues. Based on this work, he argued that "political spot ads may not be as poor a source of information as many observers have claimed."⁶

Others have reached similar conclusions. Richard Hofstetter and Cliff Zukin discovered in their analysis of the 1972 presidential race that about 85 percent of the candidates' ads included some reference to issues. In comparison, only 59 percent of the news coverage of George McGovern and 76 percent of the news coverage of Nixon had issue content. Likewise, Thomas Patterson and Robert McClure demonstrated, in a content analysis of the 1972 race, that issues received more frequent coverage in commercials than in network news coverage. Michael Robinson and Margaret Sheehan reported in regard to 1980 CBS news coverage that 41 percent of the lines of news transcript contained at least one issue mention, which was lower than what appeared in ads.⁷

These projects have attracted considerable attention because they run contrary to much of the popular thinking and press criticism about media and politics. The findings are reassuring because they challenge conventional wisdom warning of the dangers of commercials. Rather than accepting the common view, which

emphasizes the noneducational nature of ads, these researchers claim that commercials offer relevant information to voters.

But it remains to be seen whether the results stand up over time. In addition, past research has ignored the variety of ways in which substantive messages can be delivered, beyond direct policy mentions.⁸ For example, character and personal qualities are increasingly seen as vital to presidential performance. It is therefore important to assess the full range of ad content to reach more general conclusions about the rhetoric of candidates.

Prominent Ads

The study of ad content is complicated because not all ads are equally important. A random sample has the unfortunate tendency to weight important, frequently aired ads the same as less important ads. The failure to distinguish prominent from less important commercials is troubling, because in each presidential year certain ads attract more viewer and media attention than others. In addition to being aired most frequently, prominent ads are discussed and rebroadcast by the media. Owing to the general noteworthiness of these ads and their heightened exposure through the free media, they are the most likely to influence voters. It makes sense to investigate commercials generally regarded as the crucial ones in particular campaigns.⁹

I studied prominent ads as defined by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the leading historian of political advertisements. For every presidential campaign since 1952, Jamieson, on an election-by-election basis, has described the presidential campaign ads that were newsworthy, entertaining, flamboyant, or effective. I used her detailed histories to compile a list of prominent spot ads from 1952 to 1988. For 1992 to 2004, I defined prominent ads as those broadcast in *CBS Evening News* stories.¹⁰

My list is a complete enumeration of the most prominent spots cited by Jamieson and for the last four presidential elections aired during the *CBS Evening News*.¹¹ A perusal of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* coverage reveals that Jamieson was generally successful at identifying the commercials that attracted media attention. The commercials included in this analysis come from both the presidential nominating process and the presidential general election.

For these ads, codes were compiled for each commercial based on the year of the election, type of election (presidential general elec-

tion or nominating stage), sponsoring party (Republican, Democrat, or other), and content of the ad. Ad messages were classified into the areas of domestic concerns, international affairs, personal qualities of the candidates, specific policy statements, party appeals, or campaign process. Specific policy appeals involved clear declarations of past positions or expectations about future actions. General categories were subdivided into more detailed types of appeals. Domestic concerns included the economy; social welfare; social issues; crime, violence, and drugs; race and civil rights; taxes and budgets; corruption and government performance; and energy and the environment. International affairs consisted of war and peace, foreign relations, national security and defense, and trade matters. Personal qualities included leadership, trustworthiness and honesty, experience and competence, compassion, independence, and extremism. Party appeals were based on explicit partisan messages (such as the need to elect more Republicans) and references to party labels. Campaign appeals included references to strategies, personnel matters within the campaign, electoral prospects, and organizational dynamics.

The Paucity of Policy Appeals

Issue information in advertising can be assessed either as *action statements* or as *policy mentions*. The former refers to specific policy statements—that is, clear statements of past positions or expectations about future actions. For example, Reagan's 1980 ad promising a "30 percent federal tax cut" that would benefit every group and offer the government a gain in revenue was an action statement. Lyndon Johnson's criticism of Barry Goldwater for past statements proposing that Social Security become a voluntary retirement option was a specific policy mention, although Johnson never made clear whether Goldwater still supported this proposal. (One of the ads supplied the dates of Goldwater's statements.)

Few discussions of domestic or international matters reach this level of detail, however. The more common approach is the policy mention, in which general problems of the economy, foreign relations, or government performance are discussed, but no specific proposals to deal with the matter are made. For example, a Dwight Eisenhower ad about the economy in 1952 showed a woman holding a bag of groceries and complaining, "I paid \$24 for these groceries—look, for this little." Eisenhower then said, "A few years

TABLE 3-1
Content of Prominent Ads, 1952-2004

Appeal	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Other
Personal qualities	33%	29%	40%	9%
Domestic performance	30	30	28	38
Specific domestic policy	21	24	15	41
Specific foreign policy	4	2	6	3
International affairs	6	10	3	3
Campaign	5	3	7	6
Party	1	2	1	0
N	(452)	(225)	(195)	(32)

Sources: Kathleen Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) for 1952-1988 campaigns, and *CBS Evening News* tapes for 1992-2004 campaigns.

Note: Entries indicate the percentage of ads devoted to each type of appeal.

ago, those same groceries cost you \$10, now \$24, next year \$30. That's what will happen unless we have a change."¹² This commercial obviously does not suggest a plan for combating inflation, although it does portray the painfulness of price increases.

Prominent ads were more likely to emphasize personal qualities (33 percent) and domestic performance (30 percent) than specific domestic or foreign policy appeals (25 percent) (Table 3-1). Ads for Republicans included more specific pledges (26 percent) than did ads for Democrats (21 percent). Those for Republicans were more likely to emphasize international affairs (10 percent) than were those for Democrats (3 percent). In contrast, ads for Democrats were much more likely to emphasize personal qualities (40 percent) than were those for Republicans (29 percent). Ads sponsored by third parties and interest groups were the most substantive, with 44 percent of them featuring specific domestic or foreign policy appeals.

