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POLITICAL ADVERTISING

In recent decades, political advertising has assumed greater and greater importance in campaigns for offices at all levels. There is a reason for this. As political scientists Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar write in their book *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate*:

Unlike most channels of 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. (1995:52)

Thus, advertising is a tool that enables politicians to send their messages to a large number of people who tend to be apolitical, who are not particularly interested in political campaigns. What is important to recognize is that these people are often profoundly affected by the political advertisements to which they are exposed.

What follows is an introduction to an important and very controversial subject—how advertising has become a major instrument of campaigning for and winning political office. I have chosen to discuss political advertising because, although many people do not think about it, our decisions about who we vote for play a crucial role in determining what laws will be passed and how we will lead our lives. From my perspective, political advertising can be seen as the most important genre of advertising. I would hope the information presented in this book will help readers learn to “read” or “decode” political advertisements better



by offering insights into the methods used by political advertisers and thus make more informed and more intelligent decisions when they vote.

We must recognize that all political advertisements are not the same. In her book *30-Second Politics: Political Advertising in the Eighties*, Montague Kern, a social scientist, suggests there are four kinds of political advertisements. We tend to lump all political advertising together, but if you examine political ads over the course of a typical campaign, you discover there really are a number of different *kinds* of political advertisements, which are used at different *times* in a typical campaign.

There are some theorists, I should point out, who consider *all* advertising to be political in that advertising suggests a political order that produces all the products and services being advertised. Hans Magnus Enzensberger ties advertising to the need political orders have for acceptance by the public. He writes in his essay “The Industrialization of the Mind”:

Consciousness, both individual and social, has become a political issue only from the moment when the conviction arose in people’s minds that everyone should have a say in his own destiny as well as in that of society at large. From the same moment any authority had to justify itself in the eyes of those it would govern; coercion alone would no longer do the trick; he who ruled must persuade, must lay claim

to the people's minds and change them, in an industrial age, by every industrial means at hand. (*The Consciousness Industry*, 1974:8)

This leads to the development of what Enzensberger calls the "mind industry," whose basic concern is to convince people that the existing order should be perpetuated. The mind industry's main task—and advertising is a major element of the mind industry—is "to perpetuate the prevailing pattern of man's domination by man, no matter who runs the society and by what means. Its main task is to expand and train our consciousness—in order to exploit it" (1974:10).

With this insight in mind, it is worth examining in some detail Kern's insights into the kinds of political advertisements and how political advertising works.

KINDS OF POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENTS

Kern discusses political advertisements and points out some changes that have taken place in them in recent years:

If recent research indicates that contemporary political advertising has an impact that includes but is much broader than that of informing the public about candidate positions on the issues, content research based on ads supplied by campaigns also suggests that the purpose of advertising has changed since 1972. It is concerned as much with conveying impressions about candidate character as with providing information about issues. Richard Joselyn has argued that there are four types of ads, with issue statements that are largely sloganistic relating to only two of them: *prospective* and *retrospective* policy satisfaction appeals, as opposed to *election as ritual* and his largest category, *benevolent leader* appeals. (1989:6)

The most significant development in political advertising in recent decades, of course, is just the opposite of the benevolent leader appeal. Much political advertising is now negative, and it attacks political figures for their policies and often for their character and behavior as well. This leads to counterattacks, so that negative advertising becomes a dominant method in many campaigns. These attack ads are used, as Kern explains, generally only at certain times in campaigns.

She discusses different kinds of commercials one finds at different

stages in a typical campaign for political office. It isn't just a matter of developing name awareness in voters anymore. As she explains:

Further, now-classic theory of media use argues that there are four types of ads associated with four stages in a campaign: first, *name identification* spots, which are shown early in the campaign; second, *argument* spots, which present candidate positions on issues; third, *attack* spots, which focus on the opponent; and fourth, *positive* visionary appeals, which are used at the end of a campaign to give voters a reason to vote for the candidate. (1989:6)

We see then that political advertising has developed over the years and television spots have different purposes at different times in a typical campaign.

Political advertising in electoral campaigns is, ultimately, aimed at persuading voters to do what the person paying for the advertisements wants them to do—that is, to vote *for* a particular candidate, which means not voting for any other candidates. Or, in the case of political propositions, to vote the way the advertiser wants them to vote.

