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

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."[125] 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.[126]

COMPETING FOR VOTES

The 1988 presidential election made the adversarial nature of political advertising painfully clear. George Bush's commercials assailed Michael 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."[127]

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.[128]

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

best way to defuse an attack is typically to counterattack. Here are examples of three common tactics.

1. Defend against the charges

Attack by Representative Wayne Dowdy against Senator Trent Lott, Mississippi U.S. Senate race, 1988.

> SCENE: A STRETCH LIMOUSINE BARRELS THROUGH A SMALL TOWN.
>
> ANNOUNCER: TRENT LOTT SAYS HE NEEDS TO KEEP HIS TAXPAYER-PAID, $50,000-A-YEAR CHAUFFEUR IN WASHINGTON. YOU CAN VOTE FOR A PARTY POLITICIAN WHO LOOKS AT LIFE THROUGH TINTED WINDOWS. OR YOU CAN VOTE FOR A SENATOR WHO SEES MISSISSIPPI THROUGH THE EYES OF ITS PEOPLE.

Response by Trent Lott.

> GEORGE AWKWARD [LOTT'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN BODYGUARD, SPEAKING DIRECTLY INTO THE CAMERA, WITH THE AMERICAN FLAG IN THE BACKGROUND]: I'VE BEEN A DETECTIVE IN A SECURITY POLICE FORCE IN WASHINGTON, D.C., FOR 27 YEARS. WAYNE DOWDY CALLS ME A CHAUFFEUR. HE OFFENDS EVERY LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER WHO PUTS HIS LIFE ON THE LINE EVERY DAY. MR. DOWDY, I'M NOBODY'S CHAUFFEUR. [PAUSE] GOT IT?

2. Counterattack on the same question or on issues that are of greater concern to voters.

Attack by Bruce Herschensohn on Barbara Boxer, California Senate race, 1992.

> HERSCHENSOHN [SPEAKING DIRECTLY INTO THE CAMERA]: YA KNOW. A HUNDRED AND FORTY-THREE BOUNCED CHECKS. WOW, THAT'S . . . THAT'S . . . A LOT. THAT'S REALLY A LOT. THAT'S WHAT MY OPPONENT DID. IT ADDED UP TO MORE THAN WHAT MOST CALIFORNIANS MAKE IN WELL OVER A YEAR. FORTY-ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS IN BOUNCED CHECKS. BOY. I MEAN, DO YOU WANT HER TRYING TO BALANCE YOUR BUDGET? OUR GOVERNMENT'S BUDGET? GEE.
>
> ANNOUNCER: FIGHT BACK WITH HERSCHENSOHN.

Boxer's response.

> HERSCHENSOHN [NEWSCLIPS]: "WHAT I WANT IS THE REPEAL OF ROE V. WADE" . . . "WE NEED MORE OFFSHORE OIL DRILLING AND NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS" . . . "DEMOLISH THE DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY AND EDUCATION" . . . "I OPPOSE ANY CUTS IN DEFENSE."
>
> ANNOUNCER: THAT'S WHAT BRUCE HERSCHENSOHN WANTS. IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT?

3. Assail the opposition's credibility

Attack by Russell Feingold on Senator Robert Kasten, Wisconsin U.S. Senate race, 1992.

> FEINGOLD [HOLDING NEWSPAPER WITH HEADLINE ABOUT SENATOR ROBERT KASTEN'S NEGATIVE CAMPAIGN TACTICS]: IF THINGS ARE GOING TO CHANGE AROUND HERE, THIS MAN MUST BE DEFEATED IN NOVEMBER. NOT MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT RUSS FEINGOLD TO ATTACK. SO THE ONLY OPTION IS TO MAKE SOMETHING UP.
>
> FEINGOLD [HOLDING UP MOCK TABLOID ENDORSEMENT BY ELVIS PRESLEY]: YOU VOTERS KNOW BETTER THAN TO BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU READ.

Senator Robert Kasten's counterattack.

> ELVIS IMPERSONATOR [SITTING IN PINK CADILLAC WITH 1950S MUSIC BLARING, LOOKING AT CARDBOARD CUTOUT OF FEINGOLD HOLDING MOCK TABLOID]: I DON'T MAKE MANY APPEARANCES. BUT WHEN I HEARD THAT HE WAS TELLING TALES HOW I ENDORSED HIM, I HAD TO COME FORWARD. YOU KNOW THAT RUSS HAS BEEN IN POLITICS FOR MORE THAN A DECADE. FEINGOLD PLANS TO RAISE OUR TAXES OVER $300 BILLION. WELL, THE KING WOULD NEVER SUPPORT THAT. TAKE IT FROM THE KING, THIS RUSS FEINGOLD RECORD HAS GOT ME ALL SHOOK UP.

Feingold's parting shot:

> FEINGOLD [CLOSE UP]: A WHILE AGO, I WARNED YOU ABOUT MY OPPONENT'S HISTORY OF MAKING THINGS UP. I FIGURED WHEN HE STARTED

DISTORTING THE TRUTH ABOUT ME, YOU'D TAKE IT WITH A GRAIN OF SALT.

[FEINGOLD PICKS UP A JAR OF SALT AND STARTS POURING IT ON THE GROUND. THE CAMERA ZOOMS IN ON THE GROWING PILE.]

FEINGOLD: WELL, GET READY, BECAUSE NOW HE'S TELLING YOU I HAVE A PLAN TO RAISE THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS OF TAXES ON THE MIDDLE CLASS. NOT TRUE. SENATOR KASTEN KNOWS I HAVEN'T PROPOSED ANY SUCH TAX INCREASES. PERIOD. THE TRUTH IS THE SENATOR HAS MADE UP SOMETHING SO BIG THAT A FEW GRAINS OF SALT WON'T BE ENOUGH. A SHOVELFUL WOULD BE MORE LIKE IT.

[CAMERA PULLS BACK TO SHOW FEINGOLD HOLDING A SHOVEL.]

