

*"So how do citizens learn about the weaknesses of their candidates? The answer is obvious: the opposition."*

## **Nasty, brutish and short**

**Everyone hates political attack ads --  
but they're informative and crucial to our democracy.**

By John G. Geer | Los Angeles Times | April 23, 2006

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THERE ARE few pieces of conventional wisdom more deeply held than the idea that negative political advertising is a danger to our society. David Broder, the dean of Washington's political journalists, claims that "trivial is too kind a word" for the content of today's campaigns. And the public apparently agrees. In February 2004, for instance, 80% of Americans claimed in a Pew Research Center poll that negative campaigns bothered them either "somewhat" or "very much." A USA Today headline captured the general sentiment well: "Orgy of Negativity Has Many Voters Disgusted."

The argument against attack ads is straightforward: They take our minds off the real issues by distracting us with meaningless personal attacks; they encourage deception and incivility, and they disillusion voters. In her book, "Dirty Politics," Kathleen Hall Jamieson claimed that a Republican ad in the 1988 presidential campaign " suffers from the weakness that pervades contemporary campaigning: It tells us what Dukakis is against, but not what Bush is for."

But is that really a weakness? The commercial in question was the now-famous "tank ad" in which Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis was shown driving a tank wearing a helmet that his advisors had hoped would convey a pro-military image. But Dukakis looked foolish, and the Republicans appropriated the footage for their spot, superimposing a list of all the defense programs Dukakis had opposed.

What's so bad about that? Shouldn't the public have known that Dukakis had a record of opposing various defense programs, especially with the Cold War still raging? Given that Dukakis was claiming to be strong on defense, wasn't it fair that George H.W. Bush's campaign comment on the accuracy of that claim?

**The reality is that politics is a rough-and-tumble game, and campaigns are pitched battles for control of the government. The stakes are often high, and the competition is usually fierce. Attack ads may be uncivil, but what's so important about civility when the future of the country is at stake? They may constitute "scare tactics," but fear also may be appropriate. The real issue should not be the tone of an ad but whether the information presented is useful to voters.**

There is little doubt that some of the ads that will be coming into our living rooms during the congressional elections this fall will be nasty and mean. Presidential campaigns have been increasingly more negative lately; the 2004 presidential election was the most negative since the 1950s. Still, only

about 50% of the ads run by John Kerry and George W. Bush were negative. Is that an alarming percentage? Not by historical standards. During the debate over the ratification of the Constitution, the anti-Federalists, according to political scientist William Riker, attacked the Federalists 90% of the time in pamphlets and public statements. Our new government was not even in place and critics were waging a fiercely negative campaign. Not only did the nation survive, these attacks helped forge the passage of the Bill of Rights to ensure the protection of key liberties.

There are many other examples in American history of harsh political rhetoric. In the 1828 presidential race, the opposition claimed Andrew Jackson was a murderer and a cannibal and that his wife was a prostitute. In 1860, critics called Abraham Lincoln "stupid" and an "ape." During the 1948 campaign, Harry Truman drew an analogy between the Republicans and the Nazis. The tones of these attacks make the 2004 Swift Boat charges against Kerry look like child's play.

**It may be satisfying to think of campaigns as events in which contenders sketch out their positive plans for government, allowing the public to choose between competing visions of the future. But this ideal fails to acknowledge that an informed citizen needs to know both the good and the bad of each candidate. Candidates will happily describe their qualifications — but the truth is that they have a strong incentive to exaggerate their accomplishments. Indeed, that incentive is so strong that political consultant Bob Squier once said that "most lies in politics are told in positive ads."**

**So how do citizens learn about the weaknesses of their candidates? The answer is obvious: the opposition.** Kerry wanted you to believe that he opposed the Iraq war. Yet it was Bush's negative ads that highlighted the inconsistency of Kerry's record. The best known of these was the much-discussed "windsurfer" spot, which talked about Kerry's shifting positions on a number of issues and concluded: "John Kerry: whichever way the wind blows."

Of course, we can all identify negative ads that undermined the political debate. The spots that ran against Georgia Sen. Max Cleland by Saxby Chambliss in 2002 might qualify because they questioned a decorated war hero's patriotism. Perhaps the "Daisy" spot qualifies — the ad in which President Lyndon Johnson used the innocence of a young girl to suggest in an utterly inflammatory manner that Barry Goldwater would bring nuclear war.

But one or two examples can be misleading. We need to take a systematic look at the content of ads. That is what I have done, examining (nearly) all the ads aired in presidential campaigns over the last 40 years. This comprehensive look tells a very different story from conventional wisdom. For one thing, negative ads are much more likely to discuss issues than positive ads. The general view is that negative ads are just personal attacks. That is wrong. And even when the attacks do get personal, more than three-quarters of them deal with the issues of experience or honesty — pieces of information that are important and relevant when selecting a president.

Negative ads are also much more likely to be buttressed by evidence than positive ads. Candidates can talk about supporting a strong national defense. Negative ads have to go further. It was not credible for Kerry simply to claim that the president's policies were weakening national defense; he needed to demonstrate just how Bush's policies undermined our security. Candidates face a burden of proof when

they go on the attack.

It is important that we set the record straight about negative advertising. This country is about to embark on a national election that will be filled with negative ads. Citizens face difficult choices when they head to the polls in November. Negative advertising provides a chance for Democrats to make a case for why Republicans should be driven out of office, and it gives the Republicans a chance to show the risks associated with such a change.

**This struggle will not be pretty, and at times the rhetoric will even be insulting to our collective intelligence. Yet we need to appreciate its contributions to the political process. The simple fact is that if negativity were to disappear from our electoral battles, so would our claim to being a democratic nation.**

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