

Presidential candidates' television ads most negative in history

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The 2008 presidential campaign, as reflected in candidates' television spots, has been one of the most negative campaigns in history. A University of Missouri professor analyzed this year's candidates' television spots, including last night's 30-minute ad by Sen. Barack Obama and found that only one other campaign matched this level of negativity.

William Benoit, professor of communication in the College of Arts and Science, found that in television spots from 1952-2004, candidates averaged 40 percent attacks in their ad statements. In this year's race, the statements in Obama's ads were 68 percent negative compared to 62 percent for Sen. John McCain.

"The only campaign in history that matches this level of negativity was in the first ever presidential TV spot campaign when Dwight Eisenhower had negative attacks in 69 percent of his ad statements," Benoit said.

In last night's historic 30-minute ad by Obama, Benoit found the ad to be more positive with only 18 percent attacks, and it never mentioned McCain or President Bush by name. The only time Bush was mentioned in Obama's 30-minute ad was once when Obama alluded to "eight years of failed policies."

The current presidential campaign ads were closer to past ads in their topics. In recent television ads from the two presidential candidates, 61 percent of Obama's statements were about policy and 39 percent character. McCain's spots were 54 percent policy and 46 percent character. Historically, presidential ads discussed policy in 62 percent of statements and character in 38 percent. Obama's 30-minute ad discussed 55 percent policy and 45 percent character.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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