Tit-for-tat. And so it goes with many campaigns today. A negative advertisement triggers a negative response and, in turn, a negative reply. Increasingly, even positive commercials provoke attacks. Candidates who promote a particular ideology or program seem especially susceptible to criticism. Stick your neck out and get your head chopped off. Consider the race between Ohio Senator John Glenn and his 1992 challenger Mike DeWine. In one commercial John Glenn tried to pick up on the issue of health care reform.

GLENN: ONE OF THE WORST THINGS ABOUT WASHINGTON IS THAT FOR ALL THE MONEY THAT'S WASTED ON PROGRAMS THAT DON'T WORK AND THAT WE DON'T NEED, WE DON'T EVEN HAVE NATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE. NO ONE IN AMERICA SHOULD HAVE TO GO WITHOUT A DOCTOR, AND NO FAMILY SHOULD BE FORCED INTO POVERTY BY OUTRAGEOUS HEALTH INSURANCE PREMIUMS.

DeWine countered:

ANNOUNCER: THIS IS WHAT'S WRONG WITH POLITICS IN WASHINGTON. FOR 18 YEARS, JOHN GLENN NEVER SUPPORTED NATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE. HE NEVER VOTED FOR IT. . . . NOW, IN THE TOUGHEST CAMPAIGN OF HIS LIFE, JOHN GLENN IS SUDDENLY PROMISING HEALTH INSURANCE. WHERE HAS HE BEEN FOR 18 YEARS?

DeWine narrowly lost, but in his actions lie a corollary to Ailes's Law: attack early and often. The reasoning is simple enough. If political campaigns are likely to turn negative, it is best to get in the first blow. It does not matter if the candidate is a liberal or conservative, incumbent or challenger, Republican or Democrat. Anticipation of attacks from the opposition has led to preemptive strikes by candidates as different as Mitch McConnell (a conservative Republican challenger in Kentucky in 1984) and Alan Cranston (a liberal Democratic incumbent in California in 1986). McConnell's ads wore down the incumbency advantages of Senator Walter Huddleston; Cranston's attacks crushed Congressman Ed Zschau, a little-known, but well-financed Republican challenger.

The need to punch back and the temptation to get in the first blow are driven by the same electoral forces. Voters are often most receptive to attack advertisements when the candidate who is attacked responds with self-promotional advertisements rather than a counterattack. The victim of the attack can appear flawed and unwilling to defend himself. As we find below, partisanship further accentuates this effect. Republicans and Democrats want to see their own candidate score points. Partisans get an extra charge when the man or woman they support blindsides the opposition with a negative ad. By the same token, partisans are averse to seeing their own candidates on the receiving end of such a blow. This sort of judgment by voters drives candidates to run negative commercials. Even candidates who would in principle like to run wholly positive campaigns are led to attack to protect themselves from the airborne assault of the opposition.[129]

Two simple experiments demonstrate these principles. Like the experiments presented in earlier chapters, participants in our two-advertisement experiments viewed a local newscast into which we inserted political commercials. In these studies, however, we inserted two advertisements, one from each of the competing candidates, into the video. The advertisement of one candidate went into the first commercial break, and the advertisement of the other candidate went into the second.[130] Unlike the one-ad studies discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, the political advertisements were actual spots used during ongoing campaigns in California, and each commercial was either positive or negative. Viewers saw either two positive commercials (one from each

candidate), two negative commercials (one from each candidate), a negative Democratic ad paired with a positive Republican ad, or a negative Republican ad paired with a positive Democratic ad.[131]

The smaller of the two experiments was conducted during the 1992 California Senate race between Barbara Boxer and Bruce Herschensohn. This experiment highlights the vulnerability of candidates to negative messages when they air positive commercials. Table 6.1 shows the reactions of people to the competing messages. The entries in the table are Boxer's lead in the sample (i.e., the percent intending to vote for her minus the percent intending to vote for Herschensohn). The columns correspond to the Boxer advertisements, and the rows correspond to the Herschensohn advertisements. The entry in the first row and column, then, shows Boxer's lead among those people who saw a positive commercial from both candidates.

Voters' reactions to competing campaign messages square with our findings in Chapter 4. The Republican candidates generally benefit from negative messages; the Democrats, from positive ones. But this simple experiment also reveals the problem faced by candidates who, while being attacked, try to promote their own ideas. Bruce Herschensohn's margin was higher among viewers who saw his negative messages, regardless of the tone of the Barbara Boxer advertisements. For instance, when Herschensohn's positive message was paired with a Boxer attack, he trailed by 27 points (his second-worst outcome). Herschensohn's support was slightly higher when he countered a Boxer attack with an attack. Barbara Boxer, by contrast, did best when

TABLE 6.1
Voting Preferences in Two-Ad Studies: Boxer-Herschensohn (Cell entries Are the Democratic candidate's lead)

		Tone of Barbara Boxer Ad	
		Positive	Negative
Tone of Bruce Herschensohn Ad	Positive	.33	.27
	Negative	.00	.24

viewers saw positive messages from both candidates. In that case, she enjoyed a 33 point lead. Positive advertising, however, would not guarantee Boxer an easy victory. The positive ad strategy made Boxer at once appealing and vulnerable to attack. While Boxer's best outcome occurred when both candidates aired positive messages, her worst outcome arose when viewers saw a positive Boxer advertisement paired with a negative Herschensohn commercial. In this situation, the candidates ran even.

What should Boxer do? Should she promote herself and gamble that Herschensohn will also take the high road? Or, should she go on the attack, which would guarantee her a smaller electoral margin than the case where he promotes and she attacks? The theory of games developed by economists offers a useful way to think about this choice. The central insight of this theory is that candidates develop campaign strategies based on their own objectives and their beliefs about how the opponent will behave. Appendix C contains a brief discussion of the game theoretic ideas used here.

Looking at Table 6.1 from a game theoretic perspective counsels the more cautious approach. The key to Boxer's strategy depends on what Herschensohn is likely to do. Since Herschensohn always does better with negative advertisements, Boxer can expect him to attack. Boxer's best response to a negative campaign by Herschensohn is to go negative herself. If she airs a positive commercial, he can easily counter with a negative. That would be the best possible outcome for Herschensohn and would allow him to pull even. If Boxer attacks, her margin is somewhat lower than her best outcome (positive-positive), but it avoids the potential disaster of her being attacked while running positive commercials.

