

Ansolabehere & Iyengar, "Advertising & Political Discourse," *Going Negative: How Pol Advertisements Shrink & Polarize the Electorate* (NY:Free Press, 1995)

### 3

## ADVERTISING AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Political campaigns are expected to inform voters about issues of the day, to reduce their dependence on simplistic labels, and to enable them to reach reasoned choices. Unfortunately, even as candidates have become increasingly reliant on television advertising, the information function of political campaigns has fallen into disrepute. Campaigns appear all too superficial, and the question naturally arises whether superficial campaigns breed superficial voters.

Even by the most generous of standards, the American public is poorly informed about the choices. While almost all people recognize the names of their representatives in Washington, relatively few recognize the names of the candidates challenging them. And of those who do recognize their incumbent representatives, less than half feel they know enough to state something that they like or dislike about their members of Congress. Most people's opinions of the candidates, if they have an opinion at all, take the form of generic approval or disapproval rather than agreement with or objection to the politicians' policies and ideas.<sup>23</sup>

Should the public's apparent lack of sophistication and expertise be attributed to uninformative or nonsubstantive advertising? As we will demonstrate throughout this chapter, the answer is quite simply no. Instead, the relatively low levels of concrete information that voters bring to political campaigns represents an enormous opportunity for candidates to educate the public.

The educational potential of campaigns, and campaign advertising in particular, was underscored by Thomas Patterson and Robert McClure's well-known study of the 1972 presidential campaign. By comparing their survey respondents who either did or did not claim to recall watching a campaign spot, they showed that "recallers" were substantially more familiar with the candidates' stances on the issues.<sup>24</sup>

Less well-informed voters, of course, are more likely to be "taken in" by the persuasive appeals of the candidates, but these appeals are not occurring in a vacuum. Patterson and McClure's evidence suggests that the public's lack of sophistication and expertise concerning political issues should not necessarily be attributed to uninformative or nonsubstantive advertising. Voter ignorance may be attributed to several alternative factors. Large segments of the public may pay selective attention to campaign-related issues and may find nonpolicy issues (such as the candidates' personal traits or electoral prospects) more relevant or compelling. In addition, the public may "tune out" information concerning policy positions if the positions are seen as insincere, impossible to implement, or unimportant. When these factors are at work, the candidates could debate the issues at length with only negligible impact on voter information.

It could also be argued (and it is) that voters' limited awareness of the issues is due to the failings of the news media. The dominance of market-oriented television news and the increasing "tabloidization" of the print media have meant that the candidates' issue positions receive only minimal coverage. Indeed, the candidates' television advertisements are often more substantive and serious than news reports on the campaign. It is only too well-documented that media outlets of all stripes devote far more attention to the details, however sordid, of the candidates' personal lives and to the horse-race and conflictual aspects of the campaign than to matters of public policy. It is hardly surprising, then, that voters learn rapidly about the personal attributes of the candidates, and that the level of voter opinionation on questions of character invariably exceeds opinionation about the candidates' positions on issues.<sup>25</sup>

The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that the nonsubstantive appearance of campaigns may be more illusory than real: we find that exposure to campaign advertising is, in fact, a significant learning

experience. When advertisements reveal candidates' positions on the issues, voters become significantly more informed about these positions.

We will examine the contributions of campaign advertising to informed voting using two different indicators of learning. First, we consider the effects of advertising on voters' awareness of the candidates' positions on major issues. While it is obvious that candidates cannot provide detailed programmatic information within the framework of a thirty-second advertisement, they can and do convey meaningful information about their own (and their opponents') positions or records on well-known issues and policies.

From the beginning, political issues have been at the forefront of campaign advertising, though we often bridle at the manner in which issues are raised. Consider an infamous commercial run by North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms in 1990. Helms, who found himself locked in a tight race against Harvey Gantt (a black state senator), used the "white hands" advertisement to arouse white voters' opposition to affirmative action. Against the backdrop of a white applicant crumpling a rejection letter into a wastebasket, the text reads, "You needed that job. And you were the most qualified. But they had to give it to a minority because of racial quotas. Is that really fair?" This ad was widely criticized—both in North Carolina and nationally—for hitting below the belt. But for all of the controversy, the advertisement squarely confronted issues of affirmative action and fairness in the workplace on which there were clear, demonstrable differences in the candidates' positions.<sup>26</sup>

Helms's "white hands" commercial is typical: ominous, negative, but definitely issue-oriented. In fact, a recent survey of the content of political advertising in major campaigns found that approximately half of the broadcast advertisements provided "clear statements" about the candidates' positions on issues. This same study also showed that the prominence of issues in political advertising campaigns has increased since 1980.<sup>27</sup>

Our studies dealt with the main issues in the 1990 gubernatorial election (between Democrat Dianne Feinstein and Republican Pete Wilson), both of the 1992 U.S. Senate races (featuring the "women's team" of Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein versus Republicans Bruce Herschensohn and John Seymour), and the presidential race

TABLE 3.1  
*Candidates' Issue Orientation*

	1990 Gubernatorial Election	1992 Senate Election	1992 Presidential Election
Crime	Both candidates favor mandatory sentencing and the death penalty; both claim to have reduced crime rates while mayor.	All four candidates pledge to support tougher sentencing and increased police forces in order to eradicate "gangs and lawlessness."	
Environment	Both candidates oppose off-shore drilling for oil and favor tougher auto emission standards.		
Economy	Both candidates take credit for balanced budgets and economic growth while mayor.		
Unemployment		All four candidates pledge to support government-supported job training programs and tax incentives to encourage companies to stay in California.	Clinton points to increased unemployment and pledges to initiate government-supported retraining programs. Bush argues that his administration's trade policies will open foreign markets and boost employment opportunities.
Abortion		Both Democratic candidates pledge to support a woman's right to choice and to address the problem of sexual harassment of women.	Clinton pledges to appoint prochoice federal judges and attacks Bush for opposing the rights of women.

between George Bush and Bill Clinton. The issues on which the candidates advertised heavily included crime, the environment, unemployment, and abortion. Table 3.1 summarizes the positions taken by the candidates in the advertisements used in our studies.

Our own advertisements picked up those same themes. During the 1992 Senate campaigns, for instance, we produced an advertisement that described the economic devastation of California.

AUDIO

SINCE 1990, CALIFORNIA HAS LOST TWO AND A HALF MILLION JOBS. THE STATE NOW HAS THE HIGHEST UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IN THE NATION.

CALIFORNIA NEEDS ELECTED OFFICIALS WHO WILL FIGHT TO END THE RECESSION. ———WILL WORK TO BRING JOBS BACK TO OUR STATE. AS A U.S. SENATOR, HE/SHE WILL INTRODUCE LEGISLATION TO INCREASE FEDERAL SPENDING FOR JOB TRAINING PROGRAMS AND GIVE CALIFORNIA COMPANIES INCENTIVES TO MODERNIZE THEIR FACTORIES AND PLANTS.

