

Successful Campaign Tactics:

- The advantages and disadvantages of going negative
- The role of pollsters

Lewis Mazanti
Curator/Archivist
Political Communication Center
University of Oklahoma

A Political Campaign:

“the organized actions that a political candidate undertakes in order to win an election”

Tactics

“the art or skill of employing available means to accomplish an end”

The Available Means

Persuasive Communication – the campaign message
[Argument - to make your case by use of logic and rhetoric]

Mass communication to the voters - - Advertising
[Inform, notify, to call public attention to]

Pollsters may help produce these means by providing needed information regarding public opinion

A Poll determines the winner of an election.

“faith in public opinion will become...a species of religion, and the majority its ministering Prophet.” - Alexis de Tocqueville; Democracy in America, Vol.2. 1840

[He warned that while democracy may free society from the tyranny of aristocratic authority, the substitution of the absolute power of a majority would impose an even greater despotism.]

“Democracy must be something more than two wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner.”

- James Bovard

Common uses of Benchmark Polling

Information –

- demographics of electorate – socioeconomic and attitudes
- what are the important issues
- name recognition
- standing against opponent or among the field

Use -

- get in or out of race [match up against opponent(s)]
- what should be the candidates' primary theme
- adjust image: overall appearance, dress, speech pattern; emphasize or downplay characteristics (education, profession, lifestyle, etc.)
- adjust communication style: wording, graphics, issue buzz words (euphemisms)

Incumbent: - how previous record is perceived

Challenger: - where incumbent is vulnerable (issues or traits to attack)
- prospects of winning

Common Use of Tracking Polls

Information needed to design the campaign message and advertising

- Are tactics working?
- Is desired image being perceived?
- Is the constituency being reached?
- Is the advertising effective?
- Is there a need to modify candidate's position on any issue?
- Need to respond to attacks?

The legitimate use of polling is to supply information

Unethical Use of Polling: Push poll – questions designed to influence the respondents, not to gather information. Publishing false or misleading data.

Political Campaign Advertising

(the public argument)

A tactical means of calling public attention to why voters should:

1. **Vote for you** - (Esteem for candidate – Positive ad)
2. **Not vote for your opponent** - Attack ad (negative criticism)
3. **Not believe your opponent's attacks** - Response ad

Mixed Purpose Ads use any combination of above

Use of Positive Ads:

- name recognition
- identify with voters
- develop heroic image
- positive association to groups or personalities
- state stance on issue
- to position the candidate on the political spectrum
- increase perception of leadership and/or qualification

Example types:

- Biographical spots
- Endorsements (celebrity, newspaper, man on the street)
- Campaign promise/action plan

Use of Negative Ads

To question opponent's fitness for office

By direct attack; or direct or implied comparison:

- position on issues
- past voting record or performance in office
- sources of campaign funding
- ethics in office
- association with negatively perceived person(s) or group(s)

Attacks on personal character or qualifications:

- arrest record/legal problems
- business/financial dealings
- morality issues

Typical techniques: Weathervane/flip-flop; use opponent's words against him; humorous attack (satire/parody, cartoon, etc.)

Emotional appeal – fearful consequences of opponent's election

Do Negative TV Ads Work ?

YES

If the ad is deemed as credible (the more truthful it is perceived, the better it should work)

Why ? – Because “Negative” ads:

- Are easier to remember
 - Are more emotionally arousing and provocative (i.e. more interesting)
 - Provide significant amounts of relevant information
 - Show clear differences between candidates
 - May help set agenda by forcing opponent to respond to an attack
- And because “Negative Ads” are more likely to –
- be more creative
 - make use of humor
 - provide more factual citations (making them generally more truthful)
 - attract news coverage
 - move polling numbers

The Potential Disadvantages of Negative Advertising

May cause a “backlash” or “boomerang” effect if

- it is viewed as untrustworthy or dishonest
- it crosses the “LINE” to be deemed as unethical

Candidates need to be aware of how and where the “line” is drawn; and who draws it.

Every political campaign will have a unique context in terms of current issues and its relationship with the news media.

The news media seem to thrive on polling data --- and negative advertising --- the more controversial, the better (for the news media.)

How will journalist “frame” the story of the electoral race? How will the argument be labeled? (“Sleazy,” “Below the Belt,” “Misleading”)

What is "FAIR" for negative ads?

- contrast of publicly proclaimed issue stances or public voting records
- attack opponent's lack of experience or publicly acclaimed qualifications

What is "UNFAIR" for negative ads?

- "False" advertising (lies, in any form)
- "Deceptive" or "Misleading" (misrepresentation of candidates' positions)
[especially if it is framed within an emotional appeal based on fear and/or prejudice]
- Attacks regarding religion, race, or family members' problems

Tactical use of Negative ads:

Attack early in the campaign

It may be wise to attack first; especially if the opponent has an obvious weakness that was pointed out in the polls.

(The damaging effects of an attack on an opponent are long lasting and will continue to be effective long after any negative backlash effect to the attacker has dissipated.)

If attacked, refute with a direct defense as quickly as possible; then counter attack ASAP!!!

Caution! – The belief that a false proposition is true is increased by repetition of the false proposition. Focus on repeating what is true, not what is false.

Defenses against Negative Attacks

Attack the attacker's credibility - Source Derogation

- Negative Image – Mudslinger
- Negative Association – Pawn of party bosses or big fund raisers

Attack the message: It's a misrepresentation; it's deceptive;
point out argument fallacy

The effects of rebuttal strategies are less long lasting than the damaging effect of the attack; therefore, the rebuttal messages should be frequently repeated throughout the campaign until the final hour.

Do not use negative attacks in the final days and hours of the campaign!

Voter's potential backlash of negativity to the attacker needs some time to dissipate before the votes are cast – your negative ads should be seen as your duty to fairly point out shortcomings and problems with your opponent's positions, record, or qualifications, not as a final hour "desperate" attempt to win.

(Not) Everybody Hates Negative Ads

“Negative campaigns may be a kind of guilty pleasure for Americans – they claim to dislike them, but inadvertently are drawn to them in much the same way that shoppers find themselves drawn to the tabloids in the checkout aisle.” --- Paul S. Martin

Does negative advertising suppress voter turnout at the polls?

“The survey says...” More than 80 percent of voters say attack-oriented campaigning is unethical, undermines democracy, lowers voter turnout, and produces less ethical elected officials.
--- Civic Values Surveys; Institute for Global Ethics

“Recent research says...”

negative campaigns stimulate problem awareness, anxiety about candidates, and make people perceive races as closer; thus increasing voter mobilization –
(Martin, Paul S., 2004)

exposure to negative campaign ads can actually stimulate voter turnout
(Goldstein and Freedman, 2002)

FAQs regarding Negative Ads

Is there any difference in the effects of negative advertising used for male or female candidates?

Can campaign reforms eliminate any incentive to make false or misleading claims in political communications?

What is the most famous or infamous negative ad?

How can I get information about the Political Commercial Archive ?

Email me: lwmazanti@ou.edu

Visit the Political Communication Center website: www.ou.edu/pccenter