The actual course of the Boxer-Herschensohn campaign mirrored these laboratory findings. Boxer came out of the primary election with a comfortable 16-point lead over Herschensohn. In August and September, Herschensohn attacked Boxer for abusing congressional perks and for bouncing 143 checks at the House bank. Boxer, meanwhile, promoted herself on women's issues and the economy. By October, Boxer's once considerable lead had vanished, and with three weeks left in the campaign the polls showed that she held only a 3 point edge, a statistical dead heat. Boxer finally fought back. The last Democratic

commercials of the campaign painted Herschensohn as an ideological extremist, who would dismantle the Department of Education, who supported nuclear power, and who opposed a woman's right to choose. Boxer's counterattack apparently stemmed Herschensohn's momentum, and on election day, she eked out a 5-point victory.

The larger of our two-advertisement experiments was designed to see how competitive advertising played out among different partisan groups. This experiment was conducted during the 1990 California gubernatorial race between Dianne Feinstein and Pete Wilson.[132] As noted earlier, the partisan attachments of the voters actually strengthen the pressures on the candidates to attack. Like our 1992 Senate study, viewers saw two advertisements, one from each candidate, and each ad either promoted the sponsoring candidate or attacked the opponent. The commercials were actual advertisements run by the candidates during the campaign. Though the 1990 and 1992 two-ad experiments involved very different candidates and electoral circumstances, voters' reactions to competing messages and the resulting campaign dynamics were strikingly similar.

Table 6.2 shows the responses of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans to competing advertisements by Pete Wilson and Dianne Feinstein. Each panel of the table represents a particular group; the rows of each panel correspond to the Wilson advertisements, and the columns of each panel correspond to the Feinstein advertisements. For example, the first row and the first column of the first panel shows Feinstein's lead among Democratic voters who saw a positive Feinstein advertisement paired with a positive Wilson advertisement.

The results again reflected the general finding of Chapter 4: Democrats usually do better with positive messages and Republicans usually do better with negatives. Wilson's negative advertisements were more effective than his positive advertisements among all partisan groups. In contrast, Feinstein's best outcome among Republicans and Independents and second-best outcome among Democrats occurred when her positive advertisement was paired with Wilson's positive advertisement. But like Boxer, Feinstein's positive advertisements carried considerable risks. When viewers saw a positive Feinstein ad paired with a negative Wilson ad (the lower left cell in each panel), she

TABLE 6.2
Voting Preferences and Partisanship in Two-Ad Studies: Feinstein-Wilson (Cell entries Are the Democratic candidate's lead)

Democratic identifiers		Tone of Dianne Feinstein Ad	
		Positive	Negative
Tone of Pete Wilson Ad	Positive	.55	.66
	Negative	.50	.51
Independents		Tone of Dianne Feinstein Ad	
		Positive	Negative
Tone of Pete Wilson Ad	Positive	.33	.19
	Negative	.17	.18
Republican identifiers		Tone of Dianne Feinstein Ad	
		Positive	Negative
Tone of Pete Wilson Ad	Positive	–.32	–.40
	Negative	–.73	–.54

scored her lowest levels of support across all three partisan groups, trailing by as much as 75 points among Republicans.

The 1990 gubernatorial study also makes it clear that partisans are highly responsive to the antagonism of negative campaigning. Feinstein and Wilson did best among their own partisans when their negative ads were paired with the opponents' positive ads. Among Democrats, Feinstein's lead reached 66 points when Wilson promoted and she went on the attack. Among Republicans, Wilson led by 73 points when Feinstein promoted herself and he attacked. When the tables were turned, partisans felt far less supportive of their own candidates. Among Democrats, Feinstein led by just 50 points, her lowest level of support in this group, when she promoted and Wilson

attacked. Among Republicans, Wilson's lead fell to 40 points when he promoted and Feinstein attacked.

Thus, again, although positive advertising holds great potential for Democrats, negative advertising offered the most prudent strategy. For Republicans, the choice is clear: negative advertisements work best. Among Democratic and Independent voters, the difference between Feinstein countering an attack with a positive or a negative ad was minimal. However, among Republican voters, Feinstein invited disaster by running a positive campaign when Wilson went negative. In that case, she ran 73 points behind Wilson among Republicans, compared with a 54 point deficit when she counterattacked.

The California gubernatorial campaign was touted as one of the most negative races of 1990, but the election started out positively enough. In the primaries Feinstein established herself and her credentials in February 1990 with the "Forged from Tragedy" ad that we described in Chapter 1. The commercial (among other things) produced an 18-point swing in voting preferences in the primary election polls, giving Feinstein a ten point lead over her opponent John Van deKamp, a lead that she never relinquished.

The general election campaign, however, began on a sour note. Pete Wilson opened with an advertisement that claimed that Feinstein and her husband had received a sweetheart deal from a failed Oregon savings-and-loan bank. Feinstein quickly countered with a commercial listing "Five S&L Facts," including the fact that, while in the U.S. Senate, Wilson himself had received $250,000 in campaign contributions from savings institutions and had voted for the bailout of the savings-and-loan industry. The issue was dropped, and Wilson turned to Feinstein's record in San Francisco. One Wilson ad portrayed Feinstein as a tax-and-spend liberal; another showed clippings from the *San Francisco Chronicle* and claimed that Feinstein "broke the bank and left the city holding the bag." Feinstein did not sit idly by. She assailed Wilson's record in San Diego, claiming that as mayor he had turned San Diego Bay into a toxic waste dump, which cost taxpayers millions of dollars to clean up.

As the attacks continued, Feinstein slowly cut into Wilson's double-digit lead. Looking for a final push, the Feinstein team decided to resurrect the "Forged from Tragedy" ad. This time there was little

movement in the polls, and if anything, Feinstein lost the momentum that she had built at the end of September and the beginning of October. The "Forged from Tragedy" advertisement was a bust in the general election because the context differed. When Feinstein aired the ad in February, it was the only political message on television. The ad established her credentials without the countervailing effects of other candidates' advertisements. By October, the airwaves were saturated with attacks from Feinstein, Wilson, and candidates for other offices. When pitted against Wilson's negative advertisements, "Forged from Tragedy" was fated to fail.