CALIFORNIA NEEDS ———IN THE U.S. SENATE.

VIDEO

EMPTY FACTORIES AND BOARDED-UP STOREFRONTS; A GRAPH OF THE STATE'S UNEMPLOYMENT RATE; CLOSE-UP PICTURE OF THE CANDIDATE; WORKERS AT A McDONNELL-DOUGLAS PLANT AND A CONSTRUCTION SITE.

After the participants had watched the local newscast into which this advertisement had been inserted, they were asked to place both the sponsoring candidate and the opponent on a "government jobs programs" scale.<sup>28</sup> The results showed that advertisements are powerful sources of substantive information, especially in nonpresidential campaigns. Exposure to a single campaign advertisement such as this one significantly boosts voters' information about the candidates' positions on political issues. (Appendix B provides information about the specific questions used to measure information about the candidates' positions on the issues.)

Our second approach to voter learning during campaigns considers an alternative and more subjective form of political information. Even

though most voters are unaware of the specific details of candidates' positions on particular issues, they can and do utilize more inexpensive substitutes for factual knowledge. While the majority of Americans remain unfamiliar with the funding mechanisms and coverage provisions included in the Clinton administration's ill-fated health care proposal, they do know that President Clinton stands for expanded access to health care. More generally, researchers have established that the public can differentiate between the political parties on major issues.<sup>29</sup> Democrats, for instance, are considered proponents of social welfare and other public assistance programs, while Republicans are seen as protectors of business interests and supporters of a strong military. These stereotypes and expectations, however crude, enable voters to form beliefs about particular candidates' positions on issues.

We ascertained our participants' impressions of the various candidates' positions and credentials on the issues by asking them to list what they particularly liked or disliked about each candidate. Their responses covered the entire gamut of candidate attributes, from physical appearance, group connections, personal traits, and chances of victory to their positions on campaign issues. Candidate by candidate, we tallied the number of likes and dislikes that referred to specific issues and examined whether their frequency was affected by exposure to campaign advertisements. The results could not have been more clear-cut: exposure to advertising makes voters much more likely to refer to issues as reasons for supporting or opposing a candidate.

We pursued several specific questions of interest. We examined differences in voter learning in relation to different types of campaign advertising, paying particular attention to the question of advertising valence or tone. Here, contrary to conventional wisdom, our findings suggested that negative and positive advertisements were equally informative. Second, we considered whether the effects of advertisements used by candidates in one race could have an effect on how much voters know about candidates contesting other races. Such simultaneous or "spillover" learning effects turned out to be minimal; the effects of advertising on information were generally campaign-specific. Third, we identified groups of voters who were more or less likely to learn from advertising. We found that exposure to just one ad-

vertisement tended to level chronic differences in political information stemming from differences in education and various indicators of political interest. As the level of advertising increased, however, the information gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" returned and even widened.

Finally, we considered the issue of information parity among the candidates—how much do voters know about each of the contestants? Parity is important for both candidates and voters. The ability to convey information is vitally important to candidates because the more voters come to know about a candidate, the more inclined they are to vote for the candidate. Indeed, even minimal information about a candidate (such as mere name recognition) is strongly associated with voter preference for the candidate, at least in situations where the voter has even less information about the opposing candidate. Moreover, as advertisers, candidates are able to reach a large segment of the public with selectively favorable information designed specifically to influence voting decisions.

From the perspective of voters, encountering information from both (as opposed to only one) of the candidates is useful because reasoned choice requires a comparative assessment of the competing candidates. We further monitored voters' ability to engage in comparative judgments by monitoring their relative familiarity with both candidates. There was nothing surprising here: we found that each candidate's share of voter information depended on the level of advertising. When voters were exposed to only one candidate's advertising, that candidate became more familiar vis-à-vis his opponent. Exposure to both candidates' advertising, however, made voters more likely to be equally informed about both the candidates.

## THE EVIDENCE

The remainder of this chapter will identify more precisely the relationships revealed by our experiments. We begin with voters' ability to correctly place candidates on the issues. The top panel of Figure 3.1 graphs the level of voter awareness of the candidates' positions in the various campaigns under consideration. With the exception of the presidential election, exposure to campaign advertising significantly

boosted the level of issue information. In the dual Senate races, a single campaign advertisement provided a significant impetus to voter learning. Voters became even more informed when provided the opportunity to see an advertisement from each of the Senate candidates. In the Feinstein-Wilson gubernatorial race, exposure to advertising from both candidates was necessary to raise the level of issue information.

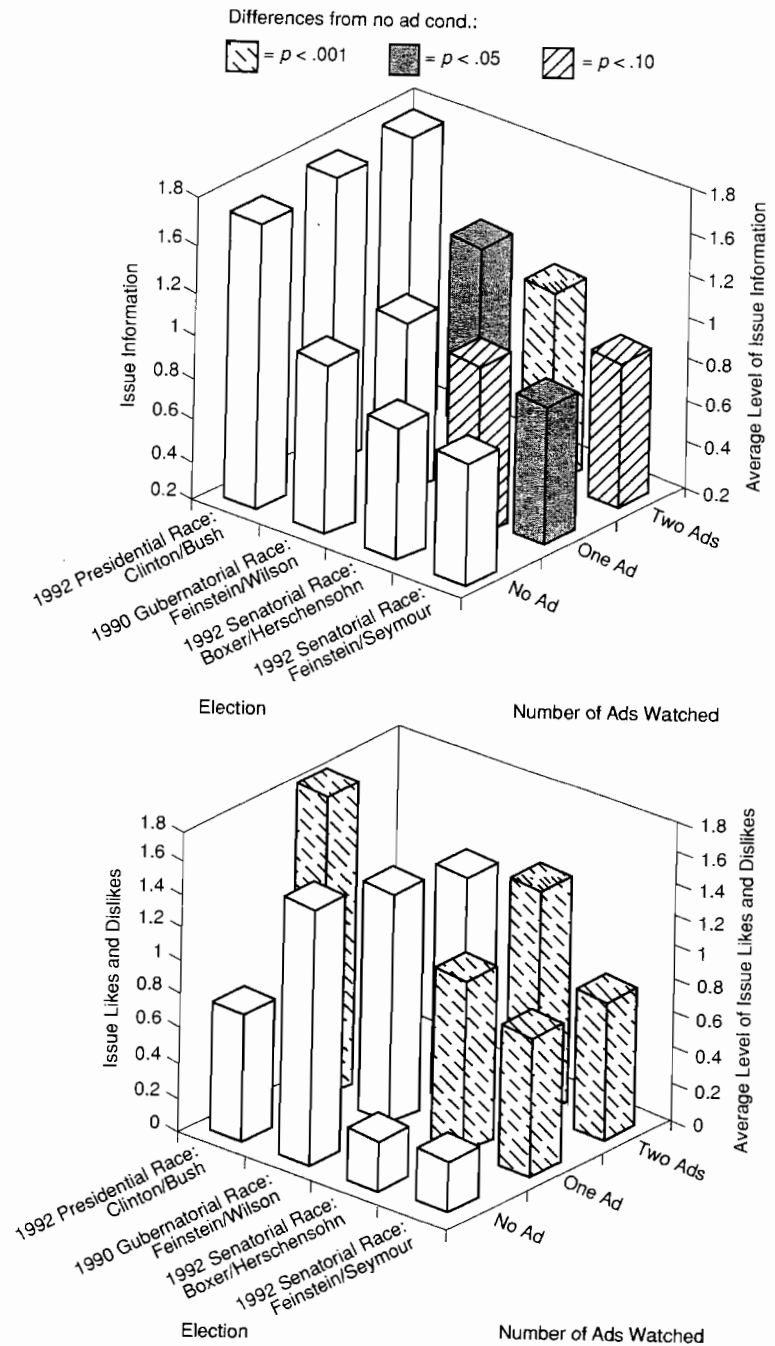
The distinctiveness of the presidential results is understandable. It is well-established that presidential candidates generate vast amounts of news coverage. Voters (and candidates) are thus less dependent on advertising. It is also clear that voters attain a much higher level of familiarity with the presidential candidates; some two-thirds of our experimental participants could correctly place Bush and Clinton on the issues of abortion and unemployment. In contrast, less than one-third of the sample could identify where Senate hopefuls Feinstein and Seymour stood on the issues of crime, abortion, and unemployment.