The party differences reflect interests within each party and have consequences for how each party is viewed by the public. The greater attention paid by Republicans to international affairs and by Democrats to domestic areas is consistent with party coalitions. It also helps to explain why Democrats are viewed as weak on foreign policy and Republicans are seen as inattentive to domestic matters. Outside groups and third parties, such as the Green and

Reform Parties, tend to be substantive because their political mobilization is based at least in part on discontent with the status quo and advocacy of a particular policy stance.¹³

Shifts Over Time

There is little reason to treat all elections the same or assume that every contest engenders the same type of advertising appeals. Based on obvious differences in strategic goals among presidential aspirants and shifts in voters' priorities over the years, one would expect extensive fluctuations in commercials from election to election. To see exactly how advertising messages have changed, it is necessary to study ads from a series of elections.

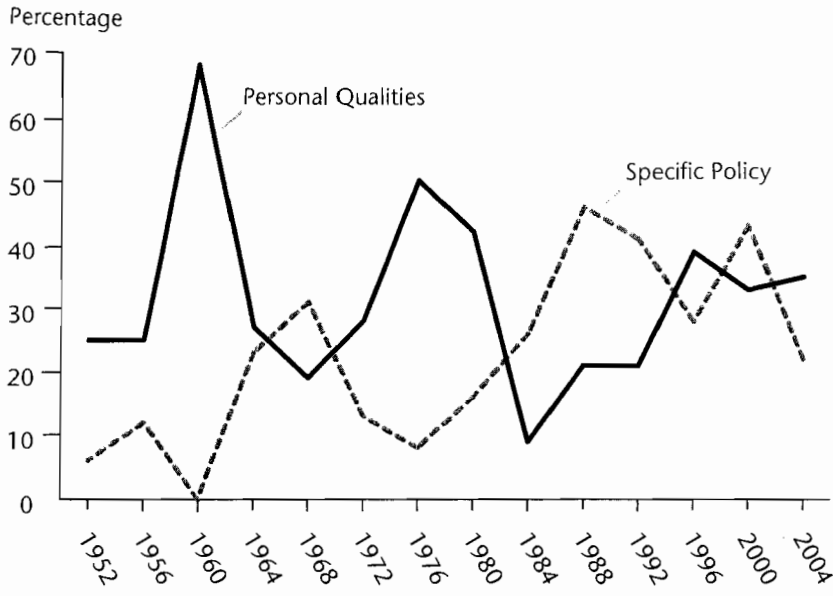
Some analysts believe that ads have become less policy oriented and more personality based in recent years. When one looks at changes in policy appeals, it is obvious that prominent ads in the 1980s and 1990s were more substantive than those of earlier periods (Figure 3-1). Twenty-six percent of commercials in 1984, 46 percent in 1988, and 41 percent in 1992 included specific statements about public policy. In 2000, 43 percent of ads featured policy-specific statements, up from the preceding two elections. But this dropped down to 22 percent in 2004.

The only other period when specific policy messages were common was the 1960s (23 percent in 1964 and 31 percent in 1968). However, as has been found in other areas of research, the 1960s were an anomaly in terms of specific policy mentions. The more common pattern in earlier historical periods was a relatively low level of specificity.

Ads based on personal qualities reached their high points in 1960 (68 percent of all appeals), 1976 (50 percent), and 1980 (42 percent) but dropped back to lower levels of 9 percent in 1984 and 21 percent in 1988 and 1992. In 1996, however, nearly twice as many appeals were based on personal qualities (39 percent) than in 1988 or 1992. This change reflects attacks during the nominating process on experience and qualifications and, in the case of Bill Clinton in 1996, honesty and integrity. In 2000, with George W. Bush's attacks on Al Gore's integrity and Gore's criticisms of Bush's inexperience, 33 percent of ad appeals centered on personal qualities. In 2004, 35 percent of the pitches were based on personal characteristics.

Races having the greatest emphasis on personal qualities involved challengers who were either unknown or inexperienced. For exam-

Figure 3-1 Prominent Ad Content by Election Year, 1952–2004



Sources: For 1952–1988, Kathleen Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); for 1992–2004, CBS Evening News tapes.

ple, in 1960 many questions were raised about the qualifications and experience of John F. Kennedy. Similarly, ads during the Gerald Ford–Jimmy Carter contest in 1976, the Reagan–Carter–John Anderson campaign in 1980, the George Bush–Clinton–Ross Perot race of 1992, and the George W. Bush–Gore contest of 2000 devoted a great deal of attention to personal characteristics, such as leadership, trustworthiness, and experience. But these emphases were more a matter of defusing or highlighting personal qualities important in a particular race than a manifestation of any general trend toward personalistic politics.

It is interesting to examine variations in ad categories over time. Table 3-2 presents the breakdowns of prominent ads for the broad categories of domestic matters (specific domestic policy appeals combined with general domestic performance), international affairs (both specific and general mentions), personal qualities, party appeals, and campaign-related messages. Party appeals were stronger in the 1950s than in any period since then. Twelve percent

TABLE 3-2
Detailed Breakdowns of Prominent Ads, 1952–2004

	1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004
Domestic Matters	62%	62%	24%	39%	30%	46%	38%	44%	68%	58%	68%	59%	60%	30%
Economy	50	25	0	0	0	8	17	31	30	7	8	4	0	9
Social welfare	6	25	12	31	12	18	3	6	4	3	11	9	30	17
Social issues	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	2	4	0	19	4	4	0
Crime, violence, drugs	0	0	0	4	12	3	6	0	0	41	11	16	4	0
Race, civil rights	0	0	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	4
Taxes, budgets	0	0	0	0	0	12	6	5	26	0	17	20	7	0
Corruption, government performance	6	12	0	4	0	5	6	0	0	0	2	2	4	0
Energy, environment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	7	0	0	11	0
International Affairs	6	0	6	19	37	21	3	11	17	10	6	0	0	31
War and peace	6	0	0	15	25	8	3	3	4	0	2	0	0	22
Foreign relations	0	0	6	4	12	5	0	2	4	3	2	0	0	0
National security, defense	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	6	9	7	0	0	0	9
Trade matters	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Personal Qualities	24	24	69	27	18	29	50	41	8	20	21	39	31	34
Leadership	0	0	25	0	0	5	3	8	0	0	2	0	0	0
Trustworthiness, honesty	6	0	0	0	6	0	31	6	0	0	2	13	9	4
Experience, competence	0	12	25	4	6	8	8	18	0	10	11	6	15	13
Compassion	0	12	0	0	0	13	8	6	4	7	6	7	7	9
Independence	12	0	19	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	7	0	0
Extremism	6	0	0	23	6	3	0	3	0	0	0	4	0	4
Party	6	12	0	0	0	3	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Campaign	0	0	16	12	12	3	9	0	4	10	6	3	4	4
N	(16)	(8)	(16)	(26)	(16)	(39)	(36)	(62)	(23)	(29)	(53)	(55)	(54)	(23)

Sources: Kathleen Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) for 1952–1988 campaigns, and CBS Evening News tapes for 1992–2004 campaigns.

of prominent ads in 1956 emphasized appeals to party, the highest level of any election in this study. In fact, for many elections from 1960 through 2000, no prominent ads featured direct party pitches.

