Jonathan Rose

Are Negative Ads Positive? Political Advertising and the Permanent Campaign

Since 2004, Canadians have had four national elections. Except for the 2011 election, each of these has returned a minority government, something that has not happened since the three minority Parliaments in 1962, 1963, and 1965. While we probably will not have another election until 2015, the succession of minority governments has had an obvious impact not only on governing but also on how political parties behave during and between elections.

This chapter will explore two significant consequences of this latest period of minority parliaments. First, we will examine the changes to political parties that now operate in a permanent campaign. In the process, we will attempt to explain why we are in a permanent campaign and how this “new normal” affects the behaviour of both political parties and governments. Second, we will explore the changing nature of political party advertising. Political parties, as a consequence of the permanent campaign, have relied to greater extent on advertising both during and between elections. This has resulted in increasing attention by the media on how parties advertise and in a concern about the alleged increase in negative political advertising. While much has been made of how corrosive this has been to the practice of politics, I will argue, following the work of John Geer, that negative ads deserve a second
look. Far from the narrative that appears in the media, they can improve the quality of our political conversation.

MINORITY GOVERNMENTS AND THE PERMANENT CAMPAIGN

While minority governments are not a new phenomenon, the rise of the Bloc Québécois as a strong regional party has made them a more likely occurrence than in the past. In *Two Cheers for Minority Government*, Peter Russell discusses their relative frequency in Westminster systems, noting that Canada has had thirteen minority governments. The UK has had eighteen, five since 1900. The next four years will see a stable majority Parliament, but the behaviour of all parties has been conditioned by this latest period of minority governments.

The success of minority governments is dependent on the prime minister’s ability to forge informal coalitions with other parties. Lester B. Pearson’s significant legislative accomplishments in the creation of the Canada Pension Plan, a national medicare program, and a new flag, to name three, are proof of their potential. The situation most congenial for them, according to Russell, is a one-party minority government with “an informal but steady alliance of the governing party with an opposition party.” The NDP’s support of Trudeau’s minority in 1972 and the Progressives’ support of Mackenzie King’s minority government are examples of this. In such an arrangement—or in a more formal codified arrangement, such as the accord between Ontario Liberal leader David Peterson, who became premier, and NDP leader Bob Rae in 1985—the government must work with opposition parties to maintain the confidence of the legislature. In the last three versions of minorities (from 2004 to 2011), the Harper government operated under neither of these arrangements. The result was an unstable Parliament that had little confidence about the timing of an election, and this instability led to all parties being on a permanent campaign footing. “The constant election fever that infects them is the most frequently cited problem,” says Russell about minority Parliaments generally. During this period, parliamentary instability shaped the behaviour of parties and changed the way they communicated in the periods both leading up to and during an election campaign.

In such an era of hyperpartisanship, the media play an important role in correcting misinformation but often fall short of that goal. They were largely
silent when, in 2008, Stephen Harper incorrectly said, “Mr. Dion does not have the right to be prime minister without an election.” With the ambiguity of the legal status of a coalition government, an issue that was raised again in the 2011 election, it is no surprise, then, that a poll commissioned by the Dominion Institute found that 51 percent of Canadians incorrectly believed that voters directly elected the prime minister. Media coverage is seen as a contest between leaders rather than as a discussion of policy differences, a problem compounded by the existence of brokerage parties. In the 2008 election, for example, media coverage of party leaders and the strategic horse race frame dominated the content of stories in the English media.

Competing with a 24-hour news cycle, the existence of cable TV, and now the Internet and the blogosphere, the media are confined to reporting what is episodic and ephemeral rather than thematic and enduring. The fluidity of media topics in the 2011 election speaks to this. The explosion of information that is discrete, targeted, and unrelenting has been described by David Taras as “fragmentation bombs.” This dominant style of reporting places a premium on dissecting the minutiae of events and personalities. The drama associated with the Conservatives’ claim of the possibility of a “reckless coalition” fit existing media narratives well: it had a clear story line (on the opposition side, righteously taking back power or, from the government’s perspective, preventing the opposition from stealing power) and strong characters (David and Goliath as the opposition and government). Combined with the visuals of “spontaneous” coalition rallies across the country, this drama provided a perfect example of what Daniel Boorstin calls a “pseudo-event.” In the 2011 election, an example of the emphasis on events rather than substance can be found in the coverage related to a young woman who was prohibited entry to a Conservative rally because she had a photo of herself and Michael Ignatieff on her Facebook page.