The underlying pattern is clear. Exposure to even small doses of campaign advertising is a significant educational experience. Aggregated across all four campaigns, the percentage of informed voters increased by 5 percent as a result of exposure to a single advertisement, and by 9 percent when both candidates advertised. Campaign advertising makes voters more aware of the issues.

The bottom panel of Figure 3.1 tracks the effects of advertising on our measure of subjective information—the number of spontaneous references to both candidates' positions on issues (any issues) in voters' lists of likes and dislikes of the various candidates. Here, the impact of advertising was even more pronounced. With the exception of the 1990 gubernatorial campaign (where issue-based likes and dislikes were unusually frequent irrespective of exposure to campaign advertising), voters became significantly more likely to refer to issues as a result of exposure to one or two campaign advertisements. Even the highly visible presidential candidates elicited a greater outpouring of issue-oriented comments when they advertised. Averaging across the four campaigns, the prominence of issues in voters' lists of likes and dislikes was nearly *doubled* when participants watched an advertisement from each of the competing candidates.

By either measure of issue information, therefore, exposure to campaign advertising is a significant learning experience. Advertisements

FIGURE 3.1  
*Learning about Issues*



impart information about their sponsors' positions on policy issues and leave voters with impressions that are more strongly tinged with issue considerations.

### The Question of "Spillover" Learning

We turn next to the question of whether the effects of advertising can spread or piggyback to other candidates and campaigns. In a presidential election year, the voter typically encounters television advertising from a multiplicity of candidates vying for various positions (from Insurance Commissioner to U.S. Representative to President). Can voters distinguish between the candidates on the roster in any given year, or do they instead simplify their task by assimilating or linking the positions of candidates from the same party? If information about candidates is sorted by party affiliation, advertising on behalf of a particular Democrat should be applied to other Democratic candidates. We would then expect a cascading form of information "coattails" by which candidates who advertise more extensively provide voters with cues about the positions of lesser known candidates. Alternatively, it may be that voters are inclined to treat candidates and races as distinct entities. In this case, advertisements that promote Bill Clinton's support for health care reform would not reflect on Barbara Boxer's or Dianne Feinstein's positions on this issue, and voters' information about the Senate races would be unaffected by Clinton's advertising campaign.

As we noted earlier, California voters were exposed to a spate of advertising during the 1992 campaign from presidential candidates Bush and Clinton, as well as the four senatorial contenders. Given the fact that voters knew considerably more about the positions held by Bush and Clinton, we naturally expected that exposure to advertising from the presidential campaign would boost information about the Senate candidates. We also considered the possibility that advertising from candidates in one of the simultaneous Senate races would affect learning about the candidates in the other race.

As revealed in Figures 3.2a-3.2b, the only traces of spillover between the presidential and senatorial campaigns concerned voters' likes and dislikes of the candidates. Exposure to an advertisement from

the presidential campaign, for instance, boosted (by a significant margin) the likelihood that voters would cite issues when asked about their impressions of the candidates in either Senate race. In reciprocal fashion, exposure to advertising from either of the Senate races more than doubled the frequency of issue-oriented comments aimed at Bush and Clinton.

Unlike the frequency with which voters invoked issues in their comments about the candidates, concrete information about the candidates' positions on the issues did not spread across campaigns. A Clinton advertisement on unemployment, for example, did not make voters any more able to identify the positions held by Boxer or Herschensohn (even though the Senate and presidential candidates held the same positions on jobs programs). Similarly, neither of the Senate races' advertising had any impact on information about the presidential candidates. In fact, the only instance of information spillover occurred within the Senate elections. Voters who watched two issue advertisements from the Boxer-Herschensohn race (one from each candidate) not only learned about the sponsors' positions, they also became significantly more informed about the positions taken by Feinstein and Seymour. This particular spillover effect, however, was not reciprocal—issue advertisements aired by Feinstein and Seymour did nothing for voters' information about Boxer and Herschensohn.

