chapter one

Introduction

david a. dulio
candice j. nelson
james a. thurber

lawrence, kansas, october 1998. Dennis Moore (D) had been campaigning for nearly one year in hopes of defeating the incumbent representative of Kansas's third congressional district, Vincent Snowbarger (R). Signs that this would be a close race were apparent as early as September 1997, when a poll showed that Moore, a well-known county district attorney, had greater support in the district than the incumbent.[1] As the campaign progressed, the candidates did not distinguish themselves from one another, and the race stayed tight.

The campaign centered on traditional Democrat versus Republican issues such as social security, taxes, education, and gun control. The dialogue between the candidates got especially nasty over social security and Representative Snowbarger's record of votes and statements on the issue. After a debate near the end of the campaign, during which Snowbarger admitted to considering a plan to phase out social security, the Moore campaign aired a radio spot highlighting the confession.

As election day approached, the air wars escalated to the point where each candidate was spending nearly $100,000 a week on television ads. Representative Snowbarger produced only three campaign ads, all of which attacked his opponent.[2] One of these ads tried to link Dennis Moore to Senator Ted Kennedy and to paint Moore as an extremist. Moore's campaign spots included hard-hitting contrast ads, but they also included light

1. Loomis (1998).
2. Loomis (1998), p. 30.

and humorous ads that turned out to be very attractive to voters of the third district. Moore took the high road by placing no negative attack advertisements on television, although some ads did contrast his views with the incumbent's record.

Moore's campaign team produced one contrast ad to distance him from the snarly ads aired previously. In this television ad, Dennis Moore, a fine musician, is shown playing his guitar while referencing issues important to the district. The spot, titled "Pickin'," concluded with Moore looking into the camera and saying, "I hope come election day, you'll be *pickin'* Dennis Moore for Congress."

The contrast and attack ads likely did their job and told voters where each candidate stood on the issues of social security, education, and gun control. However, when exit poll data were examined, voters in the third district said that what they remembered most about the campaign was Dennis Moore's "Pickin'" spot.

california's central coast, spring 1998. Lois Capps (D) and Tom Bordonaro (R) had just completed a special election campaign to fill the congressional seat vacated by Capps's late husband, Walter Capps. No candidate in the January election garnered a simple majority of votes, which then required the top two candidates—Capps and Bordonaro—to enter a March runoff election. No other federal elections were being contested at this time, which placed the special runoff election for California's twenty-second district on everyone's radar screen, especially that of special interest groups, which played a key role in it. In the initial special election held in January groups like the Christian Coalition, Americans for Limited Terms, U.S. Term Limits, and Planned Parenthood devoted resources to conveying their message. This influx of special interests paled in comparison to the onslaught of special interest money and television advertisements that appeared during the campaign for the March runoff election. Nearly a dozen special interest groups were on the airwaves attacking both candidates on any number of issues.

The Campaign for Working Families (CWF), headed by Gary Bauer, was one of the most visible of these groups. The CWF attacks on Capps's stances on abortion prompted another abortion group, the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, to launch its own televised campaign attacking Tom Bordonaro as an "extreme" and "dangerous" candidate. In addition, groups that were involved in the January campaign continued their involvement and even increased their presence in

the March race, spending more money and airing more television spots than they had in the first election. In addition, groups like the National Rifle Association and the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) entered the fray, becoming heavy spenders in the special interest air wars.

With groups like these broadcasting their message over the airwaves with such force, one would imagine that issues like abortion, gun control, and term limits were the most important to the voters of California's central coast. But public opinion polls revealed that they were not.[3] Voters of the twenty-second district cared more about issues such as education, federal disaster support (for damage caused by El Niño), the environment, and fiscal responsibility.[4] The special interest groups that were on the airwaves only served to drown out the candidates' messages that were more in tune with the voters. The candidates went so far as to make "public statements expressing [their] frustration [with] an outsider-imposed agenda."[5]

The presence of the numerous issue advocacy groups cluttered the airwaves, undermining the capacity of the candidates to control their own message to the voters. The interest groups from outside the district changed the strategy, theme, and message of the campaign. According to one observer, this "created an impression that the special election had become a referendum between . . . a dozen Washington-based groups rather than a local determination of congressional succession."[6]

Political advertising plays a key role in modern electioneering and has been part of political campaigns since the earliest federal elections were held in the United States. The experiences of Dennis Moore and Lois Capps with negative and attack advertising and with ads run by special interest groups are typical of the challenges facing candidates in modern American elections. As the modes of mass communication have changed, so have the venues for campaign advertising by candidates, political parties, and interest groups. First newspapers, then radio, and then, in the early 1960s, television entered the process. Early in the next century the Internet likely will be added to the list.

