

Who made this up?

How the last federal election campaign became a campaign about advertising

by Eric Blais

If ideas won elections, we wouldn't need campaigns. Voters would have assessed party platforms long before an election is called and polls would show little movement in the weeks preceding voting day. Most voters would be brand loyal and, as is often said in packaged goods, would remain so in the absence of something better.

Eight weeks ago, I was asked by Radio-Canada to comment on the campaigns each week along with a political science professor from York University. I agreed thinking the professor would have far more to analyse than me. He would read the tea leaves of political strategy and I would only comment on the messages and production values of political ads. I was wrong. This campaign was a campaign about advertising. So much so that we were treated to ads about the other side's negative ads and an ad about a party's own criticism of its negative ads.

Election scholars classify ads as advocacy (promoting a party's qualifications), contrast (comparing the positions of the opposing parties) or attack (pointing to the failings of one's opponent). Yet there is considerable debate as to which genre is

most effective. Some argue that negative advertising works because people are more influenced by negative information than positive information. How exactly does a picture of Jean Chrétien emphasizing his partial paralysis with the comment "I personally would be very embarrassed if he were to become the prime minister" provide information?

About the only thing academics agree on is that negative advertising has a strong negative influence on the viewer's feeling towards both the target and the sponsor who they often view as an untrustworthy

mudslinger who will do anything to win an election. I would add that for a supporter reacting to negative information, dropping out may be easier than switching to the attacker. This might explain in part why voter participation has dropped significantly in this country in recent years (although popular vote did increase this time out).

Lacking clear evidence of what works and what backfires, negative advertising in the

hands of eager agencies and political strategists under enormous pressure is a bit like giving matches to a pyromaniac.



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Yet it's hard to dismiss the impact of the 2004 Liberal ad that said "Stephen Harper says that when he's through with Canada, we won't recognize it." It's also hard to blame Liberal ad agency Bensimon Byrne for hoping that history would repeat itself and that fear of the alternative would once again trump anger at the status quo (and the perhaps surprisingly strong 103 seat showing by the Liberals on election night suggests maybe they did work). Only this time negative campaigning started long before the election was called. In Quebec in particular, the daily broadcast of the Gomery commission's deliberations were as negative an infomercial as you could possibly create. And the Bloc Quebecois' pre-campaign advertising made sure no one in Quebec forgot about Jean Chrétien's golf balls.



Before turkey dinners and the RCMP bombshell, the Liberals ran rather bland advocacy ads about the 30 million reasons to vote Liberal while they let the Conservatives run dreadful mock interviews with a pseudo journalist looking at Harper as if he was in fact the leader Canadians were least likely to trust in the early days of the campaign. "What you see is what you get," says Harper biographer William Johnson. "He's not good at acting or pretending." So why torture him and viewers with this fake interview style?



Most observers thought no one was paying attention and the polls showed no movement. But as Queen's University professor Jonathan Rose says, "We need to see advertising as the tip of the campaign iceberg." Underneath the surface the Conservatives were applying what they had learned from 2004. Stephen Harper smiled and made

policy announcements daily. And Cheryl Gallant was no longer talking about abortion being no different than Iraqi beheadings of Americans. Meanwhile the Liberals, without a slogan in English Canada until "Choose Your Canada," and an odd one in Quebec (Réussir le Canada), lacked focus in advertising and soon lost control of whatever messages they had planned to drive with voters. Instead they had to deal with beer and popcorn, the "borrowed" set from the Ligue nationale d'improvisation, Marc Garneau's invitation to Gilles Duceppe to join him in space travel, racist remarks about Olivia Chow and a book on Option Canada. To make matters worse, the NDP went negative almost from the beginning with the "boot" ad. Simple and well produced, this ad made its point without distortion of Paul Martin's face or a menacing soundtrack.

On January 10, hoping to repeat the 2004 turnaround, the Liberals released 12 attack ads including one reminiscent of the 1970 October Crisis, about the military presence in Canadian cities. How Paul Martin simultaneously approved and killed that ad became bigger news than the ad itself. And therein lays another danger of negative ads. The fight

becomes the story. Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, authors of the book *Going Negative*, describe it this way: "The more intense the conflict, the more people are drawn to it. The more a candidate attacks, the more he or 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."

The pundits will have much to discuss and analyse in the weeks and months to come. But strategy is usually fairly simple.

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Comedian and radio host Al Franken summed up the strategy used by George W. Bush to beat John Kerry with three words: "Fear, smear and queers." Based on my analysis, Stephen Harper beat Paul Martin with an equally simple strategy: "Happy, policy and Gomery."

Can you come up with three words to sum up the Liberals' strategy? I can't. But I can think of one word that isn't negative, rhymes with Gomery but unfortunately isn't found in a politician's vocabulary: Sorry. Look who's sorry now.