

NEGATIVE POLITICAL ADVERTISING AND A CASE STUDY OF 1991 KENTUCKY GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION

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I. INTRODUCTION

Negative advertising is a kind of advertising designed to evoke negative images of the sponsor's opponent. The widespread use of negative advertising is one of the most distinctive aspects of contemporary political campaigns. Negative advertising can most usefully be seen as a variant of comparative advertising. Both comparative and negative advertising name or identify the competitor. But while competitor advertising identifies the competitor "for the purpose of claiming superiority" negative advertising identifies a competitor "for the purpose of imputing inferiority". The objective of the negative advertising is to push consumers away from the competitor (1).

Negative advertising is likely in political campaigns though not in product promotion precisely because it seeks to improve the position of the sponsor by impairing the position of the competitor. To obtain gain by discouraging attraction to a competitor requires

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(1) Prasad, V. Kant. "Communication-Effectiveness of Comparative Advertising." Journal of Marketing Research, 13 (May 1976), p. 128.

a market which has only two "brands" of the desired item. If, for example, there were only two brands of cereal, dissuading customers from purchasing the competitor's brand would benefit the sponsor because it would leave only the sponsor's brand to purchase. But in a market that has more than two brands, moving customers away from one competitor will not guarantee they move forward to the sponsor. Given multiple brands of cereal, dissuading customers from buying one leaves all the others. The sponsor is one of many remaining brands and has a proportionately lower probability of winning sales. Only in a two brand market will moving customers away from the competition benefit the sponsor. Given this constraint, negative advertising is not a likely strategy in a multi-brand product campaign but is a likely strategy in two party political campaigns.

Negative advertising should be distinguished from those competitive advertisements which describe a positive attribute of the sponsor and in doing so imply an absence of that attribute in the competitor. If the advertising focuses primarily on enhancing perceptions of the sponsor, even at the expense of the competitor, it would be classified as "comparative" rather than "negative". Only if advertising focuses primarily on degrading perceptions of the rival, to the advantage of the sponsor, would it be classified as "negative". For example, the 1964 Johnson commercial which stated that the hot line "only rings in a serious crisis... keep it in the hands of a man who's proven himself responsible," implied that Goldwater was not responsible. However, since the focus of the ad was Johnson's qualifications with the implication of Goldwater's lack of qualifications, it is a comparative rather than a negative ad(2).

Negative advertising identifies the opponent and explicitly refers to either his general image or his specific policies with the goal of creating negative effect. An example of a negative advertisement making a general reference to the opponent is a 1964 Johnson spot in which a young man says, "I've always been a Republican but this man scares me... so many men with strange ideas seem to be for Goldwater... My party made a mistake and I am going to have to vote against that mistake." A 1968 Humphrey spot had only the words "Spiro Agnew for Vice-President" on the

(2) Giges, Nancy. "Comparative Ads: Better than...?" *Advertising Age*, 51 (September 22, 1980), pp. 59-60.

screen with the sounds of laughter in the background and an announcer offering "this would be funny if it wasn't serious" (3).

Larry J. Sabato estimates that a third of all spot commercials in recent political campaigns are negative advertisements and that the proportion of negative advertisements is rising (4). This trend has been encouraged by three unrelated legal touchstones. First, Section 315 of the Communication Act of 1934 permits broadcasters to refuse product or service commercials which they are deceptive or misleading but denies them the right to do so with political candidate commercials (5). Second, the Supreme Court ruling in *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964) made it very difficult for public figures (be they officeholders or persons in the public eye) to recover damages for defamatory statements that hurt their reputations. Third, the 1976 Amendment to the Federal Election Campaign Act (in response to the Supreme Court ruling *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976)) permitted unlimited expenditures for candidates by private individuals and political action committees as long as the spenders were not in collusion with the candidate. This means that while individuals and PACs are limited in the amount they can give to a candidate, they are not limited in the amount they can spend on a candidate's behalf. Advertisements produced by such independent supporters are often more aggressive than those produced by the candidates themselves (6).