FIGURE 3.2A  
*Spillover Effects on Issue Likes and Dislikes*

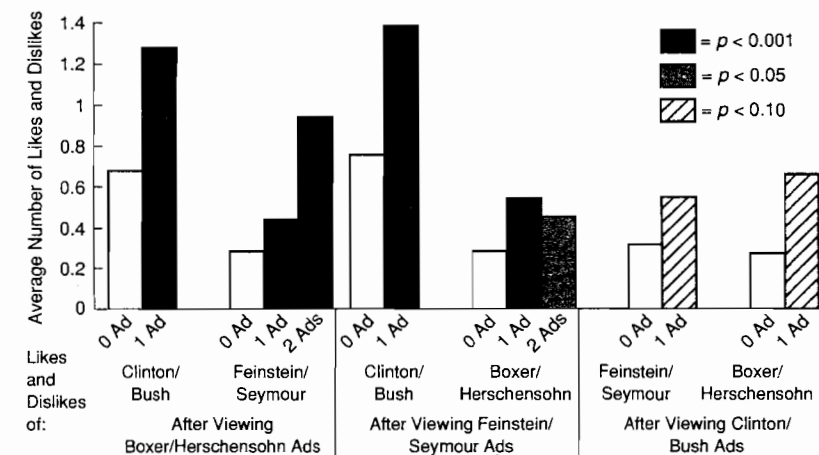
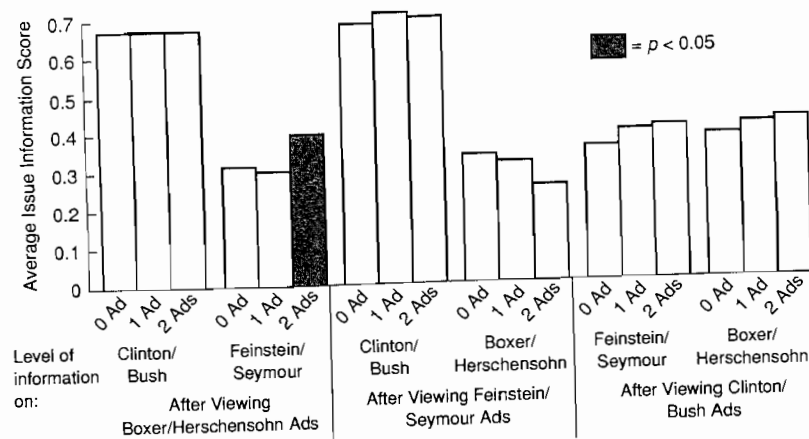


FIGURE 3.2B  
Spillover Effects on Issue Information



The evidence thus suggests that the scope of what voters learn from advertising varies with the indicator of information. Exposure to advertising from *any* candidate served to raise the frequency of issue-based likes and dislikes of *all* candidates. Voters who watched an advertisement describing one candidate's position on some issue became sensitized to issues when they were asked to comment about that candidate and various others. However, the effect of advertising on voters' ability to correctly identify the candidates' positions on the issues was more narrow and campaign-specific. Advertisements inform voters about the positions of the sponsor and his opponent, but they do not inform about the positions of these candidates' fellow partisans contesting other races.<sup>30</sup>

### The Effects of Advertising Tone

Campaign consultants have long suggested that advertising tone is an important ingredient of effective advertising. Negative advertisements are thought to be particularly attention-getting and memorable, and therefore more informative. We manipulated the tone of the campaign advertisement in several of our one-ad studies. In the 1990 gubernatorial study, for instance, participants watched advertisements from

Dianne Feinstein and Pete Wilson on the issues of crime and the environment. In the positive versions of these advertisements, the sponsor was depicted as "tough" on crime and a friend of the environment. In the negative versions, the opponent was depicted as "soft" on crime and a foe of environmental protection. In all other respects (visuals, the announcer, etc.), the positive and negative versions of the advertisements were identical. Any differences in the effects of the positive and negative advertisements, therefore, can be attributed only to advertising tone. Table 3.2 provides a capsule summary of our tone manipulations.

In our two-advertisement studies, we varied advertising tone so that participants watched either one or two positive (or negative) advertisements. Our ability to assess the effects of advertising tone in these studies was necessarily less precise because the advertisements we used were selected from those that were actually aired by the various candidates. The positive and negative advertisements thus differed in many attributes other than their tone (such as the voice of the announcer, the musical backdrop, visuals, thematic focus, etc.). Our definition of negative tone in these studies corresponds to the conditions that featured two negative advertisements; conversely, positive tone encompasses conditions in which participants were exposed to a positive advertisement from each candidate.

The differences in voter information attributable to the tone of campaign advertising are displayed in Figures 3.3a–3.3b. In general, we find that advertising tone counts for little; voters come away from positive and negative advertisements with about the same level of issue information. In addition, they are no more nor less likely to talk about issues after watching positive or negative advertisements. In the few scattered instances where tone produced a difference, no consistent pattern could be detected. In the Boxer-Herschensohn Senate race (which, in reality, was entirely negative in advertising tone), negative advertisements proved more informative and more evocative of issue-based likes and dislikes of the candidates. In the presidential campaign, however, the difference was in the opposite direction—positive advertising resulted in significantly higher information and more frequent references to issues in voters' lists of likes and dislikes of the candidates.<sup>31</sup>

TABLE 3.2  
*Experimental Manipulations of Advertising Tone*

1990 Gubernatorial Campaign—Environment	
Positive Ad	Negative Ad
When federal bureaucrats asked for permission to drill for oil off the coast of California, _____ said no. When the automobile industry wanted to weaken pollution controls, _____ said no. The Russian river, the giant Sequoias, Yosemite Valley, Mono Lake; these are the treasures that make our state great. _____ will protect these wonders. California needs a Governor like _____.	When federal bureaucrats asked for permission to drill for oil off the coast of California, _____ said yes. When the automobile industry wanted to weaken pollution controls, _____ said yes. The Russian river, the giant Sequoias, Yosemite Valley, Mono Lake; these are the treasures that make our state great. _____ will destroy these wonders. California can't afford a Governor like _____.
1990 Gubernatorial Campaign—Crime	
Positive Ad	Negative Ad
It's happening right now, in your neighborhood. A generation of youths slowly dying. _____ intends to stop this tragedy and preserve California's future. As Mayor of _____, _____ added police officers, built new jails, and fought hard against drugs. The result? Major crime rates fell by 12 percent. This record won the endorsement of the California Association of Police Chiefs. California needs a Governor like _____.	It's happening right now, in your neighborhood. A generation of youths slowly dying. _____ is not the candidate who intends to stop this tragedy and preserve California's future. As Mayor of _____ cut the police force, blocked new jails, and opposed drug education programs. The result? Major crime rates increased by 12 percent. This record was condemned by the California Association of Police Chiefs. California can't afford a Governor like _____.
1992 Senate and Presidential Campaign—Women's Issues	
Positive Ad	Negative Ad
The Senate Judiciary Committee. Professor Anita Hill testifies that she was repeatedly subjected to sexual harassment by Clarence Thomas. The Senators reject Hill's testimony; some even question her sanity. Barbara Boxer (Dianne Feinstein, Bill Clinton) believes that sexual harassment is a real problem and it is time to stand up for the rights of women. <Candidate's sound bite.> Elect Barbara Boxer (Dianne Feinstein) U.S. Senator (Bill Clinton President).	The Senate Judiciary Committee. Professor Anita Hill testifies that she was repeatedly subjected to sexual harassment by Clarence Thomas. The Senators reject Hill's testimony; some even question her sanity. Bruce Herschensohn (John Seymour, George Bush) does not believe that sexual harassment is a real problem and has opposed laws that stand up for the rights of women. Not Barbara Boxer (Dianne Feinstein, Bill Clinton). <Candidate's sound bite.> Elect Barbara Boxer (Dianne Feinstein) U.S. Senator (Bill Clinton President).

