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Trying to Parse Negative Ads Difficult

By Jim Nowlan

Voters don't like negative ads, but they have a big impact on voters anyway. Otherwise, you wouldn't see them in such profusion. Get ready for a steady diet of campaign TV ads and mailers that portray opponents as less appealing than pond slime.

Since the founding of the Republic, we have had negative campaigning. In 1828, John Quincy Adams backers circulated fliers that claimed Andrew Jackson's mother was a prostitute and his wife an adulteress.

I managed congressional and US Senate campaigns in the 1970-80s. Public officials were generally held in higher esteem then than today, so "going negative" was risky and could backfire against the candidate placing the attack ads.

In a race I managed in 1978 for the re-election (successful) of U.S. Senator Charles H. Percy, legendary newspaper columnist Mike Royko wrote two pieces critical of our opponent. We paid to reprint the columns as full page ads in every daily newspaper in Illinois. The ads apparently had great impact, because the source was so well respected. That's as negative as we got.

Today, however, campaigns are taking votes out of context and misrepresenting candidate actions. Two illustrations come to mind. I have a friend in the suburbs who is running to re-take his seat in the Illinois House. His opponent is attacking him for apparently having voted against bills that would have protected children against predators and abusers. Now, my friend is most certainly against predators and abusers. Apparently

the language in question was part of a much bigger bill that had many flaws in it, which caused my friend to vote against the larger bill.

In another case, former state Sen. Steve Rauschenberger (R-Elgin) is being charged with wasting “campaign and taxpayer” money for going to “Hotel rooms in the Ritz-Carlton. Resorts in Hawaii. Luxury travel to Italy.” Rauschenberger was president of the National Conference of State Legislatures when he was in the Illinois Senate, an honor for him and Illinois as well, in which role he learned a great deal from other states that was useful to our state. His role required that he travel extensively. None of this is mentioned in the campaign mailer, of course.

But the most vicious use of negative campaigning was by ex-Gov. Rod Blagojevich during the 2006 campaign, when he spent more than \$20 million on 23,000 relentlessly negative campaign ads against Judy Baar Topinka, which destroyed her persona. There is no more honest and reputable a person than Judy, who served with distinction in Illinois politics for many years.

Guilt by association is another tried and true form of campaign ads, more legitimate than most attack ads. President Obama is the albatross hung round the necks of many Democratic congressmen this fall. At the state level, Gov. Quinn is being attached at the hip to many Democratic state legislative candidates, especially downstate, where in many areas Quinn is running far behind his opponent, state Sen. Bill Brady.

The name of the game in politics is to define yourself in glowing accolades and also to define your opponent, in unflattering terms. Often there isn't enough money to define both, so campaigns often opt for simply defining the opponent in negative terms.

The challenge is in how to sift the wheat from the chaff.

First, be skeptical of any negative ad. Why isn't the campaign using the money to say something positive about its own candidate?

Second, divide or dilute the message's content by two or three. Exaggeration is almost always employed.

Third, consider contacting the campaign of the candidate being attacked, to get that candidate's response to the negative ad. Most campaigns have websites and can be contacted easily.

Negative ads are here to stay. They are part of the hullabaloo of democracy. Just be careful how you react to them—and don't believe everything you see and hear.