The 1956 election may have been a high point in terms of the strength of party appeals in the post-World War II era. The classic study of voting behavior, *The American Voter*, argued that party identification was the dominant structuring principle of public opinion.¹⁴ In the 1950s, it made sense for candidates to incorporate partisan pitches in their television advertising: Partisanship allowed them to win votes from the electorate. Hence, we see Republican Eisenhower and other members of his cabinet exhorting viewers to give them a “Republican Congress” and making other explicit appeals based on party leanings.¹⁵

However, after the 1950s, party loyalties in the American public began to decline. In their research, reported in *The Changing American Voter*, Norman Nie, Sidney Verba, and John Petrocik show how party identification and party-based voting ebbed in strength.¹⁶ Independents began to rise as a percentage of the overall electorate, and candidates rarely made advertising appeals based on party. Candidates’ messages were designed to appeal to the party base (such as GOP attacks on tax-and-spend Democrats and Democratic spots characterizing Republicans as uncaring and insensitive), but these messages were not framed explicitly in party terms.

Instead, advertising shifted toward other topics. Not surprisingly, given the nature of the times, war and peace issues rose during the Vietnam period. Fifteen percent of ads in 1964 and 25 percent in 1968 discussed war and peace topics. For example, in 1964, some of Johnson’s advertising effort against Goldwater emphasized the danger of war and Johnson’s record of preserving the peace. In the 1968 Democratic nominating race, print ads for Eugene McCarthy attacked Robert Kennedy for John Kennedy’s decision to send troops to Vietnam: “There is only one candidate who has no obligations to the present policies in Vietnam and who is under no pressure to defend old mistakes there.” Another noted that “Kennedy was part of the original commitment. . . . He must bear part of the responsibility for our original—and fundamentally erroneous—decision to interfere in Vietnam.” In the general election, both Nixon and Hubert Humphrey ran spots emphasizing Vietnam. For example, Nixon tried to tie his Democratic opponent to the unpopular war. In contrast, a voice-over in a Humphrey ad criticized Nixon’s refusal to discuss Vietnam: “Mr. Nixon’s silence on the

issue of Vietnam has become an issue in itself. He talks of an honorable peace but says nothing about how he would attain it. He says the war must be waged more effectively but says nothing about how he would wage it.”¹⁷

Meanwhile, domestic economy and tax and budget matters attracted considerable attention in the late 1970s and the 1980s. In 1976, 17 percent of ads addressed economic concerns, whereas 31 percent in 1980 and 30 percent in 1984 touched on the economy. One has to harken back to the 1950s to find elections with as much emphasis on the economy. Tax and budget matters were also particularly popular during this period. Republicans have repeatedly run ads challenging past Democratic performance, and Democrats have criticized Republican failures to deal with federal deficits.

There have been some interesting nonissues on the advertising front. Until 1992, advertisements on social issues, such as abortion, busing, and the Equal Rights Amendment, were not common.¹⁸ With the exception of a George Wallace ad against school busing in 1968 and a 1980 Carter commercial in which actress Mary Tyler Moore told viewers Carter had “been consistently in favor of any legislation that would give women equal rights,”¹⁹ political spots generally have avoided these subjects because they are seen by candidates as divisive.

But a change of tactics in 1992 altered this situation. Along with other challengers around the country, Indiana Republican congressional candidate Michael Bailey used graphic antiabortion footage during his attempt to unseat pro-choice Democratic representative Lee Hamilton. The goal obviously was to attract media attention and raise public awareness. Yet there is little evidence in overall results that this effort worked. Of the thirteen congressional candidates in 1992 who relied on this tactic during the nominating process, only two won their primaries and none won in the general elections.²⁰

In 1996, television advertising on abortion was used more extensively. Johnny Isakson, the leading Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate in Georgia, highlighted his support for abortion rights through an ad in order to distinguish himself from the other five Republicans in the primary. With his wife, Dianne, and their nineteen-year-old daughter, Julie, by his side, Isakson’s spot took the unusual step of using a female announcer to attack his Republican opponents on the grounds that they would “vote to ban abortions,

making criminals out of women and their doctors.” But this appeal was not successful. Isakson lost the Republican primary.²¹

In 2000, 60 percent of ad appeals focused on domestic matters (especially health care and education) and 0 percent were devoted to international affairs. These results reflect the end of the Cold War and the fact that the country was at peace. Thirty-one percent of prominent commercials that year emphasized personal qualities.

During the 2004 contest, appeals were equally divided between personal qualities (34 percent), international affairs (31 percent), and domestic matters (30 percent). These percents reflect an era in which the agenda was bifurcated between domestic and foreign policy controversies.

The Impact of Campaign Stage

Television ads used to be the near-exclusive purview of presidential general elections. As noted earlier, the nominating process was an elite-based activity in which party leaders exercised dominant control over delegate selection. Because voters were not central to the process, candidates made little use of television advertising. Much greater emphasis was placed on personal bargaining and negotiations with political leaders.

However, in recent years, advertising has become a prominent part of presidential nominating campaigns. Candidates spend a considerable amount of their overall campaign budget on advertising. Commercials have become a major strategic tool in the nominating process. Candidates use ads to convey major themes, make comments about the opposition, and discuss each other’s personal qualities.

As pointed out previously, substantial differences exist between various stages of the campaign, and one might expect to find different appeals in the nominating and general election campaigns. In nominating contests, candidates of the same party compete for their party’s nomination. There are often a number of candidates on the ballot. In contrast, general elections typically are two-person battles between major-party nominees. One can expect political commercials to emphasize different points at different stages.