In 2011, the permanent campaign was aided by insecurity about the timing of an election but was also related to the coverage of adjuncts of election campaigns and the process of covering them. Here, symbolic stories that report a party’s leasing of a campaign airplane, the details of cross-Canada tours of cabinet ministers, and, of course, the content of new election-priming ad campaigns all become fodder for the media. In the last election, much was made about the fact that the media were allotted only five questions at any
Conservative Party event or that the prime minister rarely deviated from his prepared script or controlled environment.

There may be another reason why the media focus on the process of politics rather than its substance. This has to do with the effectiveness and duration of Parliament. First, the average number of sitting days per year has steadily declined from 163 in the 1969–73 parliamentary session to 105 in the 2004–8 session, a 35 percent drop over that period. Second, and perhaps as a consequence of this, the ability of governments, both majority and minority, to pass their legislative agenda has fallen precipitously over the last fifty years. The minority government of Pearson in 1963 had a 90 percent success rate of government bills receiving royal assent. That fell to 78 percent for the majority Trudeau government from 1980 to 1984 and 69 percent for the Chrétien governments from 1993 to 2004. The performance of the recent minority governments shows a similar trend. Whereas the Martin minority in 2004 was successful 60 percent of the time, Harper, from 2006 to 2008, was only able to pass 8 percent of his government’s bills, a number that rose to 48 percent in 2009.

These data relate to another reason for the permanent campaign: Parliament is less frequently the place where national issues are resolved and discussed. Until the most recent election, our electoral system, designed to deliver majority governments that are stable and able to pass comprehensive agendas, failed to produce the very values it was designed to support. Instead, it created “a succession of regimes so fragile that the campaign for the next election begins with the first Speech from the Throne.”

The redefined role of political parties might also suggest why they are on a permanent campaign footing. John Meisel, in his 1991 classic work on the decline of parties, correctly predicted the increasing significance of advertising agencies, public relations advisors, and other spin doctors in what he called “the grand strategy of parties.” Since his writing, the influence on parties of PR agencies, pollsters, and advertisers has become all-encompassing. Meisel describes its latest version as the “Harperization of our Minds,” in which the Conservative Party has become the tool of PR and advertising agencies. Party members serve as a backdrop for PR firms in communicating their arguments about how best to sell the party. The purpose of the party organization is now to be a network for the dissemination of ideas that have been focus-group tested and marketed, and appropriately branded.
The blurring of party and government interests through the media management strategies of PR firms is a widespread phenomenon that transcends party ideology. In Alberta, the influence of PR on government was institutionalized through the establishment of the Public Affairs Bureau, a quasi-independent office that reported directly to the premier’s office. Created under Premier Peter Lougheed in 1972 for coordinating communications, it was transformed by Premier Ralph Klein into a public relations and news management agency.13 In Saskatchewan, Premier Brad Wall hired a Toronto advertising firm in early 2010 to create negative ads against the NDP leader, well in advance of the 2011 election.14 Kirsten Kozolanka writes about the importance of PR firms in selling the new right-wing policies of the Mike Harris government in Ontario.15 In the UK, the influence of spin doctors in Tony Blair’s government became so controversial that it led to the Phillis Inquiry, which examined the practices of government communications.16

The political marketing of parties affects what the media do. Esser, Reineman, and Fan found that British newspapers dedicate two to three times more coverage to spin-doctoring activities of parties than do their counterparts in Germany, where PR is less pervasive.17 The relationships among parties, the media, and marketing firms are symbiotic. The media report on the PR activities of parties and, in doing so, further perpetuate the process-dominated frame of the media.

