Negative Ads Prominent, Increasing in Number, but 2010 No More Negative than Previous Election Year

Tone of Ads on the Airwaves in Top Races Keeps Pace with 2008; Interest Groups Doing Heavy Lifting in Terms of Attacks

(MIDDLETOWN, CT --) The battle for control of Congress and key gubernatorial positions are filling the airwaves with negativity. Just under half of the ads aired so far this year were pure positive ads. Still, claims that 2010 is the most negative election to date may be premature. In an analysis of close to 900,000 airings from January 1 to October 5, 2010, the Wesleyan Media Project finds that the distribution of positive, negative and contrast ads is comparable to 2008 in proportion, if not in volume. The Project distinguishes between ads that focus primarily on attacking a candidate, ads that promote a candidate, and ads that include a promotional and attack message (termed contrast ads). Compared to 2008, attack ad percentages remain constant, with only slight changes in positive and contrast ad percentages.

"We're hearing a lot of speculation about 2010 being the most negative election to date, and in one respect the complaints are right: there are more negative ads on the air this year in House and Senate races than 2008, but that's not the whole story," said Erika Franklin Fowler, assistant professor of government at Wesleyan University and co-director of the Wesleyan Media Project. "There are higher numbers of positive ads too. In other words, although the overall number of ads has increased, we're actually seeing similar rates of negativity. That said, the sheer number of messages flooding the airwaves and the type of attacks being used are making this campaign feel more negative."

Table 1: Tone of Advertising in Top Races by Year

Year	Attack	Contrast	Promote
2008	32.8%	20.7%	46.5%
2010*	32.2%	18.3%	49.0%
% change	-0.6%	-2.4%	2.5%

*Based on Wesleyan Media Project on-going analysis of nearly 900,000 airings in gubernatorial, senatorial and congressional ads from Kantar Media/CMAG.

"One important change is a slight increase in the proportion of attack ads that include personal attacks," said Michael Franz, associate professor of Government at Bowdoin College and co-director of the Wesleyan Media Project. "Fourteen percent of attack ads in 2008, through early October, were focused solely on the personal characteristics of the candidate's opponent. That number has jumped to 20 percent this year. This trend is suggestive of more anger in political advertising, but the change is not drastic enough to be a defining feature of this year's air war."

Table 2: Distribution of Tone by Type of Ad

Year		Personal	Policy	Personal and Policy
2008	Attack %	14.04	57.72	27.57
	Contrast %	13.71	54.56	31.5
	Promote %	15.91	50.27	32.93
2010*	Attack %	20.25	49.77	28.94
	Contrast %	12.72	50.31	36.39
	Promote %	13.79	47.15	38.08

* Based on Wesleyan Media Project analysis of nearly 900,000 airings of gubernatorial, senatorial and congressional ad data from Kantar Media/CMAG.

One effect of increased interest group activity is that outside groups are increasingly becoming the source of negativity. For example, candidates overwhelmingly sponsor positive and contrast ads, and this was true in both 2008 and 2010. Attack ads, however, are far more likely than other ads to be sponsored by parties and/or interest groups. One key change in 2010 is that parties are less active in Senate races than in 2008. As a consequence, while parties accounted for 35 percent of attack ads in Senate races two years ago, they have only sponsored 8 percent this year (and 11 percent if ad buys coordinated with candidates are included). Because of that, Senate candidates are more likely to sponsor attacks this year (55 percent to 37 percent in 2008), and interest group airings in Senate races account for 1 in every 3 attack spots, up nearly 7 percentage points over 2008.

Table 3: Advertising Tone by Office and Sponsor

Office	Year		Candidate	Party	Interest Group	Coordinated
House	2008	Attack %	50.9	29.9	16.6	2.7
		Contrast %	86.9	5.2	4.4	3.5
		Promote %	94.8	0.5	3.3	1.5
	2010*	Attack %	52.0	20.4	22.9	3.7
		Contrast %	86.1	3.1	6.1	4.6
		Promote %	95.2	0	1.7	2.3
Senate	2008	Attack %	37.0	35.1	27.2	0.7
		Contrast %	80.6	12.3	3.8	3.4
		Promote %	89.1	1.4	9.5	0
	2010*	Attack %	55.3	7.8	33.9	2.9
		Contrast %	94.7	0	5.3	0
		Promote %	90.6	2.3	4.5	2.6

* Based on Wesleyan Media Project analysis of nearly 900,000 airings of gubernatorial, senatorial and congressional ad data from Kantar Media/CMAG.

The Wesleyan Media Project also coded for whether House and Senate candidates' oral approval was placed at the beginning, middle, or end of the ad. "An increasingly common tactic in attack ads is to place the approval message upfront in an attack ad and then get out of the way," said Fowler. Table 4 shows that in 2008 40 percent of attack ads had the oral approval at the beginning. This year the number has risen to 53 percent.

Table 4: Approval Placement by Tone

Year		Beginning	Middle	End
2008	Attack %	40.1	0.2	59.7
	Contrast %	19.9	1.1	79.0
	Promote %	9.4	3.5	87.2
2010*	Attack %	52.9	0.3	46.8
	Contrast %	23.3	3.4	73.3
	Promote %	7.2	2.9	89.9

* Based on Wesleyan Media Project analysis of nearly 900,000 airings of gubernatorial, senatorial and congressional ad data from Kantar Media/CMAG.

Table 5 shows when attacking an opponent, candidates generally use their voice off camera. But in contrasting and promotional spots, candidates are much more likely to appear onscreen. These data suggest that candidates are trying to distance themselves from their own attacks. "Using a voiceover and placing the approval at the beginning might shield the candidate from a voter backlash," said Fowler. "That probably accounts for the differences we see across positive and attack ads."

Table 5: Approval Type by Tone

Year		Candidate Voiceover	Candidate Speaking On Screen
2008	Attack %	92.57	7.43
	Contrast %	59.74	40.26
	Promote %	54.42	45.58
2010*	Attack %	87.46	12.54
	Contrast %	53.20	46.80
	Promote %	49.75	50.25

* Based on Wesleyan Media Project analysis of nearly 900,000 airings of gubernatorial, senatorial and congressional ad data from Kantar Media/CMAG.

"Not a lot has changed since 2008 in terms of how ads are deployed. For all the talk of an angry electorate this year, positive ads and issue-based spots still rule the airwaves," said Franz.

Travis Ridout, associate professor of political science at Washington State University and co-director of the Wesleyan Media Project, however, urged caution in over-interpreting these findings: "One thing to keep in mind is that negativity tends to increase as the

election draws to a close. It is still possible that negativity in 2010 may outpace negativity two years ago, but the data gathered so far do not yet suggest that candidates are unusually aggressive in their attacks."

The Wesleyan Media Project provides real-time tracking and analysis of all political television advertising in real-time. Housed in Wesleyan's Quantitative Analysis Center – part of the Allbritton Center for the Study of Public Life – the Wesleyan Media Project is the successor to the Wisconsin Advertising Project, which disbanded in 2009. It is directed by Erika Franklin Fowler, assistant professor of government at Wesleyan University and her collaborators Michael M. Franz, associate professor of government at Bowdoin College and Travis N. Ridout, associate professor of political science at Washington State University.

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The Wesleyan Media Project's website can be found here:
http://election-ad.research.wesleyan.edu/

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