Form and Variations in Negative Political Advertising

David E. Procter
Kansas State University

William J. Schenck-Hamlin
Kansas State University

Using a sample of 99 political advertisements from 1990 statewide and federal elections, a content analysis was employed to test whether negative political advertisements exhibited a normative style. Results indicated that negative political advertisements were remarkably similar in substance and style, indicating a normative advertising form. The authors suggest that negative advertisements are used more to "blunt" an opponent's chance of winning the election than to promote the sponsoring candidate's own images or characteristics with their constituency.

No other aspect of campaign communication research has increased so dramatically in the last twenty years as research on negative political advertising. A negative advertisement is one that directly references and criticizes political opponents (Surlin & Gordon, 1977; Sabato, 1981; Garramone, 1984).

Recently, several investigators have observed a high degree of similarity among negative advertisements (Gronbeck, 1992; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991; Pfau, Parrott, & Lindquist, 1992; Procter, Schenck-Hamlin, & Haase, 1994). They have asserted that most negative advertisements fit a common pattern, possessing similar modes of attack and style. Pfau, Parrott, and Lindquist (1992) have used the phrase "standard formula" to describe the commonality among negative advertisements.

This claim is distinct from that of other scholars who have maintained that candidate characteristics influence negative advertising construction (Bystrom, 1996; Sheckels, 1994;

David E. Procter (Ph.D., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1989) and **William J. Schenck-Hamlin** (Ph.D., University of Oregon, 1976) are Associate Professors in the Department of Speech Communication, Theatre and Dance at Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, 66506.

Trent & Friedenberg, 1995; and Trent & Sabourin, 1993). These researchers have asserted that candidate characteristics such as gender and status are powerful factors that influence the substance and style of negative advertising. The difference between these two views centers on the model that best describes the motivation behind the use, substance, and style of negative advertising. Our study engages this debate by examining negative advertisements for similarity and diversity using the candidate characteristics of gender and status.

Most research, up to now, has examined negative advertisements for candidate differences. Several scholars have argued that candidate gender is a major factor in the selection of campaign communication strategies (Benze & Declercq, 1985; Mandel, 1981; Procter, Aden, & Japp, 1988; Sheckels, 1994; Trent & Sabourin, 1993; Wadsworth et al., 1987). Researchers and political practitioners have contended that women communicate differently in rhetorical situations because of gender-role stereotypes (Blankenship & Robson, 1995; Burgoon & Miller, 1985; Dow and Tonn, 1993; Greenberg-Lake, 1989; Johnston & White, 1994; Mandel, 1981; Trent & Sabourin, 1993). This line of research and analysis has argued that negative advertisements violate cultural expectations of women as deferential, soft, and nurturing, and that women candidates must devise a negative advertising strategy with these constraints in mind.

Many political communication scholars have concluded that women candidates should either avoid negative advertising or incorporate strategies which "accommodate sex-based stereotypes of femininity" (Trent & Sabourin, 1993, p. 36) by softening or in some way disassociating themselves from the attack (Procter, Aden, & Japp, 1988), utilizing humor (Greenberg-Lake, 1989; Kern, 1989; Taylor, 1990) and/or drama (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991). From this literature, it might be expected that men and women candidates will construct negative political advertisements differently.

Candidate status has also been cited as another powerful determinant of campaign communication. Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) assert that, "Candidate status, that is, whether the candidate is an incumbent, a challenger, or running in an open seat, has a significant impact on the campaign plan" (p. 54). Trent and Friedenberg (1995) argue that many of the campaign strategies utilized by incumbents and challengers come from a long history of use, thereby creating expectations and norms for this form of political communication.

Incumbents, in the role of "statesperson" as opposed to "politician," often remain aloof from direct attacks on their opponents, relying instead on responding to attacks and, when necessary, use surrogates to issue attacks against their opponent (Trent & Friedenberg, 1995). Challengers also have negative advertising strategies available to them. "Taking the offensive position in attack advertisements" against an incumbent's record (Kitchens & Stiteler, 1979) and "calling for change" (Trent & Friedenberg, 1995) are both important strategies for political challengers. From this literature, it might be expected that the status of the political candidate will affect the construction of negative political advertisements.

