



# THE VIEW

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## IF IT'S FACTUAL IS IT NEGATIVE?

BY

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The questions are coming daily now as are the news stories. What do you make of the negative campaigning?

In a recent article by Bobby Harrison of the Northeast Daily Journal both candidates for the office of Mississippi Lieutenant Governor denied that their campaigning was negative, but instead were based on issues and statements of fact. Indeed, both make a quite good case. Both have public records upon which to base their claims. Thus, the better question might be: What tactic must be employed by a political campaign so that the campaign is considered to have gone negative?

Nationally, there have been some notable cases in the last few years of campaigns that took decidedly negative directions. Who can forget the 2004 Presidential campaign in which Democratic nominee John Kerry fell victim to the "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" ads? These ads were so effective they led to the coining of a new phrase for the act of bombarding the airwaves with negative information about a candidate. Of course such an act came to be called "swift boating" and some still use the term today. By all indications the "swift boating" of John Kerry proved to be quite effective. Prior to that, in a Georgia Senate race Saxby Chambliss unseated Vietnam War wounded, triple amputee Max Cleland by raising major questions as to his heroism. While these two instances involve Republicans as perpetrators, both parties have had their moments. In the run up to the 2006 elections, according to a story by Michael Grunwald of the Washington Post, the Republicans played on the fear that Nancy Pelosi might become House Speaker. Republican Representative John Hostettler of Indiana aired radio ads warning that a Democratic victory would

allow Pelosi to “put in motion her radical plan to advance the homosexual agenda.” According to Grunwald, Hostetter’s Democratic opponent, Brad Ellsworth, accused Hostetter of promoting the sale of guns to criminals, “including child-rapists.”

Kyle Mattes of the Division of the Humanities and Social Sciences at Caltech, Pasadena has taken a scientific approach to the study of negative campaigning. In a 2006 article titled *Attack Politics: Who Goes Negative and Why?*, Mattes defines negative campaigning and attempts to separate negative campaigning from mere telling the facts of a bad record. In this research Mattes endeavors to separate campaign strategies into those focused on political issues and those focused on character traits. He defines negative campaigning as attacking one’s opponent on the basis of character traits. Specifically, according to Mattes, this definition distinguishes between promoting oneself and attacking the opponent, while also separating campaigning on political issues from campaigning on character traits.

The examples above can thus be described, according to the Mattes definition, as efforts to talk about opponents rather than oneself, but to do so on the basis of events. In so doing, they raise the issue of the opponent’s character. Indeed, this is also the claim raised by the respective candidates for Lieutenant Governor who say that they are merely letting their opponent’s record speak for itself.

In summary, the negative label is attached to campaign strategies when they involve one candidate in any way commenting on his/her opponent’s record. Talking about oneself rather than one’s opponent results in issue bolstering and positive campaigning but then the question arises as to whether such a candidate risks defeat in using these campaign tactics. Remember that John Kerry was criticized for not responding in kind to the swift boat ads.

A few moments of reading the colorful speeches of yesteryear clearly reveals that campaigns have always employed a significant level of invective, but perhaps the character assassination was less pointed. What is it about today’s campaigns that make attacking an opponent’s character traits so tempting?

First, the sheer partisanship of today’s political environment places pressure on a candidate to not be the one responsible for losing a party’s position of advantage. Each and every single race in an evenly divided partisan world is viewed as “winner take all.” Then there is the growth of independent expenditures that enable candidates to remain a step removed from accepting

direct responsibility for a negative ad. Thirdly, ever since the Watergate incident made journalistic heroes out of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein the campaign gurus have learned how to make use of the media to convey bad news. If, by using negative campaign tactics to raise issues of an opponent's fitness to hold public office, a candidate can stimulate the media to view allegations as potential facts then the accuser may gain valuable free media time from news outlets. This was once a tedious task, but with the expansion of the uses of the Internet virtually everything about a candidate's private life has become public, and computer storage capabilities enable the information to be maintained indefinitely. Remember, it was YouTube that brought down the promising career and potential Presidential bid of Virginia Senator George Allen. Add to this phenomenon the blogs and other independent news sites and the ability to place a negative spin on the most innocuous act is available to anyone.

In summary, our ability to separate political issues from issues of personal character has become purposely blurred. Just like the First Amendment, negative campaigning is here to stay. It is up to us, the voter, to sort it out.

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William Martin Wiseman is Director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Professor of Political Science at Mississippi State University. He received his Ph.D in 1986, his MPPA in 1980, his MS in 1974, and his BA in 1973, all awarded from Mississippi State University. In addition to his duties at Mississippi State, Dr. Wiseman is a guest professor at Jackson State University. Dr. Wiseman's areas of academic interest include American government, intergovernmental relations and federalism, county and municipal management, public personnel administration, and innovations in state and local government management.

Wiseman is a sought-after speaker on state and local government, state and local politics, political theory and rural development. Often a guest editorial writer in Mississippi daily and weekly newspapers, he can also be relied upon to evaluate federal, state and local election results for all media.

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