We must remember that when advertisers pay to have something “run up a flagpole,” they always expect large numbers of people to “salute.” Or to use a different metaphor, it may always be the case that “he who pays the piper calls the tune,” but it doesn't always work out that the tune is one people like or one that convinces them to sing along. In the case of political advertising, “saluting” or “singing along” means voting for a particular candidate or in a certain way on propositions.

Table 6.1 lists the four stages in a typical political campaign and describes the kinds of political advertisements found at each stage in the campaign. I've also suggested what the specific function of each kind of advertisement is, using words beginning with *I* as a mnemonic device to facilitate remembering them.

Early in the campaign the politician wants to gain name recognition

Table 6.1. Stages and Kinds of Advertisements in Political Campaigns

<i>Time in Campaign</i>	<i>Kind of Advertisement</i>	<i>Function</i>
Early	Name Identification Ads	Identity
Later	Argument Ads	Ideology
Later Still	Attack Ads (Negative Ads)	Insult
End of Campaign	Positive Visionary Ads	Image

or persuade voters to associate him or her with the position he or she is running for. Then the campaign moves into issues the politicians believe in or don't believe in. Later the politicians use attack ads or what we commonly call "negative ads" to put opponents on the defensive. Finally, politicians offer "visionary" ads to give voters reasons to vote for them on the basis of their character.

THE 1998 CALIFORNIA PRIMARY: A "VIRTUAL" CAMPAIGN FOR GOVERNOR

The 1998 California campaign for governor has achieved a rather legendary status. In the campaign there were three Democratic candidates. The least-known one, at the beginning of the campaign, was Al Checchi, a multimillionaire former airline executive who spent \$40 million (his own money) seeking the nomination. When Diane Feinstein, a Democratic U.S. senator from San Francisco, decided not to enter the race, Jane Harman, a two-term U.S. congresswoman, entered. She spent \$15 million (her own money) seeking the nomination. Checchi's \$40 million is the most any nonpresidential candidate has ever spent on a primary campaign.

The underdog was Gray Davis, the lieutenant governor of the state, and a person with more than twenty years of experience in state government. He spent \$9 million (not his own money) on the race and won the primary. The slogan for his campaign was brilliant:

EXPERIENCE MONEY CAN'T BUY

This slogan did two things. First, it pointed out that Davis was a person who had a lot of experience in government. Al Checchi, it turned out, hadn't even voted in a number of elections and was a political novice. And though his \$40 million bought him name recognition, when he started running negative advertisements about Jane Harman, he neutralized her as a political force and he alienated many voters. Thus, one unintended consequence of Checchi's campaign was to weaken Harman so Davis had an easier time getting the nomination.

Davis's slogan also played on a feeling people in California have that wealthy people shouldn't be able to buy an election. And they shouldn't be able to start at the top. These notions seem to be, in part, an outgrowth of a particularly vicious and expensive self-financed campaign run by

Michael Huffington, a wealthy Republican in California's 1996 U.S. Senate race, which Feinstein barely won.

California is an enormous state with a population of more than thirty million people. The only way to get one's message out to the people in the state, aside from whatever news coverage a candidate may get, is through advertising—and chiefly through commercials on radio and, more importantly, on television. There were several debates in the campaign, with the Republican nominee Dan Lungren participating, but for all practical purposes, all that most voters in California saw in the primary were commercials—which is why the campaign was dubbed a “virtual” campaign.

QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE “VIRTUAL” CAMPAIGN

The 1998 primary raises some interesting questions about the relationship between political advertising and voting.

1. *Are people no longer affected by negative campaigns?*

People always say, in polls, they don't like negative campaigns but voting records seem to indicate that they are affected or influenced by them. Numerous case studies of elections show that negative campaigns, full of attack commercials, are effective. One theory is that negative campaigns turn many viewers off (dissuade them from voting at all) and thus play into the hands of politicians, generally conservative Republican ones, who rely on the minority of conservative Republicans who *do* vote (in contrast to the majority of generally liberal Democrats, who don't vote).

It may also be that California voters are somewhat different from voters in other states, or that California voters have established a new trend.

2. *Is it the number or the quality of the advertisements that counts?*

The primary showed, at different times, each of the candidates in the lead. First Checchi, with his advertising blitz, took the lead. Then when Harman entered, she took the lead—until Checchi's negative ads hurt her. Then when he started advertising late in the race, Gray Davis's advertising campaign put him in the lead, and he stayed there and captured the nomination by a large margin.