Table 3-3 lists the distribution of prominent ad appeals from 1952 to 2004 by campaign stage. Personal qualities were used more often in the nominating campaign than in the general election campaign. For example, in 1980 Carter used so-called character ads to

TABLE 3-3
Ad Content by Campaign Stage, 1952–2004

Appeal	General Election	Nominating
Personal qualities	30%	40%
Domestic performance	34	21
Specific domestic policy	17	26
Specific foreign policy	3	6
International affairs	8	3
Campaign	6	3
Party	2	0
<i>N</i>	(304)	(129)

Sources: Kathleen Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) for 1952–1988 campaigns, and *CBS Evening News* tapes for 1992–2004 campaigns.

Note: Entries indicate the percentage of ads devoted to each type of appeal.

highlight the contrast between his own family life and that of his Democratic opponent, Massachusetts senator Edward Kennedy: “I don’t think there’s any way you can separate the responsibilities of a husband and father and a basic human being from that of the president. What I do in the White House is to maintain a good family life, which I consider to be crucial to being a good president.” Personal qualities also played a major role in Carter’s 1976 nominating campaign effort. Taking advantage of public mistrust and skepticism following Watergate disclosures, Carter pledged he would never lie to the public: “If I ever do any of those things, don’t support me.”²²

Structural and strategic differences between the nominating and general election stages of the campaign help to explain the use of personal appeals in the primary season. The nominating stage often generates more personal appeals because, by the nature of intra-party battles, personality and background more often than substantive matters divide candidates. With Democrats competing against Democrats and Republicans against Republicans, there are at this time usually as many agreements as disagreements on policy issues and general political philosophies. Politicians, therefore, use personal qualities to distinguish themselves from the field and point out the limitations of their fellow candidates.

Domestic performance appeals in prominent ads were less common in the nominating process than in the general election campaign. One standard appeal concerned credit claiming on economic matters. A 1976 Ford ad showed a woman with bags of groceries meeting a friend who was working for the Ford campaign. The Ford supporter asked the shopper whether she knew that President Ford had cut inflation in half. "In half?" responded the shopper. "Wow!" A 1980 ad for Democratic contender Edward Kennedy had the actor Carroll O'Connor say that Carter may "give us a Depression which may make Hoover's look like prosperity."²³ By using a prominent personality, ad makers hoped to enhance the credibility of their message.

The attention devoted to domestic matters is important, and several articles have addressed issue-based voting by primary voters.²⁴ But few of these projects address the role of candidates in providing substantive cues. For there to be extensive issue-based voting, candidates must emphasize substantive matters and provide issue-based cues. Although a fair amount of attention is paid to domestic affairs in the nominating process, for prominent ads these types of appeals occupy a smaller percentage in the spring than in the fall.

International relations receive about the same amount of emphasis in prominent ads at both stages. Trying to capitalize on a United Nations vote seen as harmful to Israel, Edward Kennedy in 1980 ran an ad saying Carter "betrayed Israel at the UN, his latest foreign policy blunder." Meanwhile, on the Republican side, a Reagan ad noted, "Our foreign policy has been based on the fear of not being liked. Well, it's nice to be liked. But it's more important to be respected." A 1976 Ford ad aimed at Reagan said, "Last Wednesday, Ronald Reagan said he would send American troops to Rhodesia. On Thursday he clarified that. He said they would be observers or advisers. What does he think happened in Vietnam?" The ad then concluded with the tag line "Governor Reagan couldn't start a war. President Reagan could."²⁵

Internet Web Sites and Ads

The 1996 elections were historic in introducing a new type of political communication: information and ads delivered via candidate Web sites on the Internet. Interested browsers could read full-text speeches, detailed biographies, discussions of policy positions, and copies of press releases online.

Almost all of the material on the Web sites that year presented positive portrayals of each candidate's positions, organization, or background. Except for the occasional press release buried several screens into the Web site, there were no attacks on the opposition. Instead, Internet users could browse Steve Forbes's family pictures and read his announcement speech. Pat Buchanan's Web site was filled with speeches and position papers on everything from immigration to trade policy. Robert Dole's site featured video snippets of the Kansan discussing his beliefs.

The most novel feature of any of the Web sites was Forbes's Flat Tax Calculator. With this segment, visitors entered their wage and salary income, checked a box for their personal exemption (\$25,600 for joint married returns), and their number of dependents. After clicking the calculate box, the Web site would automatically calculate the viewer's income tax under Forbes's 17-percent flat tax proposal. It also would produce a table showing the tax savings, between the current and the flat tax rates, for five different income levels. The demonstration concluded with the tag line "It's simple. It's honest. And that's a big change for Washington."

In the general election, candidates also made extensive use of the Internet. Clinton, Dole, and Perot each had Web sites emphasizing their general themes: "Building a Bridge to the 21st Century" for Clinton, "More opportunities. Smaller government. Stronger and safer families" for Dole, and "For Our Children and Our Grandchildren" for Perot. Their sites contained sections outlining the candidates' policy positions, speeches, biographies, and press releases, among other things. Perot was alone in not featuring a picture of his running mate, Pat Choate, on his Web site.

Dole offered an interactive feature on his fall general election page clearly modeled after Forbes's Flat Tax Calculator. This was the Dole-Kemp Interactive Tax Calculator, which gave visitors the opportunity to estimate the "value and magnitude of the Dole-Kemp tax cuts for a person or family at your income level." After entering marital status, number of dependent children under the age of eighteen, and income level in 1996, the visitor could have the Web site automatically calculate his or her current tax costs, what the person's tax would be under Dole-Kemp tax cuts, and the value of the estimated savings.

However, the calculator took into account only the 15-percent across-the-board tax cut and the \$500 per-child tax credit. It did not include the impact of the earned income tax credit, the capital

gains tax cut, the education and training deduction, or the charitable contribution tax credit. Taxes were calculated as if the plan were fully phased in, even though that would not take place until four years later.

By 2000, the Internet was becoming more vital to the electoral process. The number of Americans online rose nearly tenfold from 7.5 million in 1996 to 67 million in 2000, roughly 40 percent of the adult population.²⁶ With hits on candidate Web sites being more plentiful, all of the presidential aspirants sought to harness the Internet for voter outreach, financial contributions, news and ad delivery, and volunteer mobilization.

