

# Comparison of two political ads politics essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Throughout history, politicians have used generally used several methods, such as short speeches, political advertising and rallies to achieve their main target of winning votes. Not surprising, as social media becomes the biggest platform to reach out to the people, politicians have taken more advantage of it to use political advertising to persuade voters. This is evident from the amount spent on political advertising rising exponentially, from few hundred millions of dollars in the past to a projected sum of almost three billion dollars in the current US Presidential Election[1]. Much of the literature on political advertising focuses on its effectiveness, how it will affect voters' intent as well as how it will affect the perception of the candidate. As political advertising must achieve results in a short period of time, a variety of techniques of advertising are usually employed, such as offensive or attack advertising, negative advertising, and self-image advertising to name a few. Prior to the 1980s, candidates usually start off with self-image ads to establish their positive image before moving on to negative ads to attack the opponent. However, such strategies were less often seen in recent elections. The questions are, however, why do political candidates increasingly choose to rely more on negative ads? Is that the most effective way to persuade voters in a short amount of time? We will look at a few examples of political ads and attempt to understand the extent of how the approach taken in ads development has changed and how it affect both the voters' decision and candidates themselves, and perhaps the underlying intention behind.

Perhaps one of the most controversial ads is the " Daisy Girl[2]" ad by Lyndon Johnson's Democratic Party in the 1964 election. It was referred as Lyndon Johnson's response to Republican candidate Barry Goldwater's

statement that he would consider a nuclear war in Vietnam. The ad instantly created a controversy and stopped airing after its first run. The key point in this ad was the countdown and nuclear explosion that followed after the young girl attempt to count the petals on the flower. The approach taken in this ad was perhaps to take advantage of the nuclear warfare possibility raised by Barry Goldwater, as a tool to frighten the voters that the consequences would be disastrous if indeed nuclear weapons were to be used during the war in Vietnam. The ad was labeled as an attack or negative ad since the underlying intention was to condemn Barry Goldwater's approach that Vietnam should be continuously bombed instead of ending the war in a less brutal method. Although the ad was pulled out immediately, the point was made. However controversial this ad was, it did serve its purpose of winning the votes over where it can be seen from the landslide victory Lyndon Johnson had over Barry Goldwater, with him winning 44 states to Goldwater's 6 states only. It proved the efficacy of negative campaigning and the reach of media[3]. As an undecided viewer, one would have easily casted his vote for Lyndon Johnson in view of the serious consequences that would affect future generations if nuclear weapons were used. Arguably, the fact is that negative ads such as " Daisy Girl" are deemed effective because the message itself is remembered, but at the same time ineffective because the candidate sponsoring the ad may be put to a disadvantage instead, such as being criticized for bias or inaccurate evaluation of the targeted candidate. Therefore, negative ads may be risky and may backfire anytime the targeted candidate finds a loophole. Nonetheless, negative ads are very effective in discriminating candidates' images, especially to those voters who do not follow the campaign as attentively. In the 1964 election, although this

<https://assignbuster.com/comparison-of-two-political-ads-politics-essay/>

controversial “ Daisy Girl” ad may not be the main reason for Lyndon Johnson’s victory, the approach taken for this ad proved to be a debatable point: to instill fear into voters’ mind (the nuclear effects), or to portray Barry Goldwater as being an aggressor or extremist who planned to continue to inflict torture to the enemy.

Moving forward to the 21st century, such offensive ad like the “ Daisy Girl” may not be as effective now as it would be. This is due to the fact that people are more educated than before, which means that they are able to think more objectively and analyze the context behind the ad more elaborately with regards to the issues raised. Also, with technological improvements due to globalization, people get into contact with politics more easily through social media or virtual platforms. Nonetheless, this does not mean that negative ads have lost its appeal to the candidates in deciding their campaign ads. In fact, negative ads occupy the majority of the commercials expenditure spent by both candidates in the 2012 presidential campaign. Barack Obama has invested about 85% of his campaign’s commercial expenditure on negative ads, and Mitt Romney a hefty 91%[4]. However, it is fortunate to note that the degree of negativity is better off than before since outcries of controversies have been reduced, and candidates tend to focus more on their policies and approach to improve the life of their people which they rely on to win votes. Why then, is the amount of negative ads becoming more prevalent? Perhaps emotional and psychological aspects of human nature could be the reason behind. As pointed out by experts, the ability of negative ads may compel voters to look

for more information about the candidates, and in the process influencing the undecided[5].