Davis's \$9 million was a considerable amount of money, but it paled in comparison with Checchi's \$40 million and Harman's \$15 million. Statewide campaigns in California, especially for important and high-profile positions such as governor, are very expensive—due in large measure to the enormous size of the state and its huge population.

3. *Is it the advertising or the record of the candidate that is crucial?*

This matter is particularly significant. Do people vote for someone because of advertising per se or because the advertising points to a person's record or stand on important issues (and attacks opponents' positions)? In the 1998 California primary, the experience of the winning candidate seemed to be crucial. If so, that would suggest Californians have rejected the notion that experience in government is bad and that the less experience a politician has, the better—a position made popular by Ronald Reagan and by many conservative Republicans.

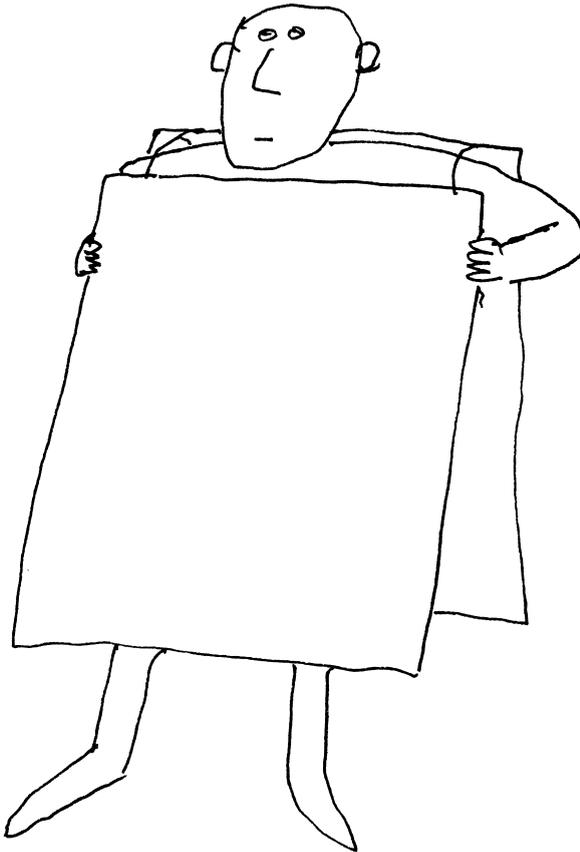
It is estimated that by a ratio of something like four to one, Americans get their information about the positions of candidates from advertising rather than the news. Much of the news in political campaigns tends to focus on the horse race aspect of the campaign—who's ahead rather than differences on issues. And curiously, what the news programs on television decide to cover is often shaped by the candidates' political advertisements. The advertisements set the agenda for the newspapers and radio and television news programs.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson explores the relationship between news and advertising in her book *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction and Democracy*. She writes:

News reporting can provide a frame through which viewers understand ads. Conventional campaign wisdom holds that news sets the context for ads. If the news accounts are inconsistent with the ad, the power of the ad is diminished. When the two are consistent, the power of both is magnified. But news can only reframe ads if reporters question the legitimacy of their claims, point out the false inferences that they invite, and so on. Without such reframing by reporters, campaign ads have the potential to shape the visual and verbal language of news, and in recent campaigns they have become increasingly successful. (1992:124)

This failure of news reporters to deal with misleading statements and matters of that nature is due, in part, to the obsession newspeople have with who is winning a campaign rather than the truth or falsity of advertisements. In addition, written critiques of political commercials in newspapers generally cannot undo the damage done by them, since the impact of television commercials is so great.

Political advertisements about issues can be divided into two categories. There are so-called platform ads, which are full of broad generalities, and slogan ads, which contain some slogan related to an action the candidate promises to take or gives an important insight into the candidate's character. When Dwight David Eisenhower said "I will go to



Korea” in 1952, he was offering a slogan ad. And Gray Davis’s “Experience money can’t buy” was another slogan ad that took his primary campaign and reduced it to one slogan that people could remember.

THE 2002 CALIFORNIA CAMPAIGN FOR GOVERNOR

Governor Gray Davis had very high popularity ratings for the first two years in which he was in office. He spent a great deal of money on education and was riding high when, in 2000, California was hit by an energy crisis—manufactured by Enron and other companies, which used illegal tactics to gouge California for electricity. Davis didn’t handle this crisis to the satisfaction of most Californians and his popularity plummeted.