The role of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and the use of the Internet by political parties have been cited as another reason for our permanent campaign. While Tamara Small discusses this in greater detail elsewhere in this volume, the Facebook group “Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament” (CAPP) in late 2009 and early 2010 is a strong example of the use of social media. CAPP, which attracted a quarter of a million members in days, shows the capacity of social media sites like Facebook nominally to engage citizens who might not normally participate in political parties.18

Alternative party websites can supplement the political marketing of parties. These websites—such as the Not a Leader website (notaleader.ca), which poked fun at Stéphane Dion in 2008, or, in the 2011 election, ShitHarperDid.ca—are useful for parties in two ways. First, they represent a push form of communication whose content is distributed by others. If done successfully, they have the capacity to go “viral” through forwarding via email and posting on websites. Unlike traditional advertising, political parties are not involved
in their dissemination but merely provide the platform to facilitate it. The second, and arguably more valuable, purpose of social media and alternative websites is the media coverage that results from these viral websites or videos.

The amount of media coverage devoted to the appropriateness of the “pooping puffin” on the Not a Leader site suggests that the real purpose was to use provocative images to drive viewers to the site. It also demonstrates the potential of viral media to backfire. The media response to the website varied from calling it “mischief making” to more serious allegations of lapsed judgment. A year later, in 2009, it was the Liberals’ turn to apologize. An online contest on the party’s website asked supporters to post edited pictures of Stephen Harper being “Anywhere but Copenhagen” to draw attention to his planned absence at an international climate change summit. The offending photo that crossed the line was that of Harper on Lee Harvey Oswald’s body as he is killed by Jack Ruby. The Liberal Party seemed to be endorsing—at least visually—the assassination of the prime minister. Like the pooping puffin, the negative attention that this garnered far overshadowed the policy point that the website was trying to make. Every election seems to be marked by a new social media. If 2008 was the YouTube election, 2011 was the Twitter Revolution. Yaroslav Baran suggests that the most important effect of social media in this election was that Twitter was novel, sped up the dissemination of communications, and provided “oxygen for a developing story” by allowing journalists to quickly test ideas for a story. If not Twitter, the legacy of this election may be the mobilization of vote mobs on university campuses and the media coverage that a small group of students can generate.

The permanent campaign has also been abetted by changes, both legislative and behavioural, in party fundraising rules. The legislative changes came about first in 2003 through Bill C-24, which amended the Canada Elections Act, and later through changes in 2006. The 2003 amendments placed limits on individual donations and a ban on corporate and union contributions. While this changed the rules of the game substantively, fundraising as an important activity of parties has also changed the nature of the game. As Tom Flanagan notes elsewhere in this volume, the Conservatives have been the most successful fundraisers since the 2004 election. This has had two consequences. First, the infusion of cash has been spent between elections, when there are no regulations, rather than during elections, when there is a spending limit. The most visible manifestation of the non-election spending is the
increase in political advertisements. The second consequence of this fundrais-
ing success is that the Conservatives are the party least dependent on state
subsidies for their revenue. State support for parties came from three sources:
a $2-a-vote subsidy, tax rebates to individuals on political contributions, and
a subsidy of 50 percent on a party’s national election campaign. The ability of
Conservatives to fundraise successfully means that public support constitutes
a smaller share of their total revenue. This gave the Conservative government
the impetus to phase out, over three years, the per-vote subsidy for all political
parties beginning in 2012.

The disparity in fundraising between political parties is striking. In 2009
and 2010, the Conservatives raised $17 million each year, compared to the
Liberals, who raised $7 million in 2010, and the NDP, with $3.9 million in
2009.22 In 2008, the Conservatives were the first party to raise more than $20
million, a significant number since this is the limit imposed per party on elec-
tion expenses. Successful fundraising is, in part, related to the resources allo-
cated to fundraising. Fundraising becomes a means (to fundraise further) as
well an end in itself. Here, too, the Conservatives far outstrip other parties. In
2008, they spent $7 to $8 million on fundraising, compared to $2 million for
the Liberals and $1.8 million for the NDP. These new rules embodied in the
changes to limits on political contributions as well as the changes in practice
of political parties have had significant repercussions on how parties behave
between elections.