Both Republican and Democratic candidates used their Web sites during the nominating process to communicate with volunteers. Through e-mail, the Bill Bradley campaign mobilized 5,000 volunteers throughout the Northeast to help with voter canvassing in New Hampshire. Forbes organized his volunteers into 5,000 e-precincts based on e-mail addresses. Both John McCain and Bradley became masters of fund-raising over the Internet. Following his surprise win over George W. Bush in New Hampshire, McCain raised 40 percent of his subsequent \$10 million from his Web site. Bradley generated several million from his site between October and December 1999. Both Gore and Bush had Spanish translation sections on their Web sites, along with press releases, speeches, policy position statements, and a place where visitors could get information on how to volunteer in individual states. Gore also had a place where constituents such as Asian Americans, gays, environmentalists, women, students, senior citizens, and African Americans could receive appeals tailored to their particular interests.

In contrast to 1996, several candidates began to take advantage of interactive features of the Internet for the 2000 race. In addition to e-mail, search, and volunteering capabilities, Bush had two interactive features on his site. Following on the heels of Forbes and Dole in 1996, he developed the Bush Tax Calculator, which allowed visitors to plug in their filing status, number of children, income level, and income percentage from a second earner to see what their income tax cut would be with both the current code and the Bush plan. Around tax day, Bush placed ads for the tax calculator on the Yahoo.com Internet portal. However, Democrats criticized the calculator because it covered income levels only through \$100,000, even though much of the tax cut would go to high-income earners. To publicize this omission, Democrats set up their own Web site—

MillionairesForBush.com—that showed how the super-rich would benefit disproportionately from Bush's tax reductions.²⁷ In addition, Bush posted the names and amounts for all his campaign contributors on his Web site and made the database searchable so that people could look up who had given what amounts of money to his campaign. Gore's site had places where visitors could apply for internships, sign up for automatic e-mail updates, and make campaign contributions.

All of the candidates used video streaming technology that posted television spots on their Web sites and allowed those viewers with video players and sound cards to watch ads that were broadcast over the airwaves. Many of the candidates even placed video from speeches and Webcasts onto their Web sites for later viewing by voters. These Web site ads displayed the same mix of positive and negative advertising as found on television. This was a significant change from 1996 when Web site ads tended to be more positive than television spots. Candidates tended not to advertise on sites other than their own because viewership levels even on major Web sites during the nominating process were not very large.

In the general election, Bush and Gore made extensive use of the Internet. Unlike in 1996, the presidential candidates used their Web sites for democratic outreach. Citizens could contribute money, volunteer, register to vote, and develop their own Web sites to aid the candidates. One novel feature of Gore's site was GoreNet, which provided interactive town meetings and a chance for Gore supporters to talk with one another. Both Gore and Bush provided language translation for Spanish-speaking voters and easy access to audio and video clips. On Gore's site, citizens could register for automatic e-mail updates and could personalize the site to their own particular interests. The same was true for Bush's site. Bush's Web site had a feature called Daily Trivia (on August 24, 2000, the question was "Which hand does Governor Bush write with?"). It also offered a contest to name an airplane and a store featuring George W. merchandise. One problem with Bush's site was that it used a small type size, which made it more difficult to read.

In terms of content, the candidates in the 2000 campaign set up sites that had more of a newscasting quality than in 1996. Bush's site, for example, included news items that made him look good or his opponent look bad. When the Rand Corporation issued a study of Texas schools that indicated little progress had been made, GeorgeWBush.com quickly posted another Rand study that showed

better results for the state's education system. It also listed an e-government study that ranked Texas first among the fifty states in using the Internet to bring services and information to the general public. Gore's site, in contrast, had fewer "newsy" items and more features that publicized his initiatives, speeches, and town meetings.

Unlike in 1996, when candidate Web sites featured mostly positive material, in 2000, Web sites started to emphasize a blend of positive and negative appeals. Bush's site attacked what the Republican said was a pledge "to create or expand more than 250 federal programs" and said that "Gore's 'small government' rhetoric doesn't match his 'big government' plan." Gore's Web site tended to emphasize more positive appeals, but it occasionally took a shot at Bush over various policy proposals. Both candidates relied on alternative sites to deliver the most hard-hitting attacks. The Republican National Committee operated the site *GoreWillSayAnything.com*, whereas the Democratic National Committee ran a site called *IKnowWhatYouDidinTexas.com*.

By 2004, candidates were using their Web sites in the same way as they did television spots, to present a blend of attacks on the opposition along with positive statements of their own programs. The biggest shift from earlier years was in the large number of attack ads featured on the Bush and Kerry sites. Both candidates used the Internet to publicize hard-hitting attacks on the opposition.

Similar to television advertising, though, the organizations running the most negative Web sites were the political parties and outside groups. For example, the RNC had a game known as "Kerryopoly" on its site in which players moved pieces around a board showing Kerry's five homes and various luxury possessions.²⁸ Meanwhile, the DNC had a feature called "Bush Record Exposed" on its Web site that listed his "Top 10 Lies," "Top 10 Flip-Flops," and "Top 5 Scandals."

In terms of overall themes, Bush's site had the early slogan "Steady Leadership in Times of Change." Later, this shifted to "Building a Safer World and a More Hopeful America." The site explained how to become a Bush volunteer, make a contribution, register to vote, write a supporting letter to a newspaper, and host a party for the president. At the same time, it attacked Kerry's "raw deal" and complained that Kerry "plays politics and makes empty promises." Every week new television ads were presented on the site for people who lived in states that were not targeted for ad expenditures.

In a twist on past elections, Bush's site presented a "Kerry Gas Tax Calculator" that estimated how much more money people would pay if Kerry's 50 cent/gallon proposal was enacted into law. This calculator asked people in which state they lived and how many miles they drove in an average week and then computed how much a gas tax increase would cost them. Not only could people calculate their own cost, they could forward the site to someone else via email so that individual could determine his or her own increase.

The site also had an animation game called "John Kerry's Flip Flop Olympics," in which players were asked to name Kerry's positions on improving education, whether he owned an SUV, tax relief, and Iraq. After allowing visitors to indicate how Kerry had voted and what statements he had made on these issues, the game listed what it said were Kerry's contradictory positions over the years.