Table 3.2, continued

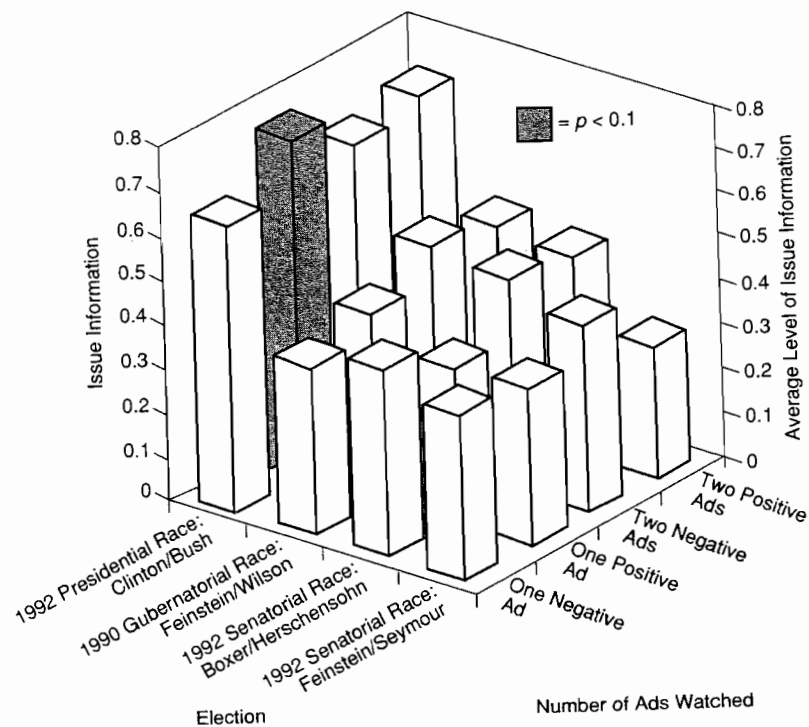
1992 Senate Campaign—Unemployment	
Positive Ad	Negative Ad
Since 1990, California has lost 2.5 million jobs. The state now has the highest unemployment rate in the nation. California needs elected officials who will end the recession. _____ will work to bring jobs back to our state. _____ will introduce legislation to increase government funding for job training programs and to provide California companies with incentives to modernize and expand their factories and plants. California needs _____ in the U.S. Senate.	Since 1990, California has lost 2.5 million jobs. The state now has the highest unemployment rate in the nation. California needs elected officials who will end the recession. _____ has done nothing to bring jobs back to our state. _____ opposes legislation to increase government funding for job training programs and to provide California companies with incentives to modernize and expand their factories and plants. California can't afford _____ in the U.S. Senate.

Based on the results shown in Figures 3.3a and 3.3b, we conclude that negativity does not bolster the information value of political advertising. How much voters learn about the candidates' positions and the extent to which they think about political issues when evaluating the candidates does not depend on the tone of the advertising campaign.

### Who Learns?

To this point we have assumed that all voters learn uniformly from advertising. Of course, this is implausible. Academic researchers have devoted considerable effort to identifying the factors that discriminate between people who comprehend and learn from campaign messages and those who do not.<sup>32</sup> These studies have demonstrated that the reach of campaign messages is limited by built-in differences in recipients' political attentiveness and information. We know that the more attentive and informed are drawn disproportionately from the ranks of the affluent, educated, and politically engaged strata of society. Of course, attentive and informed voters are more likely to monitor campaigns and messages about the candidates' positions on the issues. In this sense, the effect of campaigns is to exacerbate existing information inequalities—the smart get smarter, the uninformed stay uninformed.

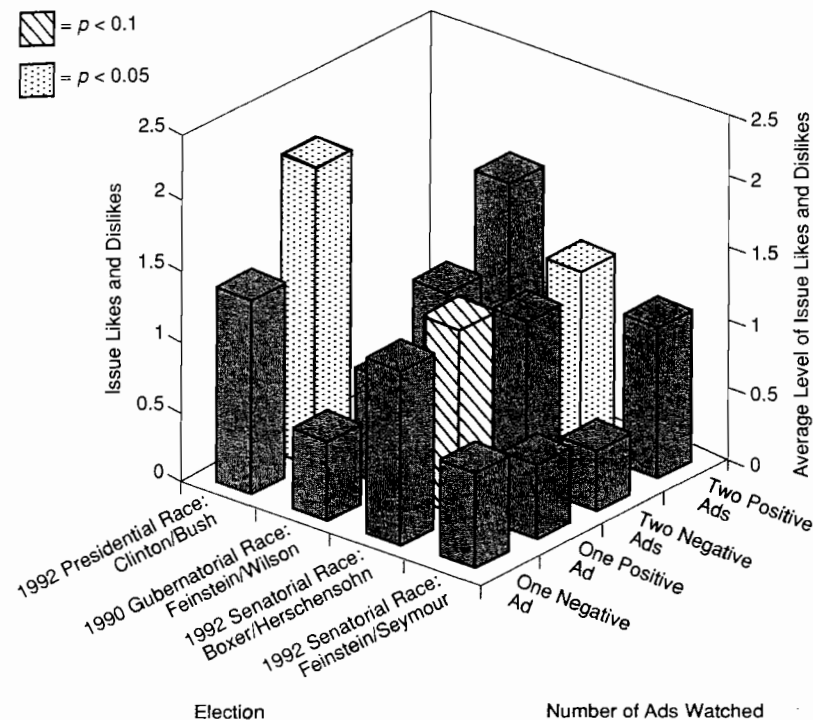
FIGURE 3.3A  
Effects of Advertising Valence on Issue Information



Political advertising may not fit the general pattern described above. Unlike most channels of campaign communication, advertising allows candidates to reach uninterested and unmotivated citizens—those who ordinarily pay little attention to news reports, debates, and other campaign events. After all, the “audience” for political advertising is primarily inadvertent—people who happen to be watching their preferred television programs. Of course, viewers can choose to tune out or channel-surf during advertising breaks, but the fact remains that the reach of advertising extends beyond relatively attentive and engaged voters.