II. HYPOTHESIS

A research conducted in 1974 by McClure and Patterson indicates that television advertising contributes to voter's knowledge level. They report that about three-fourths of voters who recalled seeing a political advertisement in the 1972 presidential campaign could correctly identify the ad's message (7).

(3) Nancy, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

(4) Sabato, Larry J. "The Rise of Political Consultants", New York: Basic Books, 1981, p. 165.

(5) Szybillo, George J. "Political Advertising and Broadcast Media." *Journal of Advertising*, 5 (Fall 1976), p. 43.

(6) Lammers, Nancy (ed), "Dollar Politics", 3rd ed., Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1982, p. 87.

(7) McClure, Robert D. "Television News and Political Advertising." *Communications Research*, 1 (January 1974), p. 25.

Academic research on comparative advertising reports conflicting findings but reveals possible undesirable effects. Prasad found that comparative advertisements evoke higher recall than Brand X advertisements (comparisons with the "leading brand" as differentiated from a named competitor), but lower claim credibility (8). While corroborating Prasad's finding of comparative advertising evoking higher recall than Brand X advertisements, Murphy and Amundson found both comparative and Brand X advertisements to be less believable than noncomparative or straight sell messages (9).

The purpose of this study is to examine what the negative advertising is and how it is distinguished from comparative advertising and also to approach the 1991 Kentucky Gubernatorial Election as a case study in terms of negative political advertising.

Based on these empirical findings and theoretical formulations the hypothesis derived is:

H: Negative political advertising affects voter evaluations of candidates and the criteria for making those evaluations in sponsor's (who finance the negative advertising) favor.

III. METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

As mentioned above this study examines the 1991 Kentucky Gubernatorial Election in the light of negative political advertising.

This election is an interesting one in which to study political advertising for several reasons. The Jones/Hopkins election had a high level campaign expenditures. Jones raised \$ 4.2 million for the primary and \$ 3.4 million for the general election. He has received about \$ 86,000 from people affiliated Turfway racetrack and about the same amount from people connected with PIE Mutual, an Ohio based medical malpractice insurance company, plus \$ 450,000 from people connected with the thoroughbred industry. After the primary Jones started receiving a substantial amount of money from architects, engineers, road builders and others who do business

(8) Prasad, op. cit., p. 130.

(9) Murphy, John H. "The Communications-Effectiveness of Comparative Advertising for a New Brand Users of the Dominant Brand." *Journal of Advertising*, 10 (1981), p. 16.

with the state. On the other hand, the other candidate, who was the Republican candidate, Hopkins raised \$1.5 million during the primary and \$1.56 million for the general election. The biggest group of people contributions that Hopkins has received is \$28,000 from the people associated with a Bourbon Country horse farm. He also has received contributions from the horse, coal, and banking industries and some road constructors.

Media effects would also be expected to be strong because the race was at a high level. Research conducted by a local Kentucky newspaper indicated that political and negative political advertising caused people to be fed up with the race. And so the participation in the election was at a very low level. In November 5, 1991, only 44% of registered voters cast ballots for governor. Most Kentuckians elected to stay away from the polls.

Democratic candidate Jones was the lieutenant governor of Kentucky, elected in 1987. He began running for governor even before he became lieutenant governor. He continued his front-runner's tactics; he refused to release his personal financial information. Instead, he has gone on the offensive lately attacking Hopkins's ethics in an effort to deflect Hopkins's attacks on Jones's personal finances. His more articulate television presence, especially during the two TV debates with Hopkins, and the heavy Democratic registration might be considered as the advantages of Jones.

The main promises given by Jones about taxes, he said, he would not raise taxes. He proposed eliminating the state income tax on private pensions and suggested changing the inheritance tax. About abortion, he said that the decision about whether to have an abortion should be left to the woman during the first three months of pregnancy; the woman loses the right to make that choice after the first three months. About the environment, "right to work", and the ethics in government he said the same things with his rival, Hopkins.