Kerry's Web site emphasized "A Fresh Start for America." It explained how to volunteer, recruit fellow voters, and organize local campaign events. Visitors could contribute to campaign "blogs" and learn about a variety of issue positions. There also was a Rapid Response Center on the site that provided answers to GOP criticisms and attacks on Kerry. Another section featured a link titled "Bush-Cheney: Wrong for America," which accused Bush of leading one of the most negative campaigns in history.

Although there were no animation games or tax cut calculators, the site presented ads that were airing across the country. This included both ads explaining Kerry's vision for the future as well as commercials attacking the Bush-Cheney record. The site also featured longer videos explaining Kerry's background and why he was well suited to lead the country.

Neither candidate devoted much money to running ads on commercial Web sites. According to a study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, Kerry and Bush spent less than \$2 million on Internet advertising, a small proportion of its overall expenditures. Of this, Kerry spent three times as much (around \$1.5 million), while Bush expended around \$500,000.²⁹

The Rise of Negative Advertising

Critics have widely condemned the advertising style in recent elections, but few have defined what they mean by *negativity*. Observers often define negativity as anything they do not like about campaigns. Defined in this way, the term is so all-encompassing it

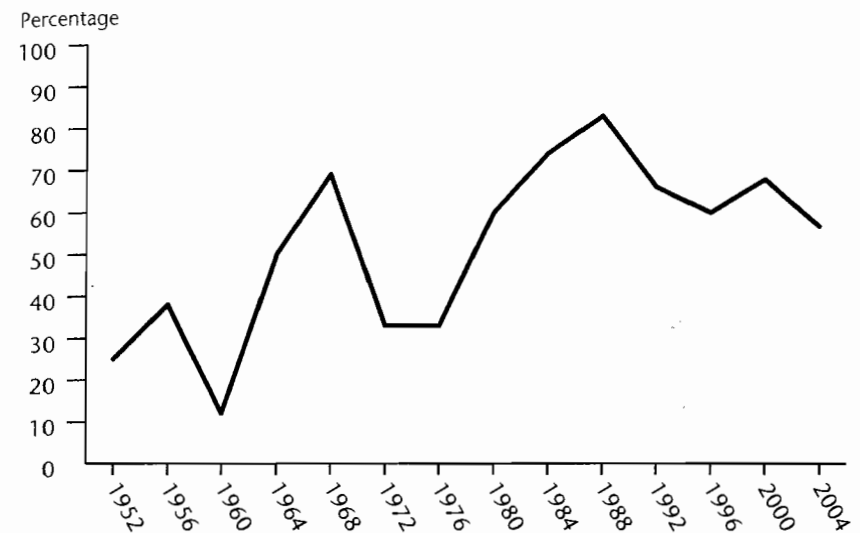
becomes almost meaningless. The broadness of the definition brings to mind former justice Potter Stewart's famous line in a concurring opinion concerning pornographic material. When asked how he identified pornography, Stewart conceded that he could not define it. But, the justice asserted, "I know it when I see it."³⁰

Others such as Jamieson have proposed drawing a distinction between three types of advertisements: attack (spots criticizing the opposition), advocacy (spots presenting a positive presentation), and contrast (those criticizing the opposition and presenting the candidate's own perspective). One study at the University of Pennsylvania Annenberg Public Policy Center demonstrated the differences in voter reactions to attack and contrast commercials. According to the research, "People are more upset by one-sided attack ads than two-sided contrast ads that include both an attack and a defense of the candidate's position. When shown an attack ad on Social Security reform, just over a third said it was responsible. But two-thirds said they viewed a contrast ad on the same issue as responsible."³¹

In his research of the constitutional ratification campaign of 1787–1788, William Riker distinguished direct criticism; charges of threats to civil liberties, governmental structure, and state power; and other types of appeals. Relying on contemporaneous documents used by each side in the ratification campaign, Riker was able to define negativity more clearly as unflattering or pejorative comments and show that the modern period has no monopoly on negative campaigning.³²

For my study, I examined prominent ads from 1952 to 2004 to determine the tone and object of attack. I included as negative any ad that in at least 50 percent of the presentation challenged an opposing campaigner in terms of policy positions or personal qualities. This category therefore subsumes the categories of both attack and contrast spots. If the ad included unflattering or pejorative comments made about the opponent's domestic performance, it was labeled negative. Overall, negative comments were classified into the categories of discussions about personal qualities, domestic performance, specific policy statements, international affairs, the campaign, and the political party affiliation in general. Fifty-six percent of prominent ads during this period were negative, with ads at the general election stage being about as negative (56 percent) as those in the nominating stage (54 percent). Republicans (61 percent) were more negative in their prominent ads than were Democrats (50 percent).³³

Figure 3-2 Negative Ads as a Percentage of Total, 1952–2004



Sources: For 1952–1988, Kathleen Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); for 1992–2004, *CBS Evening News* tapes.

Campaigns through 1960 were not particularly negative in their advertising (Figure 3-2). Twenty-five percent of prominent ads in 1952 were negative, and 38 percent were negative in 1956. In 1960, only 12 percent of the prominent ads featured critical statements. However, starting in the Johnson-Goldwater race of 1964, advertising turned more negative. Fifty percent of the prominent ads in 1964 and 69 percent of the prominent ads in 1968 were negative. The 1964 campaign produced a successful effort on Johnson's part to portray his opponent as a political extremist and threat to world peace. This race, as mentioned in Chapter 2, featured the "Daisy" ad and others that damaged Goldwater's political prospects. One of the most visible ads of that campaign showed someone cutting off the eastern seaboard of the United States with a saw to make the point that Goldwater was extreme in his perspective. An ad that never aired linked Goldwater to the Ku Klux Klan. Although the ad was produced and given the go-ahead for regional airing, it was pulled at the last minute, according to one Johnson aide, because it "strained the available evidence, it was going too far."³⁴

The effectiveness of Johnson's television ad campaign undoubtedly encouraged candidates in 1968 to use negative advertising. The

race that year, among Nixon, Humphrey, and Wallace, was quite negative. The presence of Wallace in the race threatened both Nixon and Humphrey, and each responded with ads attacking the Alabama governor. Humphrey ran an ad showing a large picture of Wallace while actor E. G. Marshall explained, "When I see this man, I think of feelings of my own which I don't like but I have anyway. They're called prejudices. . . . Wallace is devoted now to his single strongest prejudice. He would take that prejudice and make it into national law."³⁵ Democrats also sought to take advantage of popular displeasure over the vice presidential qualifications of Spiro Agnew. One of their ads opened with a poster of "Spiro Agnew for Vice President," while in the background a man looking at the picture gradually collapsed in laughter.³⁶