One of the ads that Mitt Romney's Republican Party used in the 2012 election is called " We've Heard It All Before[6]". The ad depicts his opponent, Barack Obama, constantly repeating some of the speeches and promises he made in his 2008 election and saying it again in the current election before ending it off with a question asking, " Are you better off?" and a sentence, " Obama isn't working". Yes, it is definitely a negative ad, albeit in a much more reserved manner as compared to " Daisy Girl" which was more offensive. The Republican Party merely has to expose failed policies under Obama's administration by effectively using his tired, rehashed talking points against himself. It is not a typical negative ad whereby the approach taken is to solely bring down the opponent's image and capabilities. Instead, this ad has an additional stint of sarcasm that mocks Obama for his lack of creativity and new or improved plans for the future. In addition, the reason why this ad may be useful is because it sets the viewer to think about the message that is brought across: Are you better off? It triggers a chain of thought in everyone, especially since the US economy has barely recovered from the 2008 financial crisis (coincidentally the same year as the previous election), it is a good time to start reflecting and gauge how much better or worse off one is since Obama took charge four years ago. The state of recovery from 2008 financial crisis was a good chance to show how effective Obama's policies were, and hence it fulfilled the objective of this ad which is to cause the voters to think and perhaps vote for a change if they feel shortchanged in the last four years. For Mitt Romney himself, this ad

may put him at an advantage as it was not based on groundless accusations, but merely raising questions which Barack Obama could find it difficult to answer.

On the contrary, positive ads do stand out as well even if its impact may not be as long lasting. The approach towards positive ads would generally focus on how well the candidate appeals to the masses by projecting his understanding of the concerns that the voters have so as to devise a plan that will convince and secure their votes. It reassures the voters and reaffirms the choices for those who have already decided, and informs those undecided voters the candidate's plan on what will be implemented or further improved upon election. As earlier mentioned, even as positive ads are not as favored to as negative ads based on the amount spent on them, we do not underestimate the impact of a positive ad. Arguably, negative ads are only effective if it causes a positive difference in evaluation between the source and the targeted candidate, whereas positive ads are always effective since it serves only to promote the source[7].

One of the ads that the Democratic Party produced in the 2012 election was named " The Choice[8]". It was a very different genre of ad whereby Barack Obama himself was the main cast; speaking as though he was having a one minute rally. It was a simple and straightforward ad; with the charismatic Barack Obama clearly depicting the major differences in the plans which both candidates will be focusing on and reminded the voters to vote for the candidate whose plan they think is more beneficial to them. Having illustrated a few negative ads prior, for once, this ad portrays the positivity in politics which people tend to see it as ' dirty mind games' between

politicians. It shows a clear contrast with “ We’ve Heard It All Before” and “ Daisy Girl” as it does not sensationalize the subject matter, no meaningless quips; neither does it contain exaggerated claims nor ad hominem attack, but the complete opposite of just the candidate explaining the differences in economic vision in a polite manner. With the vast amount of viewership, of about three million views just on the virtual platform itself three months after being released, one can easily understand how influential this man is in garnering attention without the use of an offensive approach. On a personal basis, I feel that such approach taken is appropriate at current point of time as it encapsulates the vision of looking ahead and be prepared for the challenges, instead of always condemning what the opponent has failed to fulfill in the last four years in a bid to win over votes. It is a composed ad that does not attempt to implore voters on casting their votes for him, but rather to put across the message of making a choice they deemed is better. Thus, the ad is very effective for people who do not understand the differences between the two candidates very well, such as young or first time voters who are not yet very involved. Comparing Barack Obama’s “ The Choice” ad with Mitt Romney’s “ We’ve Heard It All Before” ad, it shows the difference in intention and personalities of the two candidates. The target audience for their respective ad is different; with Barack Obama speaking to the general population while Mitt Romney intends to sway the undecided voters over by emotion appeals that set them thinking.

In conclusion, the approach taken in ads development over the years has changed in the sense that the degree of negativity has decreased and hence less controversies surfacing. This could also be the reason why the amount

spent on developing ads has soared exponentially as the impact of each ad could be directly related its degree of negativity. In addition, we also realized that the percentage gap of negative ads to positive ads is widening as a result. As human beings are tuned to be more sensitive towards negativity, this would then in turn increase their curiosity when exposed to such ads and leads them to wanting to get a clearer picture, which is good since their knowledge and understanding of the candidates will be much better on polling day. On the other hand, the enthusiasm shown in positive ads aims to fortify the position of the candidate by reaffirming those voters who have already made up their mind, and to assure undecided voters that this candidate is more suitable to be the President. Knowing these effects, an intelligent campaign organizer would use positive ads when they are ahead and vice versa. These could perhaps be due to the mindset that if the polling surveys show that the candidate is currently behind, he would have to attempt to disrupt the momentum of the opponent's run in order to sway voters' decision. Likewise, if the candidate is currently ahead, he would want to cement the spot by garnering more supports through spreading positivity via emotional appeal and enthusiasm[9]. Although this method is not proven hundred percent useful, it is a logical one. Nonetheless, political campaigners should be careful in the use of ads. A campaign that relies heavily on negative ads may cause a backlash to the party themselves, thus it poses more risks than benefits. True enough, the outcome of 2012 US elections became unequivocal evidence towards why political campaigners should not rely so heavily on negative ads as its main tool to achieve success, but to put more effort in improving their credentials to win voters over.