Conversely, the claim of a standard formula in negative advertising questions the extent to which candidates actually influence the construction of negative advertisements. Consultants or other elements in the campaign context likely have a powerful influence on the creation and use of negative advertisements. One element to consider in the use of negative advertisements is the candidate's opponent.

Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) have viewed an election as a type of zero-sum game

in which candidates are players, and the payoff is the chance of winning an election. A particular candidate's actions are constrained, in part, by the opponent's actions. In a zero-sum game an increase in one candidate's chance of winning necessarily lowers the other candidate's chance of winning. Because candidates want to maximize their chance of winning, they cannot fail to consider the opponent's strategy without lowering their probability of winning.

From this perspective, candidates use a negative advertisement more to "blunt" an opponent's chance of winning than to promote themselves with their constituents. Therefore, promoting images of oneself are not as important as constructing advertisements which damage one's opponent. Thus, campaign players have likely come to view negative advertisements which are "intense, grim, humorless, and often mean (Pfau, Parrott, & Lindquist, 1992) as the standard formula for blocking an opponent's strategy.

To examine these two models, this study applied a content analysis to negative political advertisements to isolate candidate differences among candidates in mixed-sex statewide elections. Political advertisements, like any short story, can be broken down into what is said -- substance -- and how it is said -- style (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991). Substance and style variables for negative advertisements were determined from a review of the negative political advertising literature and from a pilot study on the identified categories. The substance of each negative advertisement was explored through an analysis of the "type of advertisement" (Pfau & Kenski, 1990), "focus of attack" (Garramone, 1984), and the "type of support for the attack." Stylistically, the negative advertisements were studied by examining their "format" (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991) and the "agent delivering attack" (Jamieson, 1986; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991).[1] We explored each content variable for a dominant category and for gender and status differences among the categories of each content variable.

The following three research questions guided the analysesof the content categories.

RQ1: Do political campaigns more frequently use one category than any other for each content variable?

RQ2: Do women candidates differ from men candidates with regard to how they employ each content variable?

RQ3: Do incumbents, challengers, and open-seat candidates differ in regard to how they employ each content variable?

METHOD

The target population consisted of all 1990 statewide elections for governor and U.S. Senate featuring men versus women candidates. Statewide elections were chosen because candidates in these races are likely to air political advertising in order to cover large geographical areas, the races are generally well-financed, and political parties have more at stake in winning them. Mixed-sex races were chosen to obtain an equivalent number of men and women candidates. Two criteria were used to select advertisements for the analysis. First, every advertisement had to make a direct reference to the opposition candidate and every advertisement had to have been televised during the campaign. Table 1 represents the sampling frame used for this study.

The advertisements were acquired either from the University of Oklahoma Political Commercial Archive or from individual campaigns and advertisers. A total of 99 negative

TABLE 1

Sampling Frame of 1990 U.S. Senate and Gubernatorial Elections

State	Women Candidates	Men Candidates
1990 U.S. Senate Elections		
CO	Josie Heath (D, S, L, 9)	Hank Brown (R, S, W, 2)
DE	M. Jane Brady (R, C, L, 0)	Joe Biden (D, I, W, 0)
HI	Pat Saiki (R, S, L, 0)	Daniel Akaka (D, S, W, 0)
IL	Lynn Martin (R, C, L, 4)	Paul Simon (D, I, W, 4)
KS	Nancy Kassebaum (R, I, W, 0)	Dick Williams (D, C, L, 0)
NJ	Christine Whitman (R, C, L, 2)	Bill Bradley (D, I, W, 0)
RI	Claudine Schneider (R, C, L, 2)	Claiborne Pell (D, I, W, 1)
WY	Kathy Helling (D, C, L, 0)	Alan Simpson (R, I, W, 0)
1990 Gubernatorial Elections		
AK	Arliss Sturgulewski (R, S, L, 6)	Tony Knowles (D, S, L, 4) and Walter Hickel (Ind, S, W, 6)
CA	Diane Feinstein (D, S, L, 6)	Pete Wilson (R, S, W, 7)
KS	Joan Finney (D, C, W, 2)	Mike Hayden (R, I, L, 7)
NE	Kay Orr (R, I, L, 5)	Ben Nelson (D, C, W, 9)
OR	Barbara Roberts (D, S, W, 3)	David Frohnmayer (R, S, L, 5)
PA	Barbara Hafer (R, C, L, 3)	Bob Casey (D, I, W, 0)
TX	Ann Richards (D, S, W, 9)	Clayton Williams (R, S, L, 4)
WY	Mary Mead (R, C, L, 1)	Mike Sullivan (D, I, W, 0)

