

An Uptick in Negativity: Last Few Weeks Provide Confirmation – 2010 Campaign Most Negative in Recent History

Republicans Using Pure Attack Ads More Often; Dem Attack Ads Still More Personal

(MIDDLETOWN, CT) – In just the last few weeks a large uptick in negative ads has pushed this year from one that was no more negative than 2008 to the most negative campaign in recent history by both sides. In an analysis of year-to-date (through Oct. 20) and traditional general election advertising (9/1-10/20) of House and Senate races, the Wesleyan Media Project is now finding a marked increase in negativity as the general election season has heated up and drawn close to Election Day.

“Citizens are seeing many more ads this year, but it is no longer simply the number of ads on the air that are making this campaign feel more negative. More than half of all ads are pure attack ads, and if we include contrast spots, roughly 2 out of every 3 ads on the air are negative.” said Erika Franklin Fowler, assistant professor of government at Wesleyan University and co-director of the Wesleyan Media Project. Negative ads mention only the candidate being attacked, while contrast ads mention both a favored candidate and his or her opponent. Fowler continued, “Every year there is speculation about unprecedented levels of negativity, but at least in comparison to recent campaigns, the speculation this year is correct.”

Using Wisconsin Advertising Project analysis of CMAG (Campaign Media Analysis Group) data from 2000-2008 as points of comparison, attack ads have steadily increased since the 2004 election, and the 2010 House and Senate advertising is the most negative in the past decade (Table 1).

**Table 1. Negativity in House and Senate Advertising Over Time
(All Sponsors – candidate, interest group, party and coordinated)**

	Democratic Ads			Republican Ads		
	Promote	Contrast	Attack	Promote	Contrast	Attack
2000	39.7%	27.3%	32.9%	43.0%	25.9%	31.0%
2002	50.5%	18.4%	30.4%	54.5%	12.8%	31.9%
2004	47.9%	24.5%	27.0%	47.1%	24.5%	27.7%
2008	34.8%	22.6%	42.5%	33.7%	16.8%	49.3%
2010*	29.4%	20.2%	49.9%	24.9%	19.1%	56.0%

* Based on Wesleyan Media Project’s ongoing analysis of federal advertising from Kantar Media/CMAG, Sept. 1 through Oct. 20. 2000-2008 numbers are from the Wisconsin Advertising Project (no data available for 2006); 2000 data is from the top 75 markets, 2002 and 2004 from the top 100 markets, and 2008 and 2010 from all 210 markets.

Looking at just the most recent weeks since September 1, the project finds that Republicans are attacking more than Democrats.

Fifty-six percent of Republican-sponsored ads (including party, candidate and interest group ads) mention an opponent, compared to 49.9 percent of ads sponsored by Democrats and their allies. Both parties have increased their rate of attacks over 2008 levels. In the comparable 7-week

time period in 2008, 49.3 percent of Republican ads attacked, and 42.5 percent of Democratic ads attacked.

“Republicans have been more likely to attack in the waning days of this campaign than Democrats, though Democrats cannot claim the moral high ground, as half of their own ads have contained attacks,” said Travis Ridout, co-director of the Wesleyan Media Project and associate professor of political science at Washington State University.

Moreover, it remains true, in line with our report last week, that Democratic are attacking more personally with 18.4 percent of attack ads containing a personal reference compared to only 5.6 percent for Republicans.

“Democratic attacks are disproportionately focused on personal characteristics of their opponents,” said Michael Franz, associate professor of government at Bowdoin College and co-director of the Wesleyan Media Project. “In fact Democrats are three times as likely to include personal attacks in their negative spots compared to Republicans.”

Taking into consideration the entire year’s worth of political advertising, the project finds that, as a proportion of total ads, Democrats and pro-Democratic sponsors are just as likely to attack as Republican and pro-Republican sponsors in U.S. House and Senate races. Democratic sponsors attacked in 40.6 percent of their ads; the comparable figure for Republicans was 40.9 percent. However, while Republican sponsors are attacking at almost the same rate as in 2008 (in which they attacked in 41 percent of all ads), Democratic sponsors have increased their negativity, rising from 36.3 percent in 2008.

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, Michael M. Franz, associate professor of government at Bowdoin College and Travis N. Ridout, associate professor of political science at Washington State University.

The Wesleyan Media Project is supported by grants from John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, The Sunlight Foundation, Wesleyan University, and its partner institutions Bowdoin College and Washington State University. Data provided by Kantar Media/CMAG with analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project using Academiclip, a web-based coding tool. Results are based on a large sample of ads, accounting for over 60 percent of the roughly 705,000 airings between September 1 and October 20.

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

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