3. Lou Cannon, "Single Issue Ads Driving California Race," *Washington Post,* February 21, 1998, p. A4.

4. Gill (1998).

5. Gill (1998), p. 11.

6. Gill (1998), p. 6.

Not only have the outlets for political advertising expanded over the past twenty years but so have the users of political advertising. Political advertising once was used primarily by candidates; the most recent elections have seen an explosion in the use of advertising not only by candidates but also by political parties and interest groups. As political advertising becomes a more pervasive medium for delivering messages from a variety of sources, understanding the role of political advertising in election campaigns becomes all the more important.

Studies on the Effects of Campaign Communications

Scholars have studied the effects of campaign communications for more than fifty years. After a time prior to 1940 during which the assumption of the "massive propaganda impact [of] the persuasive contents of the mass media" went unchallenged, scholars began to doubt the power of campaign communication.[7] Studies such as *The People's Choice* showed that nearly half of all voters made their electoral choices six months before election day and only a quarter made them during the traditional campaign season (after Labor Day). Theories that campaign communications reinforced, rather than persuaded, the electorate's attitudes began to dominate. Scholars such as Klapper concluded that mass communication was an agent of reinforcement rather than of change.[8]

It was not until the introduction, and subsequent domination, of television that scholars again began to tout the power of paid advertising. Television gradually became a dominant force in American culture. It eventually became the prime source of political and electoral information for many Americans.[9] It is no surprise, therefore, that campaigns began to turn to television as a means for communicating their message. Another development that led to the discovery of the effects of paid political advertising was the waning of citizens' allegiance to political parties.[10] As other scholars have argued, parties became less important and individual candidates became more important in the waging of elections.[11] As candidate-centered elections became a political reality, candidates and their teams of

7. Blumler and Gurevitch (1982), p. 242.
8. Klapper (1960).
9. Blumler and Gurevitch (1982).
10. Wattenberg (1990a).
11. Wattenberg (1990b); Aldrich (1995); Beck and Sorauf (1991); Crotty (1984); Broder (1972).

consultants gravitated toward television as a means for disseminating their message.[12]

The most significant development in the study of political advertising came from within the discipline of political science. Scholars who studied political communication changed their focus from persuasion to cognition research. Most early research focused on how much political communications persuaded the electorate to vote for one candidate or another or to adopt a certain position on an issue.[13] However, more modern research began to focus on individuals' cognition.[14] This shift in focus led the way for work that has identified the power of television advertising to set agendas (see, for example, Herrnson and Patterson in chapter 5 of this volume as well as Iyengar and Kinder 1987) and prime the electorate.[15]

At the very least, campaign advertising conveys information to the electorate. Each chapter in this volume exhibits this and goes beyond. However, there is some debate in the literature over exactly who in the electorate is affected by the information conveyed in political advertisement. Research focusing on the cognitive processing of information is the basis for much of this debate. Zaller's seminal work illustrates the effects of political awareness on the susceptibility of individuals to take in and be affected by political information during campaigns.[16] Ansolabehere and Iyengar show similar differences across individuals' level of partisanship.[17] Other scholars have shown how factors such as prior political knowledge, interest in politics, partisan intensity, and education affect the amount of information that individuals receive and process from campaign messages.[18] In addition, Kahn and Kenney (in chapter 4 of this volume) illustrate that many of these factors are important predictors of the level of information retained by individuals in campaigns.

We know that political advertising conveys information to voters. Less well understood, however, is how information is conveyed through political advertising. This question is addressed by the chapters in this book. In

12. Thurber and Nelson (2000).

13. For example, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944); Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954).

