

# Political Television Ads

## PRO

It has become quite fashionable of late to attack political advertisements. Some decry the corrupting effects of televised political manipulation, while others fear the advantage they bring to more affluent parties. Both, however, are wrong.

Much has been made of the American experience and especially the ad campaign of George Bush's 1988 election. I remember it well, for I was on the national staff of his opponent, Michael Dukakis. George Bush's ads were manipulative. They were cynical, pandering ads that preyed on the worst impulses of the American voters. They also worked. But they succeeded not simply because of their craftiness. Rather, George Bush had some help. Not only did a nominally independent group direct its own attack ads against Governor Dukakis, but Dukakis himself failed to respond effectively to the ads' assertions.

Neither of the problems stated at the beginning should necessarily spell the doom of political advertising. In the first case, televised ads can be limited to candidates and political parties, and in the second, televised advertising should be kept in perspective. Even the infamous "Willie Horton" ads could have been neutralized if Governor Dukakis had challenged them early on. Voters are not so manipulable that they cannot choose between competing versions of the truth. If we're worried about people being taken in by simplistic messages, then we're pointing the finger at the wrong culprit. No one is forced to watch political ads; if we cannot distinguish fact from fantasy, perhaps the problems lie deeper in our educational systems.

More importantly, in the right hands televised political advertising can be an effective educational tool. Putting aside all of the objections -- that television is shallow, that it can manipulate -- no one can deny the power of televised advertising to bring new political ideas to people who have not previously experienced them.

So what holds back political ads? Listening to the opposition rhetoric, one divines a fear

of televised ads. With their visual imagery, televised ads are a more potent tool, and because they are more expensive than radio or print ads, they are likely to benefit wealthier parties and candidates.

But even this can be overcome. In fact, one need look no farther than Nicaragua. In its last multi-party election, the Nicaraguan Election Commission set up a central clearing house for all foreign contributions to the country's political parties. Half of these contributions went to the parties designated, and the other half were used to finance the expensive process of new elections.

Similarly, other governments might harness interest in their electoral processes -- whether foreign or domestic -- to provide a baseline of financial resources to the various political parties. I do not suggest that governments equalize resources among the parties, nor should the parties be granted funds without demonstrating some minimum level of support. But if high-rollers are allowed to contribute towards an election's result, some of that money should be used to finance real multi-party elections.

Alternatively, governments could grant parties a certain amount of free televised time to do with as they wished. Assuming that the parties stayed within the bounds of libel and slander, they would each have a chance to make their own case to the electorate. This, of course, would require public funding, for the free time would undoubtedly substitute for otherwise paid programming. True as it is, each government has to set its spending priorities.

And therein lies the crux of the issue. If a country's political leadership is serious about holding free and fair multi-party elections, then steps have to be taken to ensure that voters are exposed to the breadth and implications of their choice. Televised political ads should be a part of this process. Warts and all, they are the efficient way to convey easily understood information to the broadest possible audience. In short, rather than seeking to curb televised political ads, they should be embraced.

- Jon Gould, Chicago, USA

## CON

In the last 30 years the ways in which political candidates solicit the public vote have changed drastically. In today's campaigns corporate media plays a larger role than ever before. In the past, coverage of political candidates was largely composed of news stories and interviews by experienced and respected journalists. When top-flight journalists had opportunities to grill presidential candidates, the results were often unexpected, and sometimes irreversibly altered the course of campaigns.

Today political party manipulators are often able to dictate the image voters see in the media. Tight deadlines and shortages of resources can leave journalists with no option but to fit their words around pictures sent directly by party manipulators. In addition,

increased competition between television news channels often forces news editors to accept party initiated stories just to get good headlines.

People in today's society are becoming more and more apathetic about voting; voter turnout in recent elections has hit an all-time low. In addition, people are becoming increasingly disinterested in spending time researching the various candidates and their platforms. Why exert effort to seek out independent information when one can simply turn on the radio or the television and get barraged with all sorts of political rhetoric? People in today's society are watching more television than ever before; A recent TV Guide poll reported that one in four Americans would refuse to quit watching television, even for one million dollars.

Because political commercials are produced by the same advertising agencies that spew forth corporate commercials, they provide politicians with the opportunity to control the image seen on television fully and completely. These agencies are in the business of manipulating people by implanting a desire for their products using "marketing messages". More often than not these "marketing messages" are composed of innuendo and exaggeration rather than factual claims about a product's virtues. Advertising agencies conduct "market research" so that they can produce particularly effective "marketing messages" that "target" various demographic groups by playing off the fears and desires associated with that group's interests and lifestyle.

A good example of this is the advertising war between Coke and Pepsi. Pepsi ran television ads portraying a group of college-aged party-prone young adults who inadvertently drank Coke instead of Pepsi, and turned into bridge-playing invalids. The Pepsi destined for the dorm ended up at an old-folks home, and inspired the elderly residents to behave like raucous adolescents. It is clear how these "marketing messages" are designed to win you over using unsubstantiated and clearly ridiculous claims.

More often than not, today's political commercials are negative, designed to malign opponents rather than to communicate positive information about the party's political platforms. A poignant example of this in recent Canadian federal politics was a television commercial produced last year by the Progressive Conservative party designed to lure voters away from the Liberal party by focusing on Jean Chretien's facial disorder. The commercial contained little or no positive information about the Progressive Conservative party's platform policies. Instead, a collage of close-ups of Jean Chretien's face focused the viewer's attention on his abnormality. At the end of the ad, a voice-over accompanied a close-up of Jean Chretien's contorted face frozen in time and asked the viewer something like, "Do you really want this man to be your Prime Minister?" This commercial turned out to work against the Progressive Conservative party, who were publicly reprimanded for the extreme maliciousness of the ad.

This kind of negative advertising creates a campaign environment in which the voter is encouraged to vote not for the best candidate based upon objective positive

information, but for the least evil candidate based upon what the voter perceives to be true claims about the other candidates - claims designed and produced by advertising agencies skilled at manipulating people using negative innuendo, not positive facts. In this kind of campaign environment, and in an advertising world where commercials are astronomically costly, the most wealthy candidate who slings the most mud at other candidates has a greater chance of being elected by "reaching" the voter population through these "marketing messages".

I don't disagree in principle with the idea of a "decent" political commercial. The electronic media of today offers an unprecedented opportunity for political candidates to disseminate positive, accurate information about their platform policies. Unfortunately in today's society, this is the exception, not the rule. Part of the blame has to fall on the shoulders of the apathetic voter. People need to actively research political parties if they expect to be able to make a decision based upon facts. Unfortunately, today's "sound-bite" society doesn't promote that kind of independence. People have forgotten that democracy isn't free - for it to work, people have to actively support it by making a sincere effort to vote based upon independently gathered facts. Until then we will continue to be taken advantage of, and unfortunately we won't realize that it's happening. Such is the nature of corporate advertising - it's so much fun you don't realize that you're being manipulated - and that perfect manipulation is exactly what pays the bills, undermining democracy in the process.

- Paul Gribble, Montreal, Canada

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