Damned Spots
A Defense of Thirty-Second Campaign Ads

Stephen Bates and Edwin Diamond

... [E]veryone denounces 30-second spots as demeaning, manipulative, and responsible for all that's wrong with American politics. David Broder, the mandarin of the op-ed page, admits he's "a crank on the subject." Otherwise staunch First Amendment champions, including Washington Monthly and, yes, The New Republic, want Congress to restrict the content of political ads. In fact, such commercials are good for the campaign, the voter, and the republic.

To cite the most common complaints:

1. TV Spots Make Campaigns Too Expensive. The problem is nearly as old as television itself. William Benton, an ad-agency founder and a U.S. senator from Connecticut, talked of the "terrifying" cost of TV back in 1952. Campaign spending has risen sharply since then, and television advertising has contributed disproportionately. Whereas total political spending,

adjusted for inflation, has tripled since 1952, the amount spent on television has increased at least fivefold. In some races, nine out of ten campaign dollars go to TV.

The important question is what candidates get in return. Quite a lot: a dollar spent on TV advertising may reach as many voters as $3 worth of newspaper ads or $50 worth of direct mail. Banning spots would probably increase campaign spending, by diverting candidates to less efficient forms of communication. In addition, spots reach supporters, opponents, and fence-sitters alike. This mass auditing imposes a measure of accountability that other media, particularly direct mail, lack.

2. A Candidate Can’t Say Anything Substantive in 30 Seconds. Referring to sound bites as well as spots, Michael Dukakis* sorely concluded that the 1988 campaign was about “phraseology,” not ideology. But a lot can be said in thirty seconds. John Lindsay’s 1972 presidential campaign broadcast a 30-second spot in Florida that gave the candidate’s positions on, among other issues, gun control (for), abortion rights (for), and school prayer (against). Lindsay’s media manager, David Garth, later joked that the spot “probably lost the entire population of Florida.”

A candidate can even make his point in 10 seconds. In California’s 1992 Republican primary for U.S. Senate, one spot said simply: “I’m Bruce Herschensohn. My opponent, Tom Campbell, was the only Republican congressman opposing the 1990 anti-crime bill. He’s liberal and wrong.” Campbell replied in kind: “Bruce Herschensohn is lying, Tom Campbell voted to extend the death penalty to twenty-seven crimes, and was named Legislator of the Year by the California Fraternal Order of Police.”

Though hardly encyclopedic, these spots reveal something about the candidates’ priorities. They assert facts that can be checked and conclusions that can be challenged. If nothing else, they improve on what may have been the first ten-second spot, broadcast in 1954: “Minnesota needs a wide-awake governor! Vote for Orville Freeman and bring wide-awake action to Minnesota’s problems!”

Brief ads do have one shortcoming. In 30 seconds, a candidate cannot hope to answer a half-true attack spot. In Bush’s [Willie Horton] “revolving door” prison ad of 1988,* for instance, the voice-over says that Dukakis “gave weekend furloughs to first-degree murderers not eligible for parole,” while the text on the screen tells viewers that “268 escaped” and “many are still at large.” But as reporters discovered, only 4 of the 268 escapees were first-degree murderers, and only three escapees—none of them a murderer—were still at large. The Willie Horton example was an aberration.

*Dukakis was the 1988 Democratic candidate for president.—Editors.
*The “revolving door” ad became associated with convicted murderer Willie Horton, who, under a Massachusetts furlough program, was released from prison in 1986 for forty-eight hours but never returned. He subsequently assaulted and raped a woman in Maryland, for which he was convicted and sentenced to prison in 1987.—Editors.
This point might have been hard for the Dukakis team to convey in 30 seconds. What kept them from responding to Hortonism, however, was not the constraints of brevity; it was their decision to try to get public attention off the furlough program—a subject that, even without the Bush campaign’s factual finagling, was bound to cost them votes. No sensible candidate will defend himself by saying he’s only half as bad as his opponent charges.

Just as short spots aren’t invariably shallow, long telecasts aren’t invariably thoughtful. The 1960 John F. Kennedy campaign aired a two-minute spot with a bouncy jingle; it conveyed youth and vitality, but scarcely any information (except for a musical reference to Kennedy’s Catholicism: “Can you deny to any man/The right he’s guaranteed/To be elected president/No matter what his creed?”). As Ross Perot demonstrated, a candidate determined to be evasive can do so in a 30-second spot or in a two-hour live Q&A session.

3. Political Ads Are Responsible for the Low-Down-and-Dirty State of Political Discourse. According to Arthur Schlesinger Jr., television is “draining content out of campaigns.” But that assertion romanticizes the past. In the 1890s James Bryce, a Briton, decried American political campaigns in 1990s terms. Campaigns devote less attention to issues, he fretted, than to “questions of personal fitness,” such as any “irregularity” in the candidate’s relations with women. These issueless campaigns diminish the “confidence of the country in the honor of its public men.”

Sleazy ads hardly raise the level of political discourse, but they aren’t the superweapon that critics claim. “When a client of ours is attacked,” boasts Democratic consultant Bob Squier, “the people of that state are going to get some kind of response the next day.” These responses are invariably revealing. In a 1988 Dukakis ad, the candidate watches a TV set showing a Bush ad. “I’m fed up with it,” Dukakis says. “Never seen anything like it in twenty-five years of public life—George Bush’s negative television ads, distorting my record. . . .” But instead of presenting a sharp reply, Dukakis only turns off the set—a metaphor for his entire campaign.

4. TV Ads Keep the Potatoes on the Couch. Barely half of eligible citizens voted in 1988, the lowest turnout in 40 years.* In fact, turnout has declined steadily since 1960. During the same period, campaign- TV expenditures have tripled in constant dollars. Many of the TV dollars have been diverted from doorbell pushing, rallies, and other activities that involve citizens in politics. And, according to critics, simplistic, unfair spots discourage people from voting.

It is nearly impossible to untangle the factors that influence voter turnout. Some consultants, like Republican Eddie Mahe, argue that the decline in voting is a passing consequence of demographics. In the 1960s and 1970s the baby-boom generation reached voting age and lowered voting figures (so did the 26th Amendment, which changed the voting age

*Turnout in 1996 was even lower: 49 percent.—Editors.
from 21 to 18). No surprises there: Turnout is traditionally lower among the young. So, as the boomer generation ages, turnout will increase.

As for how spots affect turnout in particular elections, the evidence goes both ways. In the 1990 race for U.S. Senate in North Carolina, early polls showed blue-collar whites inclined to stay home. But many of them turned out to vote for Jesse Helms after his anti-quotas spot received heavy air play and news coverage.

Are spots, then, blameless for the parlous state of voter participation? Well, no. Even if they don’t cloud the mind, they may in some sense sap the political will. To the extent that spots resemble lifestyle commercials—It’s Miller Time, It’s Morning in America—they may be taken no more seriously than other TV advertising. This is especially so when no other campaign is visible to the viewer. Today’s political rally, as Democratic consultant Robert Shrum has said, consists of three people around the TV set.

But the doomsayers’ solution—to try to divorce politics from TV—won’t work. Since the 1950s the voting classes have increasingly stayed home to be entertained, a trend encouraged by demographics (the suburban migration), by new at-home options (cable, VCRs), and at least partly by fear (crime in the streets). Banning political spots, as some cranks in the press and Congress would do, wouldn’t bring voters outdoors. It would deprive the couch-potato/citizen of a sometimes abused but ultimately unmatched source of electoral information. As Dukakis discovered, melodramatically turning off the TV resolves nothing.

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