The 1990 and 1992 campaigns carry a more general lesson about the tone of political advertising. Against the backdrop of a negative campaign, promotional advertising appears particularly weak. This is true of both Republican and Democratic candidates. A candidate is demeaned in the voters' eyes when he or she promotes while the opposition attacks. Clearly, this places enormous pressure on candidates to go negative, even when voters are fed up with the nasty tone of campaigns.

ORGANIZED INTERESTS

Many observers trace the negative climate of current political campaigns to the activities of interest groups. In 1980, the National Conservative Political Action Committee (NCPAC) attacked six prominent Democratic Senators—George McGovern in South Dakota, Frank Church in Idaho, Birch Bayh in Indiana, John Culver in Iowa, Warren Magnuson in Washington, and Herman Talmadge in Georgia—as being too liberal and out of touch with their constituents. All six were defeated, giving NCPAC instant notoriety and the Republican party control of the U.S. Senate for the first time since 1954.

The NCPAC legend carries two morals. First, interest groups are as belligerent as any candidate and operate primarily to destroy their opponents in Congress. Second, conservative and Republican groups are especially negative. However, a closer look at interest group campaign activity reveals that only the second of these conventional wisdoms has any merit, and even the groups that campaign on behalf of Republicans tend to promote their friends much more than they attack their foes.

Interest groups are drawn into the fight by the prospect of being able to knock their foes out of Congress. Unlike direct contributions to candidates, which are subject to strict limits, independent expenditures remain unregulated. Interest groups are allowed to contribute no more than $5,000 a year to a candidate. That limit was set in 1974 and inflation has greatly eroded its value: a $5,000 contribution today is equivalent to an $1,800 contribution in 1974.[133] Independent expenditures, on the other hand, enjoy the First Amendment protection of free speech, so groups can spend as much as they like for or against candidates.[134] "Considering that," says Dr. Joseph Hatch, who chairs the American Medical Association's political action committee, "we're additionally enthused about making independent expenditures. We see that as the way of the future to express our political influence."[135]

Elected officials are far less excited. Politicians fear ambush from hundreds of extremist and single-issue groups that can readily spend large sums to push their particular agendas. A congressional vote for gun control or for restrictions on abortion funding or for reform of social security may trigger a barrage of negative advertisements from groups with heavy stakes in those issues. Organized interests seem to have a unique edge in going negative. Attack advertisements from interest groups convey all of the negatives about the candidate who is attacked without the risk of a political backlash against the candidate the group supports.[136]

Many single-issue and ideological organizations have aped NCPAC's strategy of independent attacks. In 1992 alone, interest groups spent a total of $1.6 million in opposition to House and Senate candidates, with much of that money coming from a few groups and concentrated in a few key races. The National Rifle Association, for example, spent $136,000 in opposition to Mike Synar, a Democratic Congressman from Oklahoma. The National Abortion Rights Action League spent $144,000 against Massachusetts Republican Steven Pierce, a House challenger. Together, Public Citizen, Inc., and the Clean Up Congress Committee of the Willamette Citizens PAC poured $100,000 into a campaign to defeat House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich.

Organized interests have been no less innocent in presidential campaigns. The infamous Willie Horton commercial was actually the

handiwork of the National Security PAC. Seeing that the interest group's anticrime message had scored points with the electorate, the Bush campaign picked up the attack in an advertisement called the "Revolving Door," which discussed Massachusetts' prison furlough program and showed a stream of men dressed in blue prison uniforms walking into and then out of a revolving door. All told, conservative groups pumped $3.4 million dollars into the independent campaign against Michael Dukakis.[137]

Examples such as these have stirred no end of furor about the negativity of interest groups' independent expenditures.[138] These, however, are the exceptions. When groups jump into the political arena, it is usually to praise their friends, rather than to assail their foes. Elected officials dread making decisions on controversial issues that may bring independent money into campaigns. Even still, independent money isn't bad for elections, since it goes overwhelmingly to produce positive messages.

The Federal Election Commission (FEC) records independent expenditures for and against candidates for President, House, and Senate. The classification is done by the interest groups themselves. Organizations that make independent expenditures in House, Senate, and presidential campaigns must file detailed reports with the FEC, specifying the candidate about whom the expenditure was made, the amount of the expenditure, and whether the funds were spent "for" or "against" the candidate. These data reveal that interest groups promote candidates much more frequently than they attack.[139]

Figure 6.1 shows the independent expenditures for and against House and Senate candidates from 1980 to 1992.[140] The decade began with a flurry of negative campaigning by interest groups. In the 1980 election, organizations used their independent expenditures primarily to attack candidates. The volume of independent negative campaigns trebled in the next election, and 1982 saw the most intense negative campaigning by organized interests. In that year groups like NCPAC and the NRA spent $3.7 million in opposition to Democratic Senatorial candidates and another $930,000 against Democratic candidates running for the House. However, the tone of interest group campaigns changed abruptly in the middle of the 1980s. Since 1984, interest groups have spent approximately three dollars in support of

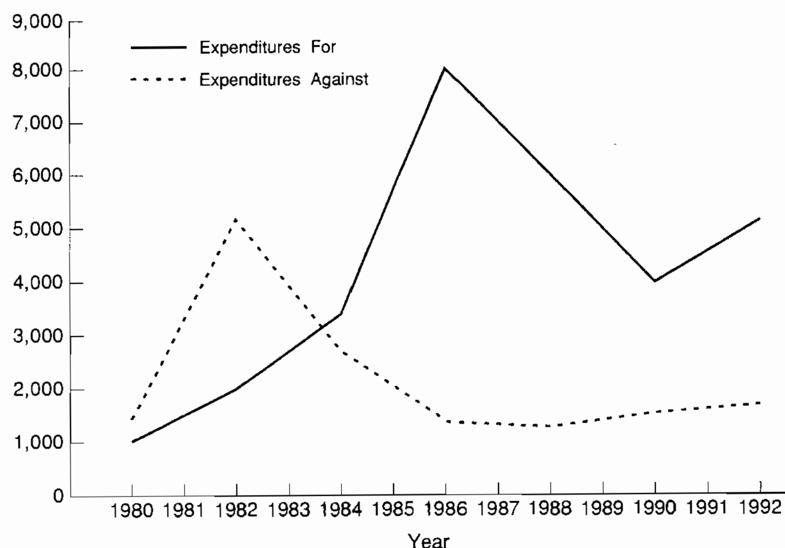
candidates for every dollar they have spent in opposition. At the same time that candidates began to step up their attacks on one another, groups began to actively promote their own ideas and candidates.