Note: D = Democrat, R = Republican, Ind = Independent; I = Incumbent, C = Challenger, S = Open Seat; W = Won, L = Lost; # = total number of negative advertisements used in the campaign.

advertisements were used in the analysis. This constitutes 98% of the negative advertisements produced in the 1990 races as only two advertisements, from the Whitman/Bradley race, were not obtained. The database included eleven women and ten men candidates who televised 50 and 49 different advertisements respectively.

A written coding instrument was developed and two independent coders were trained to use it. For content categories relating to type of campaign advertisement and format of campaign advertisement, coders judged the dominant theme in the advertisement. For the other categories, the coders judged whether the components of the category were present or not in the advertisement. After coding all advertisements, each content category was evaluated for intercoder reliability.

Intercoder reliability was assessed with Cohen's kappa (1960). The values of kappa were .75 for content variable one, .85 for two, .79 for three, .73 for four, and .77 for five.

RESULTS

The first research question asked whether campaigns used one content category more frequently than any other category for each analysis. For advertisement type, all 99 advertisements were classified into attack, comparison, or response. Attack advertisements comprised 58 advertisements, with the remaining being split between comparison ($n = 25$) and response ($n = 17$). Analysis of the frequency of advertisement type disclosed a significant chi-square ($\chi^2 = 27.15$, $df = 2$, $n = 99$, $p < .001.$), indicating a more frequent occurrence of attack advertisements for all campaigns.

Advertisement formats consisted of report, humor, and drama. Results revealed that

73 advertisements were reports, while 11 were humorous, and 16 dramatic. Analysis of the frequency of advertisement formats demonstrated a significant chi-square ($\chi^2 = 69.52$, $df = 2$, $n = 99$, $p < .001$), indicating that a report format was chosen more frequently than humor or drama.

The presentation of attack included the sponsoring candidate, a neutral reporter, a personal witness, a surrogate, or negative visual association. Each agent of attack was counted as it appeared in an advertisement. Analysis of the frequency of presentation of attack revealed a significant chi-square ($\chi^2 = 81.79$, $df = 4$, $n = 136$, $p < .001$). Results demonstrated that all campaigns more frequently chose a neutral reporter ($n = 65$) as the agent of attack, and less frequently selected a personal witness ($n = 8$) or a surrogate ($n = 7$) as the agent of attack than expected. There were no significant discrepancies between observed and expected frequencies with respect to sponsoring candidate ($n = 25$) or negative visual association ($n = 31$).

The focus or basis of attack consisted of performance, orientation, ethics, qualifications, and personality. Each attack category was counted as it appeared in an advertisement. Analysis of the foci of attack revealed a significant chi-square among the content categories ($\chi^2 = 61.18$, $df = 4$, $n = 160$, $p < .001$), indicating that some categories were used more frequently than expected. Results demonstrated that campaigns more frequently criticized the ethics ($n = 64$) of opponents, and less frequently attacked the qualifications ($n = 14$) or personality ($n = 9$) than expected. There were no significant discrepancies between observed and expected frequencies with respect to performance ($n = 32$) or orientation ($n = 41$).

Last, type of support included undocumented facts and figures, documented facts and figures, narratives, and testimony. Each type of support was counted as it occurred in an advertisement. Analysis of the frequency of type of support morefrequently disclosed a significant chi-square among the four categories of support ($\chi^2 = 73.02$, $df = 3$, $n = 152$, $p < .001$). Results showed that campaigns more frequently used undocumented facts and figures ($n = 77$), and less frequently used narratives ($n = 13$) or testimony ($n = 15$) than expected. There were no significant discrepancies between observed and expected frequencies with respect to documented facts and figures ($n = 47$).