What Hopkins said about the taxes is that he would not raise taxes. He would like to eliminate the state income tax on private pensions and cut the state inheritance tax. He has not specified any cuts in state government to pay for these cuts. About abortion, he favored outlawing abortion except in the cases of rape, incest, and threat to the life of the mother.

The most important side of this gubernatorial race is that Hopkins concentrated all his campaign on Jones' tax record. And Hopkins approached to this in a rude way. So this approach created a strong anger on the public and his negative advertisements created a negative image upon Hopkins. When we look at all the election strategies of both candidates, we shall see that this is the main mistake made by Hopkins. The other gaffes and controversies about the Hopkins campaign are as follows:

1. For years, Hopkins' congressional resumes said he served in the Marines during the Korean War. He persisted in saying this during a news conference. In fact, Hopkins did not join the Marines until nearly a year after the armistice was signed.

2. Some of Hopkins' congressional resumes also said he attended Purdue and Southern Methodist universities. In fact, he took a few insurance-related courses.

3. In march 1991, Hopkins told the Herald-Leader that he did not favor any changes in the state's abortion laws, but he quickly backtracked when the article came out saying he wanted to outlaw abortions except in the cases of rape, incest, and threat to the life of the mother.

4. After the first October debate, Hopkins said he would not oppose jail terms for women who had abortions. With 30 minutes his campaign reversed that position.

5. If Hopkins is elected governor, he said he would legally take \$660,000 from his congressional campaign fund and keep the money for his personal use. Hopkins said that he would not do this, but he refused to sign legally binding statement to that effect.

6. After the news broke that members of Congress had been writing bad checks on the House bank without penalty, Hopkins' campaign said that he might have written one bad check. Hopkins later disclosed that he had written 32 bad checks- totaling more than \$ 4,000- during a one-year period.

The gaffes and controversies for Jones' campaign:

1. In 1984, an outbreak of equine viral arteritis started on Jones' farm. The virus eventually affected horses at more than 30 farms. Some people said Jones was too slow in reporting the disease and could have taken more steps to keep it from spreading.

2. In 1985, a barn fire at Airdrie Stud killed 15 horses. Jones was near the barn minutes before the fire. He first offered to take a lie detector test, then he refused investigators were never be able to determine the cause of the fire.

3. In February 1991, Jones praised the 1990 education reforms, but he refused to say how he would have voted on the bill that included the reforms and a tax increase. After critical press coverage and attacks from one of his opponents, Jones finally acknowledged that he would have supported the bill.

4. Jones furthered this image that he was ducking questions when he refused to say how he would have voted as president of the Senate, on a controversial drunken driving amendment. He said the politics of it is if you don't have to make a decision, you are a damned-fool if you do, and why do I want to alienate 50 % of the people?

5. Jones has promised to take the "For sale" sign off the Capitol. But Hopkins said Jones was opening the door to conflicts of interest. Jones was owed \$ 1.6 million from money that he lent to his 1987 campaign for the lieutenant governor. He said he would accept donations while in office to pay off that debt but will not allow anyone to solicit contributions.

6. Dr. Michael Donald, the state veterinarian when Jones took office in 1987, said Jones pressed him to change state regulations that were hurting Jones' horse farm. Jones denied there was any pressure.

IV. CONCLUSION

In November 5, 1991 44 % of registered voters cast ballots for governor. Most Kentuckians elected to stay away from the polls. And Jones trounced Hopkins by surprising record margin of nearly 2 to 1.

As mentioned above, Hopkins approached to Jones' tax record in a very rude way and this caused a strong anger upon the general public in the State of Kentucky. So, Hopkins using negative political advertising created a negative image against himself, instead of his opponent Democratic Jones. Also the election strategy generated by Hopkins created a very serious negative effects upon his own credibility and political character.

So, the hypothesis derived could not be proved within the limitations of this study. Nevertheless, this study should be evaluated in its own natural variables and also limitations.

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