Compounding his problems were his rather aloof and somewhat authoritarian manner, leading to difficulties with members of his own party. With the demise of the dot-com boom and the flat economy, California suddenly found itself with a gigantic budget deficit, just when the 2002 elections came around. From the moment he became governor, Davis started gathering a huge amount of money for his campaign chest—estimated at around \$60 million—because he was afraid that some rich California Republican might decide to run for governor, which is exactly what happened.

In the Republican primary, a wealthy Republican, Bill Simon, ran against the former mayor of Los Angeles, Richard Riordan. Riordan is a moderate Republican and polls suggested he had a very good chance of defeating Gray Davis. So, in a brilliant move, Davis spent \$10 million attacking Riordan and ensured that Simon, a bumbling, doltish and very conservative candidate, won the Republican nomination for governor. Even though Simon ran what some Republicans described as the worst campaign in the country, he only lost to Davis by six percentage points. Lyn Nofziger, a Republican campaign expert, called Simon “too dumb to win.”

Simon made one disastrous mistake after another, but still came close. In part, this was because many Californians, though they didn’t like Davis very much, didn’t like Simon at all. In truth, most Californians said they didn’t like either candidate and picked the lesser of two evils. Many people felt that Davis had spent too much time getting money for his campaign and that he had looked after companies that had given large donations to his campaign. Simon called him a “pay to play” governor. Davis ran essentially a negative campaign, filling the airwaves with attacks on Simon. Toward the end of the campaign, Davis ran some positive commercials about his achievements.

Dan Walters, a reporter from California, wrote an article, “A State of Gray,” that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* on October 24, 2002. In it he quotes from the endorsement that the *Los Angeles Times* gave Davis:

Davis’s obsessive pursuit of every last campaign dollar from special interests is unseemly, and the governor has been slow to grasp the lead on critical issues. . . . Davis is aloof. He agonizes over minor decisions most governors would leave to aides. He is robotic and largely humorless. He is often at war with the Legislature.

This, remember, is from a newspaper that endorsed Davis.

Davis had predicted he would win by double digits and mentioned, a number of times, when he was giving his victory speech on November 5, how he found politics to be “humbling” (by that he meant his humiliating victory over Simon). He did pass some very forward-looking social legislation in the weeks before the election, which shows—as one commentator put it—that if pressed, Davis does “the right thing.” Being the governor of a large state like California is often a stepping-stone to the presidency, and Davis was, for a while, thought to have a very good chance of securing the Democratic nomination for the presidency. After his poor showing in California, and the many critical articles about him in many newspapers, his chances, now, don’t look very good. On the other hand, a week in politics can be an eternity, so it’s premature to count Davis out.

THE CODE OF THE COMMERCIAL (AND OTHER POLITICAL ADVERTISING)

The television commercial, because it is the most powerful form of advertising, is the most interesting and most complex kind of political advertisement. In these commercials, a set of emotional values is established around common themes, values, or beliefs. Table 6.2 shows these values by offering a set of opposites and listing the negative notions that most Americans find repellant.

Political advertisements use symbols, as best they can, that generate the positive appeals listed in table 6.2. These appeals lead to positive feelings about a candidate, which then translate into votes for the candidate.

Table 6.2. Positive Appeals and Their Negations

<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
hope (for the future)	despair
compassion (for those in need)	coldness, aloofness
ambition (to do what’s needed)	lethargy
trust	deviousness
nostalgia (for the mythic past)	unconcern for the past
intimacy	distance
reassurance	gloominess
local pride	local shame
national pride	national shame



Figure 6.1

We want candidates who reassure us, who give us hope, who are compassionate toward the poor and disadvantaged, who make us feel proud about where we live and about America. We like to feel that our candidates are like us and aware of people like us, even though they may be quite far removed—in distance and socioeconomic status—from us.

One of the most important things candidates do is to use visual symbols to get their messages across directly and viscerally. Thus we see them appropriating important American symbols: the flag, the hard hat (identification with the blue-collar worker), a “visionary” look over the horizon, the all-American family, and so on, to generate the emotional responses that lead to instant and powerful identification with the candidate and hopefully, as a consequence, votes for the candidate. Not that language is unimportant, but in commercials a great deal of the communication burden is carried by physical symbols.

And that is why politics has become, to such an important degree, dominated by advertising—just like so many other areas of American life. Presidents (and other politicians) are just one more product to be sold to the American public, and while advertising isn’t the only determining factor, it does play a major role in political campaigns and, by implication, in the governmental process.