PARTY ADVERTISING IN A MEDIA-SATURATED ENVIRONMENT

One of the most visible effects of changed rules related to election financing
is the ubiquity of party advertising. It is important to recall that advertising
occurs both during elections and now, more significantly, between elections.
In both instances, very few limits are placed on what or how a political party
can communicate. In Canada, party advertising during elections is modestly
regulated compared to other countries, but the prohibitions are few. Parties
cannot broadcast on election day and all party advertising must be endorsed
by political parties.23

Other countries impose greater limits on party advertising during elec-
tions. The United Kingdom prohibits election advertising, favouring party
election broadcasts, which are longer than our political spots and are allocated
according to electoral strength, giving minor parties access to public airwaves. In Germany, the principle that underlies broadcasting ads is “equal opportunity for all parties” and parties are sold airtime at a rate lower than commercial advertising. Moreover, if a TV station accepts ads from one party, it must accept them from all. In Finland and Israel, the content of political advertising is restricted. While comparative party ads are allowed in Finland, negative ads directed at the leader are not. In Israel, military images of any kind are banned from election advertising. Had such a rule been adopted here, the controversial 2004 Liberal ad that showed a tank and gun pointed at the camera would have been prohibited. This incendiary ad used a military drumbeat as a sound track and—with a series of quick visual cuts of tanks, troops, an aircraft carrier, and smog-congested cities—implied that Stephen Harper’s motives were not to be trusted. Critics felt that the claims made in the ad through images and the voice-over were without basis.

The justification for not placing excessive constraints on party advertising during elections is based on a number of principles. The first is to ensure a “free marketplace of ideas.” Allowing political parties to engage one another and, by extension, the voter and the media, is deemed to have a salubrious effect on democracy. Other than televised debates and, increasingly, party websites, in our system, election ads provide the only opportunity for political parties to have unmediated access to the voter. Ads tell us the priorities of competing parties and the differences in their policy platforms. In short, they are, in Stanley Cunningham’s words, a “form of argument.” He describes ads as “narrative structures” that tap into larger mythic stories about national values or aspirational leadership. Ads can provide information shortcuts to simplify and distill policies and platforms, taking advantage of the low level of political knowledge among voters. These condensed symbols perform the legitimate democratic goals of obtaining, storing, and evaluating information, according to Samuel Popkin. In other words, political advertising can allow a voter to remember and quickly retrieve an issue or policy position from a candidate or political party.

Increased knowledge is certainly one product of political ads, but our responses to these ads is another legitimate product. Advertising allows a political party to transfer positive or negative feelings toward itself or another party. While this can be understood as preying on the hopes and fears of voters, Ted Brader finds a link between the degree of political sophistication
of a voter and the effect that ads might have on them. His research shows that our ability to be swayed by political advertising is related to how much political knowledge we have; as Brader puts it, “Knowing and caring seem to go hand in hand after all.” Regulating the content of political ads, therefore, may have some impact on the ability of these ads to transmit knowledge but also to provide memorable shorthand cues.

Advertising by political parties during elections might be an example of path dependency: it is used because communications firms that run elections have always used advertising as a vehicle of persuasion. But does it work? On this question, the research is decidedly mixed: the best answer is that advertising is effective sometimes on some issues by some parties. Subsequent research has both revised and reinforced these findings.

Research on political advertising has used various measurements as a proxy to test advertising effectiveness. Nicholas O'Shaughnessy found that viewers recalled 80 percent of political ads versus only 20 percent of commercial ads. Others, like Tony Schwartz, argue that recall is an improper barometer for political ads and that political affect is more important. The problem with measuring affect is that except in very controlled experimental settings, it is difficult to separate the impact of the ad from the media coverage of the ad from discussions with a friend about the ad. Kathleen Hall Jamieson's work on political advertising argues that the grammar of a political spot—the verbal and visual way an argument is crafted in an ad—is an important way to judge its success. Still others have sought to understand political advertising by categorizing ads as either issue oriented or image based. Collectively, this research points to very different conclusions about the impact of political advertising on voters’ attitudes and behaviour.