The reasons for the reversal can, again, be traced to NCPAC, but this time to its failures. In 1982, NCPAC tried to repeat its earlier success, targeting six prominent liberal Senators. The group spent three million dollars, only to lose in all six races. Defeat spelled declining contributions and, eventually, the death of the organization. The fall of NCPAC exploded the myth among consultants and interest group strategists that attack advertising is a group's best means of defeating opponents, shaping the campaign agenda, or securing the organization's long-range interests.

Since 1984, organizations have tended to run positive advertising campaigns. The National Rifle Association (NRA), the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL), and a handful of NCPAC knock-offs (such as the Midwest Conservative PAC and the East Coast Conservative PAC) still run negative campaigns. Even these groups,

FIGURE 6.1

Independent Expenditures For and Against U.S. House and Senate Elections (in thousands)



however, balance their attacks with expenditures in favor of candidates to their liking. In 1992, for instance, the NRA spent $139,000 in support of Democrat Gene Green of Texas, and NARAL supported the Senate candidacies of Ben Campbell in Colorado and Russ Feingold in Wisconsin to the tune of $140,000 each.

The predominance of positive campaigning by interest groups stems from the fact that the biggest independent spenders in national politics are not ideological and single-issue groups, but trade associations, which invariably run positive campaigns. Two organizations, in particular, stand out: the Realtors and the American Medical Association (AMA). In 1992 the Realtors spent $170,000 in support of Rod Chandler, a Republican House member in Washington running for the Senate; $125,000 for the reelection of Gene Shaw, a Republican House member of Florida; and $330,000 in support of Democrat Les AuCoin's Senate bid in Oregon. Lined up behind incumbent Senator Robert Packwood, AuCoin's opponent, were the AMA and the Automobile Dealers, who spent $228,000 and $66,000, respectively, to push their candidate. The AMA also spent $258,000 in favor of Vic Fazio, a Democratic House member from California; $119,000 for Michael Andrews, a Democrat from Texas; and $185,000 for Scott McInnis, a Republican from Colorado. The list goes on, with one important theme running throughout. Trade associations use independent expenditures to promote Representatives and Senators who have proven their support for the groups in the past. They are careful not to attack any opponents of these lawmakers, because, after all, they might win—and it's a lot easier to throw positive money at successful incumbents than to overcome the ill will engendered by an attack.

While legislators generally have less to fear from interest group attacks than is commonly thought, interest group expenditures do have a serious partisan slant. Groups campaign much more intensely on behalf of Republican candidates. Organizations independently spent $42 million on House and Senate campaigns during the 1980s and 1990s. Of that, 62 percent went either in favor of Republicans or against Democrats. Presidential elections showed an even steeper Republican advantage among independent expenditures. Of the $78 million in independent expenditures spent during the 1980s and 1990s, 92 percent were "for" Republicans or "against" Democrats.[141]

When looked at through partisan lenses, interest group attacks appear more prominent. The organizations that back Republicans attack the opposition much more frequently than the organizations that support the Democrats. In House and Senate races during the 1980s and 1990s, groups that backed the Democratic candidates spent forty-five cents against the Republican opposition for every dollar they spent in favor of the Democratic candidate. Groups that backed the Republican candidates, on the other hand, spent sixty cents against the Democratic opposition for every dollar they spent in favor of the Republicans.

In presidential elections, things looked worse for the Democratic candidates. Much worse. Not only did Republican-leaning groups overwhelm the Democrats with independent expenditures, but the Republican groups have been much more negative. For every dollar spent in support of a Republican presidential candidate during the 1980s and 1990s, groups spent seventy cents against the Democrats. Groups that backed the Democrats, by contrast, spent only twelve cents against Republican candidates for every dollar they spent promoting Democrats.

Interest groups seem to be keying off of the same ideological forces that shape candidate advertising. Negative messages appeal disproportionately to Republicans and Independents, while positive messages are more powerful for Democrats. Conservative interest groups should be able to exploit this difference just as effectively as Republican candidates can. Liberal interest groups, on the other hand, may find themselves in the same bind as Democratic candidates. Their aim is to rally liberal voters behind a cause or a candidate. The best way to do so is to promote particular ideas and politicians, but in doing so liberal groups may lose of some their appeal among moderate and more conservative voters.

Monied interests are a convenient target for critics of American campaigns, but they really deserve little blame for the spread of negative campaigning. While there is a decided partisan bias to interest group attacks, independent campaign expenditures still go primarily to promote specific policies, ideologies, and ideas rather than to destroy people who are disliked. This is not to say that independent expenditures are wholly salutary. Highly negative independent campaigns punctuate the landscape of recent elections, especially at the

presidential level. The prospect of interest group attacks, moreover, can have a chilling effect on public policy. Most candidates assiduously avoid hot-button issues like gun control and abortion. And the multimillion-dollar advertising campaign of the insurance industry in opposition to President Clinton's health care initiative is widely credited with having grounded that policy effort. In addition, the messages of advertisements like Willie Horton or those aired by NCPAC in the early 1980s can take on lives of their own. They force candidates to address issues that they would not ordinarily discuss, and they automatically attract coverage by newspapers and television news.

THE MEDIA

Political consultants have long exploited the willingness of television stations to replay advertisements. Consider the infamous "Daisy" commercial. On September 7, 1964, Lyndon Johnson's presidential campaign launched "Peace, Little Girl." The advertisement shows a sweet young girl plucking the petals from a daisy and counting from one to nine. Then, a male announcer counts down from ten. With each successive number the camera jumps to a closer shot of the child's face. At zero, a nuclear blast fills the screen, and President Johnson says: "These are the stakes—to make a world in which all of God's children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die."