We distinguished between more and less attentive voters using a variety of measures. These included years of formal education (high school versus college), prior knowledge about current events, interest in public affairs, prior voting history, and attentiveness to the print

FIGURE 3.3B  
Effects of Advertising Valence on Issue Likes and Dislikes

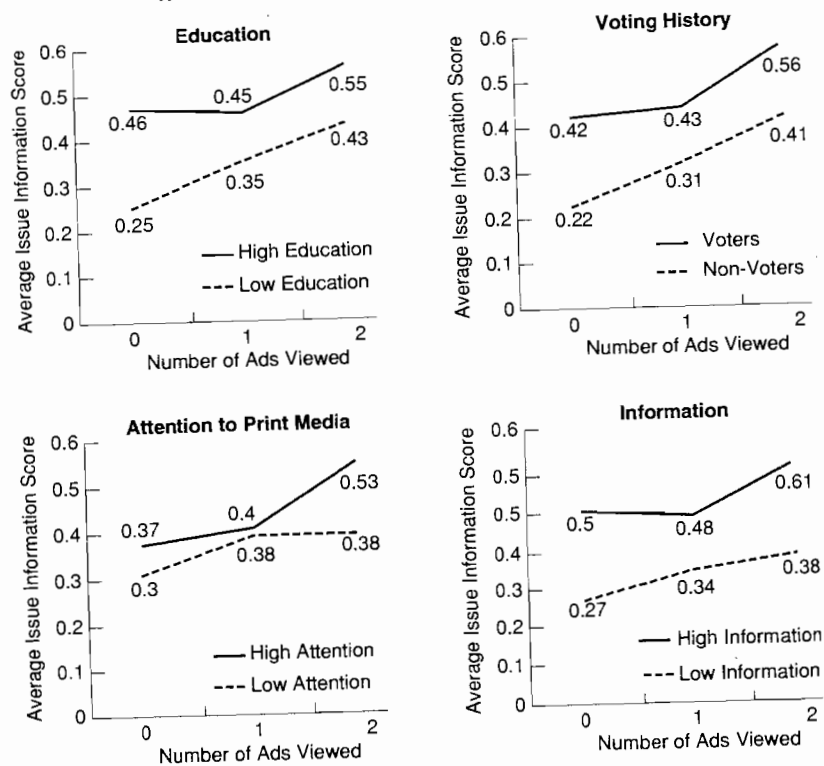


media.<sup>33</sup> In addition to these indicators, we also examined differences in learning associated with party affiliation and gender. Party affiliation is especially important, for it enables us to assess whether learning is politically motivated or “selective.” Perhaps voters find advertisements from one of their “own” more interesting, credible, or relevant than advertisements from the opposition. Gender is also relevant because three of the candidates contesting the races under consideration were women (Dianne Feinstein in 1990, Feinstein and Barbara Boxer in 1992). The presence of two women Senate candidates in 1992 attracted considerable publicity and discussion concerning a potential “year of the woman.” Research suggests that men tend to be more attentive to the political world, but analysts have wondered whether the presence of strong female candidates might close this gender gap.

For the purpose of assessing group differences in learning, we pooled across all four campaigns. In the case of participants who watched advertising from the 1990 gubernatorial candidates, learning was defined as information about the gubernatorial candidates; in the case of the presidential study, it was learning about Bush and Clinton, and so on.

The results of this pooled analysis (shown in Figure 3.4) were intriguing. As we expected, the information boost produced by exposure to a single campaign advertisement was much greater among less-advantaged groups. However, when the level of advertising was increased to two advertisements, the learning effects became more pronounced among the more attentive and engaged. The more educated and informed, frequent users of the print media, and regular voters all registered no increase in information after exposure to a

FIGURE 3.4  
*Individual Differences: Issue Information*



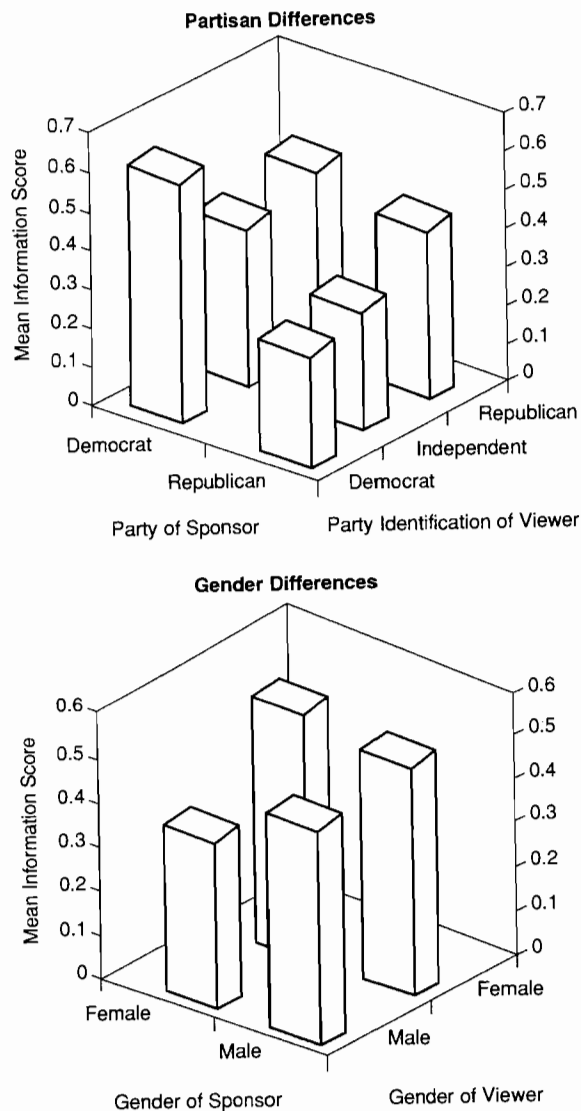
single advertisement, but showed substantial increases after watching two advertisements. Among their less-advantaged counterparts, however, exposure to two advertisements induced only modest gains in information. As a result, the information gap between the more and less attentive was narrowest when participants encountered advertising from only one of the candidates, and widest when participants encountered either none or two political advertisements.<sup>34</sup>

The case of voters' prior political information is illustrative. Among our participants who watched no campaign advertisements, the high-information group enjoyed a lead of 23 percent in awareness of the candidates' positions. Among participants who saw a single campaign advertisement, the lead dropped to 14 percent. And when the news-cast included two advertisements, the lead was back to 23 percent.

Extrapolating from these results, we may surmise that as campaigns generate more extensive amounts of advertising, the less attentive and informed either tune out or fall victim to information overload. Either way, they fail to learn. The more attentive voters, on the other hand, only begin to acquire new information as the level of advertising surpasses some threshold. Given the vast amounts allocated to broadcast advertising in most major races, our results lead to the conclusion that advertising is not as egalitarian a form of campaign communication as expected—the more the candidates advertise, the more their message reaches only the better-informed segments of the electorate.