One content category was clearly selected more frequently than any other category in each analysis. The typical negative advertisement attacks the sponsoring candidate's opponent, has the appearance of a report, uses a neutral reporter to present the attack, focuses primarily on the opponent's ethics, and uses undocumented facts and figures to support its claims. So, the first research question was answered affirmatively.

The second research question dealt with whether women candidates differed from men in regard to each content variable. Analyses of gender revealed non-significant chi-squares with regard to all content variables (see Table 2). Women's campaigns are similar to men's with respect to the selection of an attack advertisement, a report format, the agent who presents the attack, the aspect of political ethos they choose to attack, andthe type of support used in advertisements. So, research question two was answered negatively.

The last research question asked whether differences in candidate status affected the makeup of negative advertisements. Analysis of status differences in regard to four content variables revealed non-significant chi-squares (see Table 3). Incumbents, challengers, and open-seated campaigns selected similar advertisement types, formats, aspects of political ethos to attack, and types of support. However, analysis of status differences (see

TABLE 2

Cross Tabulation of Candidate Gender Results

Content Variable	Gender		χ^2	Sig.
	Men	Women		
Negative Ad Type			3.43	.18
Attack	24	33		
Comparison	16	9		
Response	9	8		
Negative Advertisement Format			0.55	.76
Report	34	38		
Drama	9	7		
Humor	6	5		
Presentation of Attack			5.83	.21
Sponsoring Candidate	8	17		
Neutral Reporter	37	28		
Personal Witness	5	3		
Negative Visual Assoc.	13	18		
Surrogate	3	4		
Focus of Attack			3.38	.50
Performance	15	17		
Orientation	23	18		
Ethics	29	35		
Qualifcations	4	10		
Personality	4	5		
Type of Support			0.46	.93
Undocumented Facts	40	37		
Documented Facts	26	21		
Narratives	8	5		
Testimony	8	7		

Table 3) revealed a significant chi-square with respect to the agent who presents the attack. Incumbents were more likely to use a surrogate to deliver the attack to the opponent than either challengers or open-seated candidates. There were no significant discrepancies among incumbents, challengers, or open-seat candidates with respect to the other agents of attack. With the exception of the agent delivering the attack, research question three was answered negatively.

CONCLUSIONS

Within the limitations of the data sample, this study finds clear support for the contention that negative advertisements have strikingly similar substance and style elements. This study finds that the normative negative political advertisement is an attack advertisement, employs a report format, uses a neutral reporter to deliver the attack against the target, focuses the attack on the target's ethics, and relies on undocumented evidence to support its claims.

TABLE 3

Cross Tabulation of Candidate Status Results

Content Variable	Cadidate Status			χ^2	Sig.
	Incumbent	Challanger	Open-Seat		
Negative Ad Type				6.09	0.19
Attack	6	12	39		
Comparison	6	7	12		
Response	5	2	10		
Negative Advertisement Format				4.47	0.34
Report	15	15	42		
Drama	1	5	10		
Humor	1	1	9		
Presentation of Attack				21.19	<.01
Sponsoring Candidate	0	10	15		
Neutral Reporter	14	12	39		
Personal Witness	2	1	5		
Negative Visual Assoc.	2	8	21		
Surrogate	4	0	3		
Focus of Attack				9.89	0.27
Performance	2	8	22		
Orientation	10	9	22		
Ethics	9	11	44		
Qualifations	0	3	11		
Personlity	0	1	8		
Type of Support				12.04	.06
Undocumented Facts	11	18	48		
Documented Facts	10	7	30		
Narratives	0	5	8		
Testimony	6	1	8		

Results also showed no gender differences, contrary to previous research suggesting this candidate variable affects campaign communication style. While choices were clearly made in negative advertisement construction, gender differences were not evident. These findings are consistent with Benze and Declercq's (1985, p. 283) study which found more similarities than differences in men and women political advertising and with Procter, Schenck-Hamlin, and Haase's argument that "gender differences are secondary to other concerns when constructing negative political campaign advertising" (1994, p. 17).