The commercial aired just once, but it caused an instant furor. NBC, the network on which the commercial aired, was flooded with phone calls and letters. Senator Goldwater requested equal time from NBC to clarify his positions on the tactical use of nuclear warheads. Out of shock and voyeurism, television news programs on all three networks featured the commercial and the resulting controversy. Bill Moyers, President Johnson's press secretary, reported to the president a week after the spot aired:

> [W]HILE WE PAID FOR THE AD ONLY ONCE ON NBC LAST MONDAY NIGHT, ABC AND CBS BOTH RAN IT ON THEIR NEWS SHOWS FRIDAY. SO WE GOT IT SHOWN ON ALL THREE NETWORKS FOR THE PRICE OF ONE. THIS PARTICULAR AD WAS DESIGNED TO RUN ONLY ONE TIME.[142]

Three decades later, campaign commercials remain very much in the media spotlight. Advertisements have become a regular feature on the news, and candidates play that fact for all its worth. Newspapers and television news programs that give even the most superficial attention to the campaign cannot avoid reporting on the candidates' paid messages.

Political advertisements also make the nightly news because they are perfect news stories. Reporters need low-cost, high-impact stories that can be compressed into a half-hour newscast. Most aspects of political campaigns are time-consuming to cover and don't make for good TV. Speeches, press releases, and debates cannot compete with the images of urban violence, medical emergencies, and natural disasters. In contrast to the standard campaign fare, thirty-second spot ads contain great soundbites, arresting visuals, and sensational attacks, all in a package that fits easily into the two-minute format of television news or the fast format that many newspapers have copied from *USA Today*. Campaign advertisements are made for TV. They're made for TV news.

Negative advertisements make particularly tasty morsels for the media. For journalists, it is a no-lose situation when candidates attack one another. Allegations of dishonesty and incompetence lay the seeds of controversy and scandal. Even if the charges prove to be false, reporters can always rail against the candidate who aired the attack for slandering his or her opponent and engaging in sleazy campaigning. The fight itself often becomes the story.[143]

Political consultants cater to the incentives facing newsrooms. Campaign managers produce materials that journalists can easily use. That strategy worked in 1964, and it has been further refined. Copies of advertisements are regularly sent to television news stations and newspaper op-ed page editors even before the spots air. Sometimes campaigns do not even bother to purchase air time; they simply rely on local television stations to show the commercials for them.

Consultants also dovetail their advertisements with the candidates' speeches and staged events. One technique is "the message of the day." Running a spot on crime and visiting a ward of AIDS babies on the same day only produces confusion. Running a spot on crime and giving a speech in front of 100 uniformed policemen whose union has endorsed the candidate enables the campaign to set the public agenda. The advertisement can ride the wave of favorable news about the endorsement. What is more, by focusing on a single issue, the campaign can lead the press to focus on that issue as well. A story about the endorsement makes a natural lead-in for a story about the concerns raised in the advertisement.

And nothing seems to provoke the press like a stinging attack. Commenting on the 1988 election, Roger Ailes surmised that the news media "either want mistakes, pictures or attacks and we [the Bush campaign] were giving them pretty good pictures and pretty good lead stories and we were sticking to our theme of the day. . . . We were disciplined, giving them the soundbites and feed that they wanted. It wasn't that they were rolling over for us. It was that we were basically programming something that they would air."[144]

Even obscure campaigns on tight budgets use attack advertisements to get free press. Herbert London, the 1994 candidate for comptroller in New York state, provides just one of the most recent examples.

"Kill the Jews?" began a London advertisement. The ad identified Mr. London as the "Jewish candidate" and went on to portray Carl McCall, an African-American, as an opponent of the state of Israel and an extreme radical. The spot never appeared on television, but it was released to the news media, it was played on WNBC-TV, and it was discussed in articles in the *New York Times*.

Another London commercial appeared in the *Jewish Press* and played up the same themes. A photo shows a smiling Mr. London beneath the heading "Kosher," while a photo of an unsmiling Mr. McCall appears beneath the heading "Non-Kosher." The ad then lists quotes that were designed to upset Jewish voters and were attributed to Jesse Jackson, David Dinkins, and other black leaders. The small print in the ad is a disclaimer that the quotes are "fictitious." The ad prompted protests from Democratic and black political leaders. Even better, from London's point of view, this ad in a small-circulation newspaper suddenly became big news in the *New York Times*.[145]

For London, the bad press was worth it. The Comptroller's election received just five feature stories in the *New York Times*, three of them on London's advertising. None of the stories about the ads discussed McCall's candidacy, only the charges of anti-Semitism raised by

London. Even if the stories were critical, London succeeded in getting his basic message spread more widely for free and he got the press's discussion of the campaign defined on his own terms.[146]

All of this works to the advantage of the candidates. Turning advertisements into news stories allows candidates to set the campaign agenda and magnifies the effects of the ads considerably. Coverage of particular issues boosts the candidates and parties who are already associated with those issues in the voters' minds.[147] Of course, news coverage of the advertisements recycles the sponsoring candidates' messages, providing them with valuable prime time, free of charge. Media guru Roger Ailes described this as the best of all worlds: "You get a 30 or 40 percent bump out of getting [an ad] on the news. You get more viewers, you get more credibility, you get it in your framework."[148]

Ad-news also serves the interests of individual journalists. They get their bylines, and editors get a cheap, high-impact story. This sort of reporting, however, compromises the quality of campaign journalism. The image of the press as a whole suffers. Campaign news is a function of what the candidates say and do. As candidates have come to rely more heavily on negative advertisements, the message of the media has become more negative as well. Not surprisingly, voters increasingly give election coverage poor marks. In 1994, for example, the *Times Mirror* survey of the electorate gave the media a C grade. The problem is not lack of substance, but the negativity of the message that the media convey. Seventy percent of the voters in the 1994 survey said they had learned enough to make a reasoned decision, but a majority also complained about the negativity of the news. In states where the campaigns were highly negative, people rated the media especially badly.[149] The problem is that voters get a stiff dose of vinegar from the press, because that is what the campaigns have fed them.