14. Blumler and Gurevitch (1982).

15. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995). On the power of television advertising specifically, see Herrnson and Patterson in chapter 5 of this volume, as well as Iyengar and Kinder (1987).

16. Zaller (1992).

17. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995).

18. For prior political knowledge, see Converse (1962, 1964); for interest in politics, see Dalager (1996); for partisan intensity, see Miller and Shanks (1996); Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995); and for education, see Rosenstone and Hansen (1993).

this age of technology and mass communication, paid political advertising is a crucial element of a sophisticated campaign. Candidates deliver their campaign messages to voters using a variety of paid and earned media strategies and tools. Yet the airwaves are being deluged by ads not only from candidates but also from political parties and interest groups. How do these ads affect voters? This book addresses these questions and more. Are some types of ads more successful than others in informing and motivating voters? For example, one controversial issue is the role of "negative" ads in elections. This volume defines and examines negative ads from several perspectives, but that is not the only focus of the research. Also explored is the more general question of the role that ads play in connecting the messages of political actors in the electoral process with the substance and style of the information that voters take with them into the voting booth on election day.

Central Themes of the Book

The chapters in this book focus on three of the most interesting and complicated issues in political advertising today: (1) the characterization of ads and the need to measure the impact of different types of ads, (2) the agenda-setting and priming effects of ads, and (3) the role and consequences of issue advertising for the electorate. The volume begins with an examination of how ads are characterized and, more specifically, with a look at the debate surrounding negative ads. Chapter 2 provides a review of the research on negative advertising. Richard Lau and Lee Sigelman present an extensive summary of the scholarly evidence concerning negative ads in election campaigns. Lau and Sigelman combed through a large number of published and unpublished research devoted to political advertising in an effort to identify studies that assess the effects of negative advertising. After an exhaustive search, they identified forty-one studies. They organize their review of the literature around four assertions that have come to be widely accepted as fact among those who write about negative advertising: (1) negative ads are processed and remembered more readily than positive ads; (2) negative ads work—they improve the evaluations of their sponsor and undermine those of the sponsor's opponent; (3) the electorate dislikes negative ads; and (4) the growth of negative ads has serious and unintended consequences for representative democracy in America.

Another thorny issue in the discussion of negative advertising is what

"negative" means in the parlance of political advertising. In chapter 3 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Paul Waldman, and Susan Sherr address two questions: (1) how should negativity be defined in a political advertisement, and (2) how should the amount of negativity in a political campaign be determined? Their work challenges previously published scholarship and strives to improve our understanding of the components of a political ad. Jamieson and her colleagues argue that to look at political ads as only *positive* or *negative* creates a false dichotomy and ignores *contrast* ads, which include both *attack* and *advocacy*. They suggest that contrast ads give voters reasons to vote *for* as well as against a candidate. By advancing the position that political decisions should be made by weighing both sides of an issue, they argue that contrast ads provide a useful ingredient in campaign discourse. They also suggest new ways of measuring the level of attack advertising in campaigns.

In chapter 4 Kim Fridkin Kahn and Patrick Kenney address another issue surrounding negative advertising—namely, the question of whether there are positive benefits to negative ads. Kahn and Kenney hypothesize that negative ads create a more informed public, because people learn more about candidates and issues from negative ads than from positive ads. They argue, first, that negative information is viewed by citizens as more novel and, therefore, more memorable and, second, that negative ads often provide citizens with details about the potential costs of their decisions and that people are more motivated to avoid costs than to achieve gains in their daily lives. They test their hypotheses by looking at U.S. Senate elections between 1988 and 1992. They use both the National Election Study's Senate Election Study and the Political Commercial Archive at the University of Oklahoma as data sources.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn from the explicit questions surrounding negative advertising to the more general question of the role of campaign advertising in agenda setting and priming in elections. Both Paul Herrnson and Kelly Patterson, in chapter 5, and Shanto Iyengar and John Petrocik, in chapter 6, address the question of whether campaigns matter. Herrnson and Patterson look at U.S. House of Representatives elections in 1992 to assess the impact of candidates' campaign communications and agenda setting. Their study uses a unique data set that enables them to systematically assess the impact of congressional campaign agendas on voting behavior. Using both the Voter Research Surveys and General Election Exit Poll in 1992 and a mail survey sent to 1992 Democrat and Republican candidates and their campaign managers, Herrnson and Patterson iden-

tify both the issues that candidates thought were most important in their elections as well as the issues that voters identified as most important in their voting choices.