With regard to candidate status, one difference did emerge. Interestingly, challengers did not vary from the overall negative advertisement pattern. However, incumbents were more likely to use surrogates to deliver their attacks and less likely to deliver the attack themselves than either challengers or candidates in open-seat campaigns. This is consistent with previous research which reports that incumbents are likely to use attack strategies which limit or remove their involvement in negative political advertising (Trent and Friedenberg, 1995).

Several possible explanations exist for finding a strong indication of a normative advertisement pattern while finding few candidate style differences. First, earlier research that found differences used data that were largely obtained from convenience samples. The use of convenience samples increases the uncertainty of the results due to possible selection bias (Stuart, 1984, p. 4). Data for this study was collected on a well-defined population and procedures were taken to construct an accurate sampling frame.

Second, it is possible we are witnessing a blending of campaign communication styles where women candidates take on some "masculine" strategies in their political advertisements while men candidates incorporate some "feminine" strategies in their political advertising (Bystrom, 1996, p. 28). Indeed, Kaid and Johnston (1991) note that "perceptions of women as candidates appear to be changing" (p. 327). As women become integral in political campaigns, gender expectations may place less of a role in campaign communication decisions. Likewise, recent research indicates that incumbents and challengers no longer differ significantly in their use of negative advertising (Kaid and Johnston, 1991, p. 62; Pfau and Kenski, 1990, p. 60, 158; Trent and Friedenberg, 1995, p. 88).

Finally, we believe the presence of a standard negative advertising model suggests that norms for negative advertising are established within the context of the campaign communication event itself. That is, norms and expectations are established through a history of effective negative advertising usage. Therefore, like Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995), we believe that a zero-sum game theory offers a more explanatory model of negative advertising than a model of individual candidate difference. Candidates and consultants, within the campaign context, determine strategies which maximize their chance to win while minimizing their opponent's chance to win and rely on that formula in the construction of negative campaign advertisements.

Negative advertising, based on a zero-sum model, however, raises concerns about the political campaign process. While "campaigning should be a time of self-reflection and dedication"(Gronbeck, 1992, p. 344), political campaigning is increasingly filled with formulaic negative advertisements generated from a team of campaign communication consultants, often operating on the guiding principle of "use what wins." Negative advertising creators "have no incentive to worry about the behavior of their candidates once in office, or about the level of political debate, or about the quantity of voter participation" (Diamond and Bates, 1992, p. 373). Candidate responses to complex political problems are being reduced to formulaic prescriptions, which diminishes the quality of political debate (Diamond & Bates, 1992; Gronbeck, 1992).

Further, the normative negative advertisement is narrow -- highlighting mainly attacks on the target candidate's ethical behavior. This form of advertising -- mudslinging, personal attack -- is considered the most objectionable form of campaign advertising (Gronbeck, 1992, p. 335; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991, p. 271). When political candidates attack an opposing candidate's ethics, voters view the election as a choice between good and evil rather than an evaluation and decision about differing political ideas and policies. Gronbeck concludes that "reducing political choices solely to questions of personality and morality likewise contributes to alienation" (1992, p. 344).

Certainly, scrutiny of political opponents is fundamental to the political process. Unfortunately, the substance and style of negative advertising as it exists today is narrowly drawn and may well increase the public's sense of alienation from the political system and decrease trust and faith in our political leaders.

NOTES

[1]A detailed codebook was constructed operationalizing each content category. To examine any of the content categories or to view the entire codebook, please contact the authors.

REFERENCES

Ansolabehere, S. & Iyengar, S. (1995). *Going negative: How attack ads shrink and polarize the electorate*. New York: The Free Press.

Benze, J. G. & Declercq, E. R. (1985). Content of television political spot ads for female candidates. *Journalism Quarterly*, 62, 278-283.

Blankenship, J. & Robson, D.C. (1995). A "feminine style" in women's political discourse: An exploratory essay. *Communication Quarterly*, 43, 353-366.

