

# Why so negative?

Regardless of who wins, the legacy of this election campaign may be the race to the bottom that attack ads have created, writes *Jonathan Rose*

With less than a week to go in the election, there is no sign of negative ads abating. As the election has progressed, it has become apparent that it is through political ads that the media and parties have talked about the campaign.

Regardless of who wins, the legacy of this election may be the race to the bottom that this war of words has created. Perhaps it's time to look elsewhere to see how we can stop election campaigns being dominated by advertising.

The cost of ads for each of the three main political parties is tremendously high.

In the 2004 federal election, the Liberals spent \$10 million on ads out of their total election expenses of \$16.6 million. The Conservatives spent \$7.2 million out of \$17 million on ads while the New Democrats, who spent more on advertising in that election than any time in the past, devoted \$5.4 million on advertising out of their total campaign expenses of \$12 million.

In other words, the national parties spent anywhere between 40 per cent and 62 per cent of their entire budget on advertising. While the data are not known for this year's election, the numbers are likely to be in the same ballpark.

Under the Elections Act, political parties receive funding for elections from taxpayers. The largest single expense is advertising.

Is this really a good use of taxpayers' money?

Parties like advertising because, outside of debates, it is the only time in the highly mediated environment of an election that they can take their message directly to the voters without the filter of the mass media.

Political parties also believe that ads can change the course of an election.

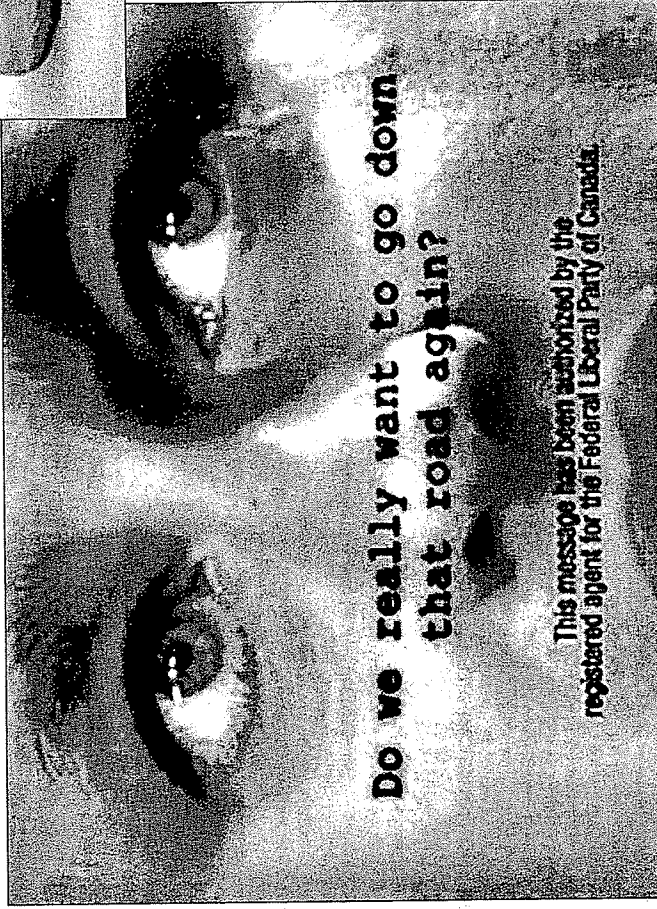
In the 1988 election, observers credit the blitz of advertising by Conservatives and pro-free-trade organizations with helping Brian Mulroney bury the Liberals and secure a second majority government.

In the 2004 election, Liberals were quoted as saying the negative ads planted enough doubt about Stephen Harper to deny him victory.

In both of these elections, conventional wisdom states that advertising made the difference. But it is difficult to separate the influence of paid advertising from the impact of the media coverage of that advertising.

The broad effects of political advertising are measured both by the effect of the ad itself in changing public opinion as well as the effect of the media coverage of that ad.

With the media's obsession with reporting on election advertisements and our airwaves clogged



anced and thoughtful discussion of a party platform. To be sure, some take the form of a "biopic," a political biography that extols the leader by glorifying his or her humble roots. Because they are longer, they have the potential to be better vehicles than ads for providing information to the electorate.

PEBs do have several advantages over our election spots.

First, because they are significantly longer than a 30-second spot, they make detailed arguments on policy areas.

Second, because there are so few of them, they are more likely to be seen as credible sources of information. PEBs are based on the principle that less is more — something that our parties might be wise to heed.

Third, because their allocation is based on electoral strength, minor parties, who under our system cannot afford network airtime, have access to public airwaves.

The German model is a hybrid of the British and Canadian system, with a twist. Public television stations give political parties free airtime, similar

Stills from two television ads that viewers have been swamped with this month take aim at the Liberal party, above, and, left, Conservative party leader Stephen Harper.

to the PEBs in Britain. Private stations sell airtime to parties but at a reduced rate than commercial advertising.

The effect of this is to lower the entrance barriers for smaller parties and to allow for longer ads, usually upwards of two minutes.

In Germany, the principle that underlies broadcasting ads is equal opportunity for all parties. If a station accepts ads from one party, it must accept them from all.

Even if we don't radically restructure our electoral process by banning election ads outright, we could civilize the process by limiting attack ads.

Finland and Israel both have restrictions on the content of their ads. Why can't we? In Finland, comparative or critical party ads are allowed, but negative ads targeted at a leader are prohibited. Such a rule would eliminate virtually all of the ads now broadcast by the Conservatives and Liberals. Israeli regulations adopted here would eliminate some of the more egregiously offensive ads.

The Liberals' infamous 2004 election ad showing a tank and gun pointed at the camera would not be allowed in Israel where any military images are prohibited in political spots.

It's not just ads that are regulated in Israel.

Until a few years ago the very appearance of candidates or leaders was banned in news coverage during the latter part of elections. Imagine an election campaign devoid of the manufactured photo ops so beloved by our political parties. The impact that this would have on the way leaders campaign and reporters file stories would be massive.

Political parties do not need to be so negative in their campaigning.

These examples from elsewhere show that there are other options. Perhaps after this election, we might be willing to entertain them.

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