The Internet advertisement for George W. Bush (figure 6.1) offered a slogan that helped define him and associates him with prosperity. Bush redefined himself a number of times with different slogans, and voters may have gotten confused trying to decide whether Bush was a “compassionate conservative” or a “reformer with results.”

THE DEATH OF THE TOBACCO BILL

I’ve been discussing political advertising and campaigns for elected office to this point. But there is another kind of political advertising that is worth considering—advertising done by interest groups to support

their goals and affect decision making in the Congress. One of the most significant recent examples of a successful campaign is the one run by the cigarette companies to defeat the tobacco bill by Senator John McCain (Republican from Arizona) in the U.S. Senate.

Tobacco companies spent \$40 million on advertising in a national campaign waged mostly on television and radio to defeat the McCain bill. The money was spent to turn around public opinion in America and thus give cover to those senators who wished to defeat the bill, which was intended to curb teenage smoking.

What the campaign did was redefine the nature of the McCain bill and change the terms of the matter being debated. The cigarette makers argued that the McCain bill was not really an attempt to curb teenage smoking *but a new tax on working-class Americans* advocated by a number of tax-and-spend members of Congress.

Since McCain is a Republican, the advertisers couldn't claim it was a liberal Democratic tax bill, but the advertisements and commercials suggested that was the case. The commercials didn't say that those paying the tax would be the people who smoked (and then ran up enormous medical bills to treat the diseases caused by smoking), not the general public. The McCain bill was described as an attack on "the American way of life."

To quote from one tobacco advertisement: "Washington has gone haywire, proposing the same old tax and spend. Half a trillion dollars in new taxes . . . 17 new government bureaucracies. Cigarettes up to \$5 a pack. . . . Huge job losses among farmers, retailers and small businesses." Attacking Washington—that is, the government—is a standard technique used by interest groups. These are the same groups, let me point out, that spend enormous amounts of money on lobbyists to influence the government.

Ironically, the person who designed the campaign, Carter Escew, is an advertising executive who has been associated with the Democratic party over the years. Escew also added a "scare" issue to the campaign against the tobacco bill—some advertising by the tobacco industry intimated that the McCain bill would inevitably lead to a huge black market in cigarettes and thus would not be effective.

Escew explained his tactics as follows (quoted in an article by Howard Kurtz, *Washington Post*, "How an Adman Helped Kill Tobacco Bill"): "The message is bounced off the satellite—the satellite being the American people—and comes back to the members [of the Senate]." Escew did this by advertising heavily in the markets where there were

wavering senators—and it was the senators who were his ultimate audience.

We see then that advertising is used not only to sell politicians to the voting public during elections, it also can be used to help shape public policy. Forty million dollars for an advertising campaign is a small amount to pay if you think that by spending that money you'll save billions.

In Japan, firms suffering severe competition have devised a course of instruction which aims to instill the fanaticism of selling for its own sake. The pressure of competition faced by these companies is heightened by the structure of each sector: they specialize too little, and thus too many firms crowd into the market. In particular, the virtual absence of specialization makes additional demands on the sellers. The programme developed under these conditions is called *Moretsu* (or “feverishly active”). It involves “breeding,” the goal of which is the fanatical seller whose drives and energy are subordinated to their selling activity. “The aim is to breed a sales genius, with an elbow of cast-iron, brain like a computer and the constitution of a horse.” In short, “they want to breed the sales robot.” The breeding programme starts its day with an hour of strenuous exercise. After breakfast it is time to practice “self-forgetting.” “They achieve this by hitting the furniture with clubs and yelling war-cries.” This is succeeded by detailed discussion of the company’s sales figures. Whoever is criticized by the instructor must literally wallow in the dust while accusing themselves of worthlessness. “After a time the conviction grows inside the participants on the course that the sales plan must be fulfilled at any cost.”

—W. F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*

If we were to sum up the total number of product advertisements we are exposed to on TV, radio, newspapers and magazines, the number could be as high as 400 per day. . . . If we were to add up *all* promotional messages—including logos on products, program promos and ads on billboards (two media that carry nothing but advertisements)—this number could reach 16,000. . . . Jacobson and Mazur . . . argue that typical Americans will spend almost 3 whole years of their lives just watching commercials on television. The United States, in fact, is ad burdened. This country accounts for 57% of the world’s advertising spending, yet the U.S. population makes up less than 10% of the world’s population.

—Matthew P. McAllister, *The Commercialization of American Culture: New Advertising, Control and Democracy*