Journalists, of course, are aware that coverage of campaign advertisements, especially the negative ones, compromises the overall quality of election coverage. Following the 1988 election, reporters and editors were deeply critical of the machinations of the Bush campaign and their own complicity in the "Willie Horton" saga. How could they be so readily manipulated by one campaign? What perverse incentives led sensible, experienced reporters to cave into television's single-minded quest for good visuals and good leads?

In the wake of 1988, a number of journalists decided to fight back. Several editorials floated proposals for new kinds of press coverage that would allow reporters and editors to prevent and even counteract future manipulations of the press by the campaigns. All came to the same conclusion: the media should act as referees. Distinguished journalists including David Broder and Ken Bode suggested that the press should evaluate campaign advertisements on a regular basis and condemn those that distorted or blurred the record. The views of Broder, Bode, and others had a significant impact in newsrooms across the country. A new genre of campaign journalism, devoted to monitoring campaign advertising, was born.[150]

By 1992, "truth-box" or "ad-watch" journalism had come into its own. The *Los Angeles Times*, for instance, published more than twenty ad-watch stories focusing on the two races for U.S. Senate in California. Ad-watches appeared regularly on national and local newscasts. The producers of CNN's "Inside Politics" program assigned a senior correspondent, Brooks Jackson, to the task of inspecting and analyzing advertisements aired by the presidential candidates. Today, ad-watches are standard fare in print and broadcast outlets at both national and local levels.[151]

Ad-watches represent an important shift in campaign journalism. They give reporters and editors a tool with which to assert their independence and to rebuild the integrity of their media. Now, journalists subject the candidates' messages to critical analysis and, thereby, alter the incentives facing the candidates. If ad-watches live up to their promise, they will make voters generally less susceptible to campaign advertising and less supportive of candidates who engage in deceptive advertising.

The media's foray into truth in political advertising also presents an important test of the role that journalists play in campaigns. Are journalists inadvertent boosters for whomever they happen to cover, or can they serve as the referees in increasingly hostile campaigns? Can they defuse the effects of unfair advertising or do they only magnify the effects?

Since ad-watch journalism is relatively new, little evidence has been collected concerning the effects of these reports on public opinion.[152] We conducted three experiments using actual ad-watch stories from

the 1992 presidential election campaign. The methods used in these experiments are similar to those of other experiments discussed in this book. Each experiment involved two videotapes of a newscast. The presentations were identical except that one of the newscasts contained an ad-watch story; the other contained a nonpolitical (personal interest) filler story. Two of the ad-watch stories analyzed advertisements run by the Clinton campaign; one examined an advertisement run by the Bush campaign. One of the Clinton spots described his accomplishments as Governor of Arkansas, emphasizing the state's economic growth and welfare and educational reforms. The other Clinton advertisement attacked Bush's record on the economy. This commercial juxtaposed statements by Bush claiming that the economy was growing with gloomy economic statistics. The Bush advertisement denigrated the so-called Arkansas miracle by noting that Clinton had repeatedly raised taxes and increased government spending.

The ad-watches were actual news stories done by CNN's Brooks Jackson. Each story first replayed the particular commercial, then questioned its facts and assumptions, and offered contrary information. Whenever a false or misleading statement was encountered, the label MISLEADING or FALSE, in bold, red, capital letters, was slapped on the advertisement. Each story concluded by rating the advertisement as either inaccurate or misleading. In the case of the Bush attack ad, Jackson noted that Bush himself had raised taxes and increased government spending. In analyzing the Clinton negative spot, the report pointed out that the economic statistics had been taken out of context and presented out of order. And about the Clinton promotional ad, the ad-watch compared Arkansas to the nation and demonstrated that on some fronts the state did well, but on others it lagged well behind. In sum, these were actual ad-watch stories; they were representative of the genre; and they accented the misrepresentations and falsehoods in the candidates' advertisements.

If ad-watches have their intended effect, then viewers should be less favorably disposed toward and less likely to vote for the candidate whose advertisement is criticized. We considered two different measures of our viewers' preferences.[153] As with our advertising experiments, we asked viewers to rate the candidates according to several traits—intelligence, integrity, diligence, and compassion. Respondents

were asked to determine which of the traits described the candidates. From these judgments, we calculated the strength of a candidate's traits relative to his or her opponent. The net trait rating ranged from 1 (complete support for the candidate whose ad is featured in the ad-watch) to -1 (complete support for the opponent). We also examined voting preferences. Specifically, we considered the margin (electoral lead) of the candidate who sponsored the ad shown in the ad-watch. To examine the effects of the ad-watches we compared those viewers who saw the story against those who saw no ad-watch (the control group).

Table 6.3 shows how respondents rated the candidates in reaction to ad-watch news stories. The first column of Table 6.3 presents the net trait ratings; the second column contains the voting preferences. The rows of the table show the experimental conditions. There are three groups of rows, one for each experiment, and an additional row showing the pooled effects of the ad-watches (the average over all three experiments). Experiment 1 corresponds to the ad-watch about the positive Clinton commercial; Experiment 2, to the Clinton advertisement attacking Bush; Experiment 3, to the Bush advertisement attacking Clinton. Within each experiment we present the net trait ratings and vote preferences of the group of viewers who saw the ad-watch (Ad-watch), the group of viewers who saw no ad-watch (Control), and the difference between these two groups, which is the "effect" of the ad-watch. The pooled effects are shown at the bottom of the table. Below each average effect we present the margin of error.[154]

The ad-watch stories clearly backfired. The candidates whose advertisements were criticized gained support on both measures. Clinton scored 6- and 14-point gains in his net trait ratings in Experiments 1 and 2, respectively. Bush registered an 8-point jump in his net trait ratings in Experiment 3. Clinton's electoral margin rose 6 points in Experiment 1 and 8 points in Experiment 2. Bush's margin leapt 27 points in Experiment 3. Overall, there was a 9-point increase (with a margin of error of plus or minus 5 points) in the net trait rating of the candidate whose advertising was featured in the ad-watches and a 14-point increase (with a margin of error of plus or minus 8 points) in that candidate's electoral margin.[155] In addition, the ad-watches aimed