Republicans sought to capitalize on the bloody riots that occurred during the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago by running an ad linking the street disorder with Humphrey. In one of the campaign's most controversial ads, Nixon contrasted footage of the bloody riots with pictures of a smiling Humphrey accepting the nomination. With music from the song "Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight" playing in the background, the ad ended with the tag line, "This time vote like your whole world depended on it."³⁷

The elections of 1972 and 1976 were not nearly as negative in tone. In both races only about one-third of prominent ads were negative. Campaigners may have become more reluctant to air negative commercials because of the backlash that followed the highly emotional ads of the 1964 and 1968 races. McGinniss's exposé of the electronic merchandising of Nixon in the 1968 campaign created a climate of skepticism among reporters that increased the risks of negative campaigning. Moral outrage against attack ads dominated the 1976 elections, which followed the "dirty tricks" associated with Watergate.

These sentiments, though, dissipated with time. As the memory of Watergate receded, the outrage associated with it also began to decline. Voters no longer associated attacks on the opposition with unfair dirty tricks. The result was that presidential contests in the 1980s reached extraordinarily high levels of negativity. In 1980, 60 percent of prominent ads were negative; 74 percent were negative in 1984; and 83 percent were negative in 1988. For example, the 1980 campaign featured efforts, albeit ultimately unsuccessful, to portray Reagan as a dangerous extremist, in the mold of Goldwater. Carter used "person-in-the-street" ads in an effort to portray

Reagan as dangerous: "I just don't think he's well enough informed. . . . We really have to keep our heads cool and I don't think that Reagan is cool. . . . That scares me about Ronald Reagan."³⁸ Another ad sought to characterize the Californian as trigger happy by listing cases in which Reagan had backed military force, including the time he said a destroyer should be sent to Ecuador to resolve a fishing controversy.

Mondale used a similar strategy in 1984 when he ran an anti-Reagan ad showing missiles shooting out of underground silos, accompanied by the musical track of Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young singing lyrics from their song "Teach Your Children."³⁹ Mondale also sought to play on concerns about Gary Hart's leadership ability in the nominating process by running an ad featuring a ringing red phone to raise doubts about Hart's readiness to assume the duties of commander in chief.

The 1988 campaign attracted great attention because of numerous negative ads such as George Bush's "Revolving Door" ad. This commercial sought to portray Dukakis as soft on crime by saying the Massachusetts governor had vetoed the death penalty and given weekend furloughs to first-degree murderers not eligible for parole. Although Willie Horton was never mentioned in this ad, the not-so-veiled reference to him generated considerable coverage from the news media, with numerous stories reviewing the details of Horton's crime of kidnapping and rape while on furlough from a Massachusetts prison. The Bush team, headed by Roger Ailes, also hammered Dukakis for his failure to clean up Boston Harbor. Dukakis, meanwhile, ran ads that reminded viewers of concern about Bush's most important personnel decision, the choice of Dan Quayle as the Republican vice-presidential nominee. Widespread doubts about Quayle's ability gave Dukakis a perfect opportunity to run an ad criticizing this selection. The ad closed with the line, "Hopefully, we will never know how great a lapse of judgment that really was."⁴⁰

The 1992 race featured sharp attacks from Clinton and Perot on Bush's economic performance and from Bush on Clinton's past record and trustworthiness, but throughout there was a lower level of negativity than in 1988. Overall, 66 percent of prominent ads were negative. One memorable spot for Clinton tabulated the number of people who had lost jobs during Bush's administration. Bush, meanwhile, portrayed Clinton as just another tax-and-spend liberal who had a weak record as governor of Arkansas and who was shifty in his political stances. Perot ran a generally positive

campaign, with commercials and infomercials that addressed the national debt, job creation, and the need for change. However, in the closing days of the campaign, Perot ran the infomercial titled "Deep Voodoo, Chicken Feathers, and the American Dream," which attacked both Bush and Clinton. One of the most memorable segments of this program featured a map of Arkansas with a big chicken in the middle to convey the message that job growth during Clinton's governorship had occurred mainly through low-paying jobs in the chicken industry.

The 1996 campaign showed a slight drop in the level of negativity, as 60 percent of the ads attacked the opponent. In the nominating process, Forbes ran a series of attacks first on Dole and then on Buchanan and Lamar Alexander. In the general election, Dole attacked Clinton's character, his record on fighting drugs, and his overall liberalism. Meanwhile, the Clinton campaign linked Dole with unpopular House Speaker Newt Gingrich and accused the duo of slashing popular programs in the areas of Medicare, education, and the environment.⁴¹

In 2000, 50 percent of prominent ads during the primaries were negative, which was the lowest level since 1976. With many media stories about Forbes's 1996 onslaught and with memories of George Bush's attack campaign against Dukakis in 1988 still on the minds of political professionals, candidates toned down the negativity of their spots in order to avoid a backlash from voters turned off by attack politics. However, this cease-fire lasted only as long as the primaries. In the general election, ads featured a preponderance of heavy-hitting attacks on the opposition. Eighty-seven percent of the prominent fall ads were negative in tone (91 percent of Bush's, 100 percent of Gore's, and 60 percent of ads aired by outside groups). Both major candidates hammered at what were seen as weak personal qualities of the opponent: trust and integrity for Gore and knowledge and experience for Bush.

In 2004, 33 percent of primary ads were negative, which was far lower than in preceding years. Howard Dean and Richard Gephardt incurred the wrath of Iowa voters when they attacked opponents. Their poor finish in those caucuses dissuaded other candidates from going negative for the rest of the nominating stage. But as in the 2000 campaign, this cease-fire proved temporary.

The general election between Bush and Kerry featured an extraordinary number of negative attacks. Eighty-two percent of the fall advertisements were negative in style, making it the second most

negative presidential general election in the post-World War II period (1988 was the most negative at 83 percent). Bush complained that Kerry was not trustworthy on terrorism and too willing to raise taxes, while Kerry faulted Bush's Iraq policies and complained about job losses during the Republican administration.