We turn next to the effects of party identification and gender. As noted above, the importance of party labels in American politics leads us to expect that advertising is particularly informative when the sponsor and viewer hold the same party affiliation. As Figure 3.5 indicates, this expectation was amply confirmed: partisan agreement enhances learning about the candidates' positions.<sup>35</sup> When the candidate who advertised was Republican, Republicans were more informed than Democrats by a margin of 14 percent. But when the sponsor was a Democrat, Democrats were more informed than Republicans by a margin of 13 percent.<sup>36</sup> Aggregating across both parties, viewers who affiliated with the sponsoring candidates were more informed than those affiliating with the opponent as well as those with no sense of party identity.<sup>37</sup>

FIGURE 3.5  
*Partisan and Gender Differences in Learning: One-Ad Studies*



Did women learn more from women candidates than men? Clearly they did. As shown in the bottom panel of Figure 3.5, men were more informed than women when the sponsoring candidate was a man. The tables were turned, however, when the candidate was a woman. Now women were more informed than men.<sup>38</sup>

### Information Parity among the Candidates

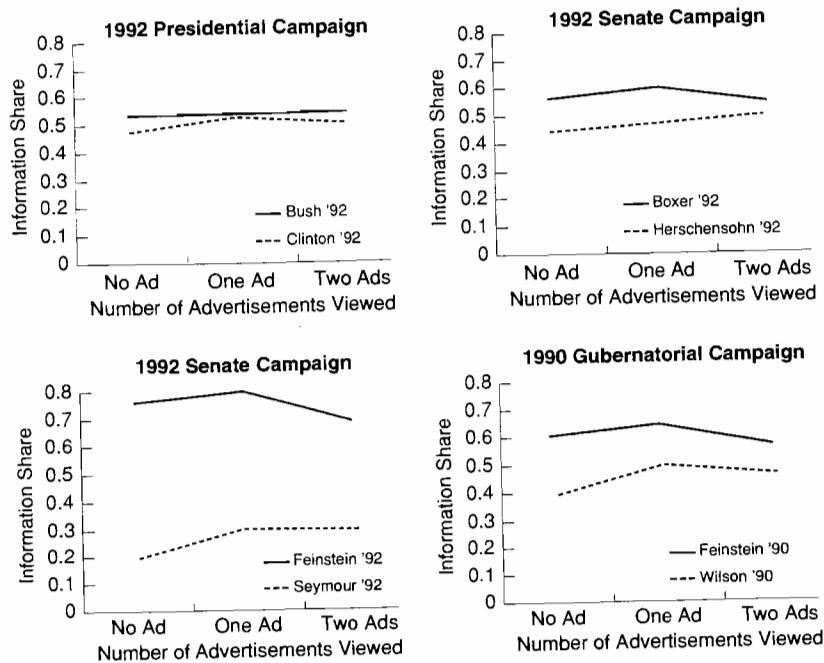
Finally, we return to the question of differences between individual candidates in their "share" of what the public learns and the extent to which the distribution of information about the candidates is affected by campaign advertising.

From the candidates' perspective, the ideal world would be one in which voters learn a great deal about them and little about their opponent(s). Since voters tend to shy away from relatively unknown candidates, familiarity is tantamount to preference. A one-sided distribution of information, though beneficial to the dominant candidate, impedes voters' ability to choose on the basis of issues. Voters need to know about both candidates' positions so that they may determine which of them is closer to their own positions.

We examine individual candidates' level of familiarity vis-à-vis their opponent in Figure 3.6. Our measure expresses voters' information about particular candidates as a fraction of their total information about both candidates.<sup>39</sup> A score of 1.0 for Barbara Boxer, for example, would mean that voters knew something about her and nothing about her opponent, Bruce Herschensohn. A score of zero would show the opposite, and .5 would be the point of equality under which voters possessed the same amount of information about both candidates.

As Figure 3.6 indicates, the presidential election was clearly the most closely contested campaign in terms of voter information. Despite Bush's incumbent status, our participants were just as familiar with Clinton's positions on issues as they were with Bush's. Each candidate's share of voter information remained even regardless of the level of campaign advertising. Our results thus confirm the argument (noted earlier) that presidential candidates' access to alternative sources of communication makes political advertising relatively unimportant in the battle for public visibility.

FIGURE 3.6  
Candidates' Share of Voter Information



The nonpresidential races fluctuated considerably with regard to the individual candidates' relative familiarity. Among participants exposed to no advertising at all, the Democratic candidates enjoyed a substantial edge in familiarity over the Republicans. In all three races, the candidates were able to increase their share of voter information when they advertised and their opponent did not. As might be expected, the gain in relative familiarity was especially prominent for the candidates who were initially less visible (the Republicans). In the cases of Pete Wilson and Bruce Herschensohn, "solo" advertising enabled them to achieve parity with their Democratic opponents. Averaging across the sponsoring candidates, the increase in relative familiarity was 5 percent. Advertising by one candidate makes the advertiser more familiar with voters at the expense of the opponent.

As expected, the distribution of voter information was most equitable when voters were equally exposed to both candidates. The information edge enjoyed by gubernatorial candidate Feinstein and Senate

candidate Boxer was substantially eroded when both candidates had access to voters. In the Feinstein-Seymour Senate race, although Seymour's share of information increased slightly when both candidates advertised, Feinstein's dominant familiarity was generally unaffected by the level of advertising.

In summary, exposure to competitive advertising campaigns increases voters' familiarity with both candidates. In the process, by evening the candidates' level of visibility, advertising benefits less well-known and less well-established candidates. Competitive advertising also benefits voters by enabling them to compare the candidates on the issues.

## CONCLUSION

Though political advertisements are generally ridiculed as a serious form of campaign communication, our results demonstrate that they enlighten voters and enable them to take account of issues and policies when choosing between the candidates. Just why are campaign advertisements informative?

In the first place, as campaign consultants are quick to point out, the inherent brevity of the campaign advertisement does not necessarily preclude the transmission of substantive information. Even the slowest-speaking of candidates can articulate a portion of their positions and records within the span of thirty seconds. In the 1992 Senate race between Barbara Boxer and Bruce Herschensohn, a Boxer advertisement noted Herschensohn's position on six different issues—his support for increased defense spending, his opposition to Social Security and the home mortgage tax deduction, his proposals to abolish the Department of Education and terminate federal funding for AIDS research, and his prolife stance on abortion.

When a political advertisement is aimed at a single issue (as is often the case), candidates can describe their position in considerable detail. Consider the following statement on abortion with a running time of twenty-four seconds.<sup>40</sup>

I BELIEVE THAT THE QUESTION OF ABORTION OUGHT TO BE RESERVED EXCLUSIVELY TO A WOMAN AND HER DOCTOR. I FAVOR GIVING WOMEN THE

UNFETTERED RIGHT TO ABORTION. I ALSO FAVOR THE FEDERAL FUNDING OF ABORTIONS THROUGH MEDICAID FOR POOR WOMEN AS AN EXTENSION OF THE RIGHT TO ABORTION, AND I OPPOSE ANY STATUTORY OR CONSTITUTIONAL LIMITATIONS ON THEIR RIGHT.