Notwithstanding this lack of consensus about its effectiveness, political parties in Canada embrace advertising. During elections, it consumes a significant share of a party’s expenses. Table 7.1 shows the total advertising expenditures as a share of the total expenses in the last three federal elections for which data are available. Two interesting trends are evident. The first is that even accounting for inflation, total advertising expenses of the three national political parties have increased over the last four elections. The other noteworthy trend in these elections is that in general, advertising has assumed a greater share of all parties’ election expenses. This suggests that advertising has become more important to the communication strategy of parties during elections.
Table 7.1 Political party election advertising expenses, 2004-11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total advertising expenses (in thousands)</th>
<th>Percent of total election expenses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011 federal election (41st general election)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDP</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 federal election (40th general election)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDP</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 federal election (39th general election)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDP</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 federal election (38th general election)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDP</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>44</td>
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The fundraising success of the Conservative Party has translated into increased advertising expenditures between elections as well as during elections. In 2008, the Conservatives spent $11 million on non-election advertising, in addition to the significant amount spent on election advertising. In the last four non-election years for which data are available, there is a significant disparity among political parties on non-election advertising. Table 7.2 shows that in 2005, the Conservatives outspent the Liberals in advertising by two to one. In the same year, the NDP outspent the Liberals in advertising, perhaps because the media attention to the Gomery inquiry was a liability to Liberal fundraising abilities. The Gomery Commission’s first report, in November of
that year, may have adversely affected the Liberals’ advertising efforts. In 2007, the aggregate amount spent on advertising was down, reflecting the toll on all parties of two elections in the previous three years. But although parties spent less in 2007, the gulf between the Conservative and Liberal advertising budgets had widened significantly. The Tories were now spending five times as much as the Liberals on advertising. In 2009, aggregate amounts on advertising by the Liberals and Conservatives increased but the Conservatives outspent the Liberals by four to one. In 2010, the Conservatives spent twice as much as the Liberals on advertising. While the Conservative amount decreased significantly from the previous year, in 2010, the federal Conservative government spent $136 million on advertising its Economic Stimulus Plan, a central plank in the 2011 election campaign.

It is clear that advertising is an essential element in the arsenal of political parties during elections. The reality of a permanent campaign, brought on in part by a succession of minority governments, suggests that this phenomenon is not confined to the writ period. Since 2004, citizens have witnessed election-style ads with greater frequency in non-election years. In addition to structural reasons, this change might be attributed to the relatively cheaper access to social media as well as leadership factors such as the succession of Liberal party leaders.

The media headlines make it clear that political advertising between elections is newsworthy. If we were to believe the way advertising is discussed in the media, we would see ourselves in a world dominated by increasingly negative advertising. Throughout the media coverage of political advertising are the oft-made claims that party ads are becoming increasingly vitriolic and that this mudslinging is contributing to public disillusionment with politics.

Some academics argue that negative political advertising has a corrosive effect on the practice of politics. In the United States, scholars such as Darrell West claim that negativity has been the most common form of advertising for presidential elections for decades. Ansolabehere and Iyengar are particularly critical of how parties employ ads to demobilize voters, turning citizens off politics and discouraging them from voting. Their research found that in controlled settings, voters were less likely to vote if subjected to negative ads. While much of the literature on negative advertising originates in the United States, Canadian scholars too have worried about the importation of American-style advertising to Canada. It might be time to put some of
these assumptions to the test and scrutinize whether parties are using negative advertising as much as the media claim. The balance of this chapter will examine the advertising during the 2008 election, the extent to which political ads in Canada are in fact negative, and if they are, whether this poses a problem.

Table 7.2  Political party advertising in non-election years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>NDP</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>552.6</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>4,786</td>
<td>1,094</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>4,194</td>
<td>792</td>
<td>699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>6,300</td>
<td>2,950</td>
<td>3,470</td>
</tr>
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</table>


There are many memorable negative political ads and a few that we wish we could forget. We might recall, for instance, the infamous “Daisy” ad broadcast just once in 1964 by Lyndon Johnson against his opponent, Barry Goldwater. This ad portrayed a young girl picking the petals off a daisy; as she counts down from ten her voice changes to a male voice counting down a rocket
launching. The ad ends with a nuclear explosion and a voice-over intoning “Vote for President Johnson on November 3rd. The stakes are too high for you to stay home.” Perhaps we think of the Conservatives’ 1993 ad “Is this a prime minister?” which showed a still image of Jean Chrétien’s face highlighting his facial paralysis. The ad seemed to be questioning his fitness to be prime minister. More recently, we have seen the Liberals’ ad titled “Harper and the Conservatives” or the Conservatives’ “Just Visiting” ad of 2009, which challenged the Liberal leader’s commitment to Canada. These ads—while sharing the qualities of being evocative and quite aggressive—are not similar to one another. Some are based on physical traits or a candidate’s history (“Is this a prime minister?” and “Just Visiting”) whereas others are implicitly negative by association only (“Daisy”). The suite of Liberal ads that included “Harper and the Conservatives” focused on policy issues rather than on personal characteristics of leaders.