TABLE 6.3
Effects of Ad-Watch Stories on Assessments of the Candidates

	Net Trait Ratings of the Candidate Whose Ad Was Featured	Vote Margin of the Candidate Whose Ad Was Featured
Experiment 1		
Ad-Watch	.175	.417
Control	.118	.357
Difference (effect)	.050	.060
Experiment 2		
Ad-Watch	.238	.342
Control	.103	.267
Difference (effect)	.135	.075
Experiment 3		
Ad-Watch	–.024	–.163
Control	–.103	–.433
Difference (effect)	.079	.270
Pooled effect	.090	.135
Margin of error[a]	±.050	±.080

[a] 95 percent confidence interval.

at the negative commercials seem to benefit the candidates somewhat more. Clinton got a slightly bigger boost from the ad-watch about his negative advertisement than from the ad-watch about his positive advertisement, and the message of the Bush attack clearly got through the truth-box filter. In short, just as with the ads themselves, negativity wins in campaign reporting, and the referees can't stop it.

The ad-watch stories had a further effect on participatory attitudes of the electorate. As with negative advertising, ad-watches primarily turned off the nonpartisan voters. The stories in our experiments produced no significant changes in the intentions to vote and the feelings

of political efficacy of Republican and Democratic viewers. Nonpartisan viewers, however, registered a significant increase in their sense of alienation and cynicism. Thirty-eight percent of the Independents in the control group reported high levels of efficacy and confidence in government; only 29 percent of the Independents who saw the ad-watch did.[156] As with negative advertising, hostile news coverage of the campaigns erodes the participatory ethos of the Independent voters still further and widens the gap between the highly motivated partisan voters and the increasingly alienated and increasingly numerous nonpartisans.

There are a variety of reasons that these ad-watch stories failed. First, by repeating the advertisement itself, the ad-watch may strengthen recall of the advertisement, thus making favorable information about the candidate and unfavorable information about the opponent more accessible in memory. The CNN stories used in our study, which we believe are representative of the genre, repeated the theme of the advertisement several times, often replaying the relevant segments from the advertisements.

Second, the ad-watch frames the issues in the terms used by the candidates, further reinforcing the sponsoring candidate's messages. When CNN documented the misleading chronology provided in the Clinton advertisement that attacked Bush's economic performance, the report focused viewers' attention on the recession and repeatedly showed President Bush making Polyannish statements about the economy. Similarly, the ad-watch on Bush's advertisement fixated on the "tax and spend" label applied to Clinton. This style of reporting prompts viewers to judge the candidates according to the criteria provided by the advertisements, which gives the sponsor of the advertisement a significant edge.

Finally, the audience may consider the ad-watch an unfair attack by the media and side with the candidate whose advertisement is scrutinized. By singling out a particular candidate for criticism, ad-watch reports run the risk of violating the basic journalistic norm of fairness. Paradoxically, ad-watches may reduce the credibility of the press and elicit sympathy for the scrutinized candidates.

Whatever the reasons for their failure, the results of our experiments are very discouraging. To date, the most careful attempts to cover advertisements while maintaining professional standards of neutrality

and fair play seem to have backfired. Even stories that pick apart a candidate's advertising can be good news for that candidate. The consequence is that ad-news chiefly magnifies the effects of candidates' commercials, providing politicians additional incentives to attack one another.

Our findings are by no means the last word on ad-watch journalism. This form of campaign coverage is still in its infancy, and our experiments may have detected the flaws with current practices as much as with the genre itself. The challenge facing reporters and editors is to develop methods of covering advertising that do not inadvertently benefit one candidate or the other. To facilitate their roles as monitors, journalists might change the ad-watch story format along the following lines:

1. *Avoid repetition of the advertisement*. Ad-watches typically replay the advertisement, sometimes straight-up, sometimes set-off in a box. While the advertisement's visuals make the story more attractive, refraining from showing the actual advertisements will minimize the danger of recycling the candidate's message.
2. *Develop two-sided ad-watches*. Almost all ad-watches single out just one candidate for scrutiny. As a result, the candidate's agenda becomes the media's agenda. To prevent this, reporters should produce ad-watches that focus on a common theme on which both candidates in a race have advertised.
3. *Use nonpartisan sources*. Ad-watches often include soundbites from representatives of the campaigns. This provides the candidates additional free air time and an opportunity to spin the news. Experts on the issues addressed in the advertisements may offer more balanced commentary on the subject matter.

Whether these suggestions will actually improve matters is an open question. Our results counsel caution. Attempts to police the airwaves can backfire just as surely as they can succeed.

CONCLUSIONS

American political campaigns focus excessively on the foibles of individual politicians and the failings of our government. Some voters (in

our experiments Republicans and Independents) find attack advertisements to be more informative and persuasive than positive messages. But even these people are turned off by the pugilism of contemporary campaigns.

The reasons for the excesses are clear. Each player in the campaign game acts, reasonably enough, to defend his or her own interests. Candidates, groups, and journalists all have strong incentives to emphasize the negatives. Candidates attack each other because that is the best way to maximize their own support, while guarding against the possibility of attacks from the opposition. Groups jump into the fray to push their own political agenda into the legislative arena, though they do so with positive messages more commonly than is thought. Journalists replay political commercials, especially negative ones, because advertisements make for simple, sensational news stories. Candidates, in turn, produce negative messages to attract free media from reporters, who are drawn to the punch and counterpunch of the campaign.

All of this, however, does not absolve the electorate. The incentives to run negative advertisements or to replay them on the news originate with the viewing public. Candidates' campaign strategies are driven by voters' reactions to competing messages; since every candidate in our experiments looked comparatively weak ignoring an attack, candidates have little choice. Candidates have only one means of fending off an attack, and that is to attack. Similarly, the perverse effects of campaign reporting stem from the way people watch television news. Reporters may well attempt to act as referees, but viewers absorb not the journalists' skepticism but the very messages from which reporters are trying to protect them.

In short, we are drawn to political campaigns as spectators to a fight, and we egg the combatants on.