In chapter 6 Iyengar and Petrocik challenge the literature that argues that methodological difficulties in measuring voters' exposure to campaigns make it difficult to assess the impact of campaigns on elections. Using both experimental and survey research, they examine the effect of campaigns on basic rule voting. The authors investigate whether campaigns matter by testing the effect of "fundamental political conditions"—namely, partisanship and assessments of an incumbent's job performance. They argue that these two components produce a "basic rule" for voters: if partisan, a voter votes his or her party affiliation (also called the "party rule"); if nonpartisan, a voter makes his or her decision based on an evaluation of the incumbent's job performance; if partisan but unwilling to support the party's nominee, a voter also uses the logic of incumbent approval.

Chapter 7 moves from evaluations of advertising in candidate-centered campaigns to an examination of issue advocacy campaigns. Darrell West argues that these campaigns raise a series of problems for election scholars. West addresses the difficulties in disentangling the effect of issue ads from all the other means of communication in an election. He also addresses the normative questions of the consequences of issue ads for representative democracy and evaluates what he sees as the three major options for dealing with the problems raised by issue advocacy in American elections.

In chapter 8 we revisit the findings presented in the preceding chapters and discuss the theoretical, empirical, methodological, normative, and practical contributions they make to our understanding of political advertising. This book by no means exhausts the debate on the role of political advertising—particularly negative political advertising—in election campaigns at the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, we think it does a good job of summarizing much of what scholarship in this area has taught us.

References

Aldrich, John. 1995. *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America.* University of Chicago Press.

Ansolabehere, Stephen, and Shanto Iyengar. 1995. *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate.* Free Press.

Beck, Paul Allen, and Frank J. Sorauf. 1991. *Party Politics in America,* 7th ed. Harper-Collins.

Berelson, Bernard, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee. 1954. *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign.* University of Chicago Press.

Blumler, Jay G., and Michael Gurevitch. 1982. "The Political Effects of Mass Communication." In Michael Gurevitch and others, eds., *Culture, Society, and the Media.* London: Methuen.

Broder, David S. 1972. *The Party's Over: The Failure of Politics in America.* Harper and Row.

Converse, Philip E. 1962. "Information Flow and Stability of Partisan Attitudes." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 26 (winter): 578–99.

———. 1964. "Nature and Belief Systems in Mass Publics." In David Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent.* Free Press.

Crotty, William. 1984. *American Political Parties in Decline,* 2d ed. Little, Brown.

Dalager, Jon K. 1996. "Voters, Issues, and Elections: Are the Candidates' Messages Getting Through?" *Journal of Politics* 58 (May): 486–515.

Gill, Jeff. 1998. "One Year and Four Elections: A Case Study of Campaign Conduct in the 1998 Capps Campaign for California's Twenty-Second District." Paper presented at the conference Money, Media, and Madness, American University, Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies, Washington, D.C., December.

Iyengar, Shanto, and Donald R. Kinder. 1987. *News That Matters.* University of Chicago Press.

Klapper, Joseph T. 1960. *The Effects of Mass Communication.* Free Press.

Lazarsfeld, Paul F., Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet. 1944. *The People's Choice.* Columbia University Press.

Loomis, Burdett A. 1998. "The Kansas 3rd District: 'Pros from Dover' Set up Shop." Paper presented at the conference Money, Media, and Madness, American University, Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies, Washington, D.C., December.

Miller, Warren E., and J. Merrill Shanks. 1996. *The New American Voter.* Harvard University Press.

Rosenstone, Steven J., and John Mark Hansen. 1993. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America.* Macmillan.

Thurber, James A., and Candice J. Nelson, eds. 2000. *Campaign Warriors: Political Consultants in Elections.* Brookings.

Wattenberg, Martin P. 1990a. *The Decline of American Political Parties: 1952–1988.* Harvard University Press.

———. 1990b. *The Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics: Presidential Elections of the 1980s.* Harvard University Press.

Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion.* Cambridge University Press.