The Objects of Negativity

Attack ads are viewed by many people as the electronic equivalent of the plague. Few aspects of contemporary politics have been as widely despised. Many observers have complained that negative campaign spots are among the least constructive developments in politics of recent years. Furthermore, they are thought to contribute little to the education of voters.

But in reviewing the objects of attack ads, it is somewhat surprising to discover that the most substantive appeals actually came in negative spots. For example, the most critical prominent commercials from 1952 to 2004 appeared on foreign policy (77 percent of which were negative) and domestic policy (68 percent), followed by international affairs (59 percent), domestic performance (54 percent), personal qualities (50 percent), campaign appeals (45 percent), and mentions of political party (17 percent).

There were some differences in the objects of negativity based on the stage of the campaign. Negative prominent ads were more likely to appear on international affairs during the nominating stage (75 percent) than during the general election campaign (56 percent). The same was true for domestic performance (57 percent in the general election campaign and 44 percent at the nominating stage). But personal qualities attracted about the same level of negativity during the general election campaign (52 percent) as during the nominating stage (46 percent).

If one examines the percentage of negative ads from 1952 to 2004 by the type of message contained in the commercials, it is apparent that in recent years domestic performance and specific policy statements more than personal qualities have been the object of the negative prominent ads. In 1980, 95 percent of ads dealing with domestic matters were negative, as were 73 percent of those in 1984 and 83 percent in 1988. Similarly, 100 percent of the ads dealing with specific policy appeals in 1984 and 1988 were negative. In contrast, fewer of the prominent negative ads in 1984 and 1988 dealt with personal qualities (50 percent and 67 percent, respectively).

These statistics demonstrate that attack ads are more likely to occur on substantive issues than on personality aspects of presidential campaigns.

Candidates often use attack ads to challenge the government's performance or to question the handling of particular policy problems. Despite the obvious emotional qualities of the commercial, Bush's infamous "Revolving Door" ad was quite specific in attacking Dukakis's record: "As governor, Michael Dukakis vetoed mandatory sentences for drug dealers. He vetoed the death penalty. His revolving-door prison policy gave weekend furloughs to first-degree murderers not eligible for parole."⁴²

Negative commercials are more likely to have policy-oriented content because campaigners need a clear reason to attack the opponent. Specificity helps focus viewers' attention on the message being delivered. Issue-oriented ads often attract public attention and are likely to be remembered. Political strategists need to be clear about the facts in case of challenges from the media. Reporters often dissect negative ads and demand evidence to support specific claims.

In addition, campaigners are reluctant to criticize candidates personally for fear that it would make themselves look mean spirited. In 1980, Carter ran ads challenging Reagan's experience and qualifications, and he was roundly criticized for being nasty. Results of research by Karen Johnson-Cartee and Gary Copeland demonstrate that voters are more likely to tolerate negative commercials that focus on policy than on personality. Voters' reactions help to reinforce the patterns noted previously.⁴³

Critics often condemn attack ads for disrupting democratic elections and polarizing the electorate. Based on experimental research, Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar argue that attack ads lower turnout.⁴⁴ However, recent experience does not bear this out. Despite a Republican primary battle in 1996 that was the nastiest in modern history and the complete absence of a Democratic primary contest, turnout in 1996 was higher than in 1988 and 1992 in every state primary or caucus except five.⁴⁵ And in the 1996 general election, the percentage of attack ads dropped from 1992, but the number of nonvoters rose, which is contrary to the prediction of Ansolabehere and Iyengar.

Indeed, most other scholars have found little association between ad negativity and drops in voter turnout. Martin Wattenberg and Craig Briens find "no evidence of a turnout disadvantage for those who recollected negative presidential campaign advertising." Steven

Finkel and John Geer suggest that campaign negativity actually may enhance turnout by heightening the perceived stakes of the race. Kim Kahn and Patrick Kenney argue that negativity per se does not reduce turnout, but that "mudslinging," meaning harsh and strident attacks on the opposition, does. Using ad-buy data on the frequency of negative attacks, Paul Freedman and Ken Goldstein conclude there is "no evidence that exposure to negative advertising depresses turnout. Instead exposure to negative ads appears to increase the likelihood of voting." Richard Lau and his collaborators find that negative political ads "do not seem to have especially detrimental effects on the political system."⁴⁶

There is little reason to expect a clear-cut relationship between ads and turnout. The most powerful predictor of turnout is mistrust and the general sense of political efficacy—in other words, whether people feel their vote will make a difference. Negative ads are as likely as positive ones to make individuals feel their vote matters and that they should care about the electoral outcome. Attack ads can convince viewers that a race is competitive, that there are differences between the candidates, and that the substantive stakes are high. In this situation, attacks are as likely to stimulate as depress voter turnout.

In researching the effectiveness of negative advertising, Richard Lau and Gerald Pomper conclude that "negative campaigning is relatively effective for challengers" because it helps them become known to voters and draw differences with the opposition. However, positive strategies work better for incumbents because they already are well-known.⁴⁷

From the standpoint of substantive content, therefore, negative ads contribute to public education when they are accurate. They do not necessarily lower voter interest. Observers interested in increasing the amount of substantive information in commercials should realize that negative ads are more informative than is commonly believed. Rather than focus on ad negativity, more attention should be devoted to the problems of ad accuracy and distortion. Commercials that convey distorted information are more problematic from the standpoint of democratic elections than attack ads per se.

Conclusion

Campaign communications have come a long way since printed pamphlets were the primary means of dialogue. Between radio and

television and the recent rise of e-mail and the Internet, candidates have a variety of means to communicate with the general public. As is made clear in this chapter, political aspirants appeal to voters based on the matters that are on the public mind. At a time of war, matters of foreign policy move to the forefront. During recessions, economic issues predominate. When there have been scandals or national crises, personal qualities rise in importance.

There also are natural variations in the cycle of negativity. After a series of vituperative campaigns in the 1980s, negativity subsided in the 1990s, then re-emerged in the 2004 general election. Policy discussions are not very detailed in any time period, yet ads still provide a sense of the values and priorities of the various contestants. Ironically, some of the most specific policy appeals are those broadcast in negative ads. As long as voters see the criticisms focusing on substantive matters, they are more tolerant of negativity. However, when charges are unsubstantiated or center on personal background or character, it becomes more of a risk for the attacking politician.