

'Mediscare' campaign shows the power of negative advertising

July 5 2016, by David Waller

Advertising can be a powerful tool for political parties, though it's just one of several factors that can influence a voter's behaviour at election time. Following the 2013 federal election, I wrote:

Generally, advertising does not appear to play a significant role in the final result of the election; rather the leaders, events, and the nature of the election are more important. If the mood is for change, then no amount of advertising can stop it.

In 2016, despite the result still not yet being known, we can say the role advertising played was very different. The 2016 election has shown that when there is a close result, negative advertising can be a powerful campaign tool. This is particularly evident in the Labor Party and its supporters' campaign around the future of Medicare under a re-elected Turnbull government.

Negative ads can be annoying, frustrating, and misleading. They can [make people more cynical](#) about politics and politicians, and actually ["turn off" voters](#).

However, in a tight race, these ads can also point to policy differences, impact on attitudes towards a candidate, stir emotions, question policies, add doubt, and [stay in the memory longer](#) than positive political ads.

The trend to negative

The 2016 federal election campaign began with largely positive ads. However, it seemed to take a significant change with one advertisement in which former Labor prime minister Bob Hawke warned of the privatisation of Medicare if the Liberal Party was returned to government.

Until this point, Medicare was not perceived as a major issue.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull responded by [describing the ad](#) as a "disgraceful scare campaign":

It is an absurd falsehood and he [Labor leader Bill Shorten] should stop misleading people.

But over the following weeks, advertising and other communications continued to spread doubts about Turnbull and the Coalition's commitment to Medicare. One Labor ad even pointed out that he has "never relied on these services", which made him "seriously out of touch".

While not everyone has children or school-aged children, everyone wants a strong, universal health system, even the young. The Medicare campaign was a perfect uniting issue that was mentioned in speeches, advertisements, leaflets, on posters, and on the "[Medicare bus](#)", with the words:

Bill Shorten and Labor. We'll save Medicare.

This left the Liberals without a clear response, other than to say that it was a "Mediscare" campaign and they would not privatise Medicare:

Third-party election advertising

It wasn't just the parties that advertised during the election. Many ads were run by third parties, such as unions, business groups, and trade associations.

There is a saying that "election time is the only time politicians will listen to you". These groups use election campaigns to present and promote their view in the hope that voters and politicians will listen to their message.

Union ads generally advocate their positions on key issues such as workers' rights, health care and education. They can support a party or attack the other, such as the ACTU's "Put the Liberals Last" campaign, which also supported saving Medicare.

Being "independent" of the Labor Party, these ads can be more direct, more critical, and sometimes more creative than those from the official party.

However, it can be risky for business associations and individuals to take a public stance on an issue, or against a party. This may be interpreted as a partisan opinion which could affect relationships with shareholders, suppliers, distributors, customers, and the new government, if they openly supported the wrong party.

Creative campaigning

Social media was another channel of negative election communication, particularly via memes. These are images with funny, derogatory, or humiliating captions or titles, which are spread online.

During this election, many anti-Liberal, anti-Turnbull, and Save Medicare memes were posted and tweeted by the unions, such as the [Australian Manufacturing Workers Union](#).

3 days until the [election](#)! (!!!!!!!)

Reminder: only one party set up a Medicare Privatisation Taskforce. [#ausvotes](#) pic.twitter.com/nKTtXT8X6p

— The AMWU (@theamwu) [June 29, 2016](#)

The ACTU also handed out fake [Medicare cards](#), more than one million Medicare leaflets, and made over 46,000 telephone calls.

Labor's Queensland branch also sent a [fake text](#) from "Medicare", although a spokesperson later claimed the sender information was supposed to indicate the subject rather than the sender.

These more creative techniques are not only another touchpoint for the message to get to the voter, but the use of humour or something unusual is better at grabbing a person's attention than traditional ads.

Exit polls found that [72% of voters](#) rated health and Medicare as important issues in deciding their vote. This is extraordinary, given Medicare [was not a major issue](#) at the start of the campaign.

So when the competition is tight, negative advertising can be a very powerful campaign tool.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Source: The Conversation

Citation: 'Mediscare' campaign shows the power of negative advertising (2016, July 5) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2016-07-mediscare-campaign-power-negative-advertising.html>

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