Burgoon, M. & Miller, G. R. (1985). An expectancy interpretation of language and persuasion. In H. Giles and R. N. St. Clair (Eds.), *Recent advances in language, communication, and social psychology* (pp. 199-299). London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Bystrom, D. (1996). *Videostyles of men and women in U.S. Senate campaigns*. Paper presented at the International Communication Association, Chicago, Ill.

Cohen, J. (1960). A coefficient of agreement for nominal scales. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 20, 37-46.

Diamond, S. & Bates, E. (1992). *The spot: The rise of political advertising on television* (3rd. ed.). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Dow, B.J. & Tonn, M.B. (1993). "Feminine style" and political judgment in the rhetoric of Ann Richards. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 79, 286-302.

Garramone, G. M. (1984). Voter responses to negative political ads. *Journalism Quarterly*, 61, 250-259.

Greenberg-Lake: The Analysis Group Inc. (1989). *Campaigning in a different voice*. Washington, DC: Author.

Gronbeck, B. E. (1992). Negative narratives in 1988 presidential campaign ads. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 78, 333-346.

Jamieson, K. H. (1986). The evolution of political advertising in America. In L. L. Kaid, D. Nimmo and K. R. Sanders (Eds.), *New perspectives in political advertising* (pp. 1-20). Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press.

Johnson-Cartee, K. S. & Copeland, G. A. (1991). *Negative political advertising: Coming of age*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Johnston, A. & White, A. B. (1994). Communication styles and female candidates: A study of the political advertising during the 1986 senate elections. *Journalism Quarterly*, 71, 321-329.

Kaid, L. L. & Johnston, A. (1991). Negative versus positive television advertising in U.S. presidential campaigns, 1960-1988. *Journal of Communication*, 41, 53-64.

Kern, M. (1989). *30-Second politics: Political advertising in the eighties*. New York: Praeger.

Kitchens, J. T. & Stiteler, B. (1979). Challenge to the "rule of minimum effect": A case study of the man-out strategy. *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 44, 176-190.

Mandel, R. (1981). *In the running: The new woman candidate*. New York: Ticknor and Fields.

Pfau, M. & Burgoon, M. (1989). The efficacy of issue and character attack message strategies in political campaign communication. *Communication Reports*, 2, 53-61.

Pfau, M. & Kenski, H. C. (1990). *Attack politics: Strategy and defense*. New York: Praeger.

Pfau, M., Parrott, R. & Lindquist, B. (1992). An expectancy theory explanation of the effectiveness of political attack television spots: A case study. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 20, 235-253.

Procter, D. E., Aden, R. C., & Japp, P. (1988). Gender/issue interaction in political identity making: Nebraska's woman vs. woman gubernatorial campaign. Central States Speech Journal, 39, 190-203.

Procter, D. E., Schenck-Hamlin, W. J. & Haase K. A. (1994). Exploring the role of gender in the development of negative political advertisements. *Women and Politics*, 14, 1-22.

Sabato, L. J. (1981). *The rise of political consultants: New ways of winning elections*. New York: Basic Books.

Sheckels, T. F. (1994). Mikulski vs. Chavez for the senate from Maryland in 1986 and the "rules" for attack politics. *Communication Quarterly*, 42, 311-326.

Stuart, A. (1984). *The ideas of sampling*. New York: Academic Press.

Surlin, S. H. & Gordon, T. F. (1977). How values affect attitudes toward direct reference political advertising. *Journalism Quarterly*, 54, 89-98.

Taylor, P. (1990, June 18-24). In politics, the time for women has arrived. *The Washington Post National Weekly*, p. 13.

Trent, J. S. & Friedenberg, R. V. (1995). *Political campaign communication: Principles and practice*. New York: Praeger.

Trent, J. S. & Sabourin, T. (1993). Sex still counts: Women's use of televised advertising during the decade of the 80's. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 21, 21-40.

Wadsworth, A. J., Patterson, P., Kaid, L. L., Cullers, G., Malcomb, D., & Lamirand, L. (1987). 'Masculine' vs. 'feminine' strategies in political ads: Implications for female candidates. *Journal of Applied Communication*, 15, 77-94.