The brevity of the advertising message may actually strengthen its information value. The typical person's attention span for political information is notoriously short-lived; few of us are sufficiently motivated to send away for the candidates' position papers, tune in to the ten-minute excerpts from campaign speeches on the "MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour," or watch the entire speech on C-SPAN. Those who do so are political aficionados and experts. The great majority of voters bypass or ignore information that entails more than minimal acquisition costs, preferring to use messages that are simple to digest and easily obtained. Of course, campaign advertising meets the demand for both simplicity and access.

In addition to the convenience benefits of advertising, political advertisements may be informative because of their reliance on widely shared cultural symbols and scripts—the Social Security card, construction workers in their hard hats, Soviet troops marching through Red Square, and so on. The imagery of campaign advertising serves to remind voters about what they already "know" about the candidates' positions on issues. Most Americans are socialized to believe, for example, that Democrats favor jobs programs and that Republicans favor balanced budgets. Advertising on the issues evokes these stereotypic beliefs about the candidates. In effect, political advertising informs voters both by providing new information and by refreshing their existing store of knowledge. This characteristic of political advertising also explains why people are more able to recall information from political advertisements than from product advertisements. Unlike their beliefs about political parties and candidates, most Americans are not brought up to believe that Anacin and Aspirin have particular strengths and weaknesses. Product advertising, being less likely to evoke prior knowledge, is thus more difficult to retain. In one national study conducted during the 1972 presidential campaign, for instance, over 50 percent of people were able to recall information

from political advertisements. Few, if any, product advertising campaigns can hope to achieve this level of recall.<sup>41</sup> In short, the continuous interplay between advertising and voters' prior beliefs provides an important impetus to learning. As we will show in Chapter 4, the intermingling of new and old information is also crucial to understanding the effects of advertising on voter preference.



Unfortunately, the trajectory is downward. By all accounts, campaigns will only continue to become more negative and nasty. Many political consultants have come to believe that all Americans are cynical about their government and that the electorate responds only to negatives and, thus, that they must go negative.<sup>124</sup> We believe that this attitude is folly; it is dangerous, and it is very hard to reverse.

## 6 THE SPECTACLE

The electorate has grown weary of the nastiness and negativity of campaigns. They are mad at the candidates, mad at the parties, mad at the media, and mad at anyone else who steps into the electoral arena. Many people now choose to stay home on election day; others openly express their dissatisfaction with the candidates and the parties among which they must choose. People no longer feel that they vote *for*, only against. If venom isn't really what the public is after, why do candidates insist on going negative?

Politicians and campaign consultants are, by and large, not mean-spirited people who conspire to scare voters away from the polls. The reality is more complex. The negative tenor of campaigns can be traced to the competitive nature of political advertising, to the activities of organized interests, and, last but not least, to the ways in which reporters cover the campaign. Politicians, interest groups, and journalists all act in ways that serve their own best interests. Few of these players really want to produce highly negative campaigns, but the interplay among them produces the kind of campaigns that voters have come to loathe.

"Politics," Lloyd Bentsen reflected after the 1988 election, "is a contact sport."<sup>125</sup> The main event is the head-to-head competition between the candidates. This, above all else, drives candidates to assail one another with thirty-second spot ads. Put bluntly, candidates attack out of fear: fear that the opposition will throw the first punch, fear that

they will appear weak if they don't respond in kind. In politics, the best defense is a strong offense, and negative advertising is the most expedient way to fend off the opposition's attacks.

In addition, candidates attack to expand the scope of the political conflict, to drag organized interests and the media into the fray. Political campaigns have about them the same excitement as a prize fight. The more intense the conflict, the more people are drawn to it. Political campaigns, however, are not nearly as orderly as professional boxing matches. No ropes keep the audience from joining in. The more a candidate attacks, the more she makes news; the more conflict there is, and stories about the conflict, the more likely the candidate's proponents are to join the fray. Corporations, professional associations, unions, and other organizations have large stakes in the outcomes of elections, and they don't remain on the sidelines long. These organizations put up millions of dollars to underwrite the candidate's campaign activities; they also aggressively publicize their support of and opposition to politicians independent of the candidate's own campaigning. Through unrestrained independent advertising, interest groups can and do influence the tone, the issues, and even the outcome of elections.

The media are less partisan, but have an equally important effect on the tenor of campaigns. Journalists report the campaign with the verve of sportswriters covering a title fight. Their job, after all, is to sell papers and attract viewers, and elections are full of great material—the mistakes and weaknesses of the candidates, the twists and turns of public opinion, and the jabs and hooks of political debate. Campaign commercials, especially the negative ones, are ideally suited to the dictates of a good news story. They pack a sensational story with good visuals and good sound into thirty brief seconds. Nothing grabs the public's attention like the smell of a scandal or the prospect of a political upset. Such stories make for entertaining reading, but they don't instill confidence in the political system.<sup>126</sup>

## COMPETING FOR VOTES

The 1988 presidential election made the adversarial nature of political advertising painfully clear. George Bush's commercials assailed Mi-

chael Dukakis for releasing dangerous criminals on furlough, for polluting Boston Harbor, for being ignorant about foreign affairs, for vetoing a bill requiring Massachusetts schoolchildren to salute the American flag, and for being a card-carrying member of the American Civil Liberties Union. The Dukakis camp was slow to react to these criticisms. Dukakis himself felt that the attacks were either unfounded or so ludicrous as to be unworthy of a response.

Worthy or not, the attacks sank Dukakis's presidential ambitions. Bush successfully portrayed Dukakis as ideologically extreme, unpatriotic, and incapable of handling important problems. By not fighting back, Dukakis created the image that he was ineffectual and indecisive. Ed McCabe, a New York marketing director who worked on Dukakis's advertising for a time, wrote after the election: "I don't think he ever realized that there's one thing the American people dislike more than someone who fights. That's someone who climbs into the ring and won't fight. That's what really happened here. He threw the fight."<sup>127</sup>

Four years later, Republican strategists reran the same themes. Bush impugned Bill Clinton's integrity, questioned his patriotism, and demonized him as a tax-and-spend liberal. Even though Clinton carried considerably more personal baggage than Dukakis, Bush's attacks did not work in 1992. They failed because Bill Clinton did something that Dukakis didn't do: he fought back. GOP advertisements were quickly countered with Democratic advertisements. Speeches by Bush or Quayle met prompt responses by Clinton or another prominent Democrat. Criticisms of the Republicans' daily messages zipped to newspapers and radio and television stations around the country via fax and satellite.<sup>128</sup>

The 1992 Democratic campaign team won the battle of the airwaves because they had anticipated the Republican strategy and responded appropriately. Here lies the true art of campaigning. Candidates must decide when to take the initiative and when to follow, when to take the high road and when to take the low, when to seize an issue and when to change the subject. There are few hard-and-fast rules, except when it comes to negative advertising.

As we noted in Chapter 1, most consultants subscribe to Roger Ailes's first dictum of politics: "If you get punched, punch back." The