Some negative ads are clearly more acceptable than others. Ads that draw attention to policy differences, even though they may make use of stark images to make that point, should be part of the thrust and parry of political argumentation. Ads that contrast one party’s position with another, such as the 1988 Liberal ads, which raised fears of free trade by literally erasing our borders, should also be fair game. In the 2011 election, the Green Party’s “Change the Channel on Attack Ads” sought to use the proliferation of attack ads to highlight the difference between them and other parties. These negative ads, which focus on issues rather than personal traits, constitute by far the majority of negative ads, according to the research of John Geer, whose expansive definition of negativity is “any criticism leveled by one candidate against another.”37 Because he is interested in presidential ads, Geer’s analysis is limited to presidential candidates during elections. We will use his definition of negativity and add parties as our object of study.

The diverse style of negative ads raises the question of how we should judge the legitimacy of negative political advertising. On normative democratic grounds, most would agree that advertising should be encouraged if it helps fill in the information void of most voters. We might think of informational ads as attempts to fill this void, but in politics, negative ads are usually information rich. Geer provides us with several useful criteria to access negative advertising.38 He believes that negative ads are worthy if they help voters to know certain personal characteristics of leaders. Competence, experience,
trust, and integrity, for example, are important proxies for leadership and contribute to needed voter information. Even so, negative ads are more likely to be based on policy differences than personality. In his study of the tone of presidential ads from 1960 to 2000, Geer found that negative ads were four times as likely to be based on issues than on personal traits.\textsuperscript{39}

Ads are legitimate if they provide evidence to support their claims, and negative ads are more likely than positive ads to include evidence. All thirty-second spots are a condensed argument. Like all arguments, they comprise a claim (what is the ad saying?), the evidence (what data supports the claim?), and the warrant (what are the assumptions that support the two?). In the last election, Conservative ads made the claim that Michael Ignatieff would lead a “reckless coalition.” Broadcast throughout the NHL playoffs in 2011, when the audience was large, they were negative and repetitive and failed to provide any solid evidence. All the same, the ad may have been effective because, like the campaign it mirrored, its strength was based on sheer repetition. It also provides a good counterargument to the claim that all negative ads have value.

Often because negative ads are so polarizing, the mass media and voters are more likely to scrutinize them for evidence than they do positive ads. Indeed, positive biopic ads, which extol humble beginnings or honesty, are rarely examined for evidence as closely as negative ads, which tend to contain more information. The result, as Bob Squier says, is that “most lies in politics are told in positive ads.”\textsuperscript{40} If more evidence can be found in negative ads than in positive ads, it follows that voters are better served by an information-rich negative campaign than by a positive campaign that does little to engage issues or ideas.

A third criterion used to assess negative ads is whether they focus on issues on which leaders or parties disagree. If there is a divergence in policy, advertising can be a legitimate vehicle to create a bright line. The normative grounds for such a justification is that if elections are about a contest of ideas, and if advertising exposes different ideas, then negative ads serve that democratic goal of informing the electorate and giving voters rational bases on which to make their choice at the ballot box. Some of the most famous negative ads, however, have implied differences where none existed, exploiting the assumption that voters have about the purpose of these ads. The Conservatives’ “Soft on Crime Doesn’t Work” ad in the 2008 federal election is an example of an ad that makes an implicit claim about a distinction that does not exist: the ad implies but does not state that the Liberals are soft on crime.
The final criterion for evaluating negative ads is whether their focus is relevant to governing. Ads that draw attention to superfluous issues such as gender or physical appearance (as did the 1993 “facial paralysis” ad) would clearly be out of bounds. This criterion would also judge the Conservatives’ “Cosmopolitan” ad (June 2009), which criticized Michael Ignatieff for being a “citizen of the world” and “owning a luxury condominium in Toronto,” as failing to meet the criterion of relevance. But the large number of negative ads broadcast by parties in 1988 around the free trade issue would be considered legitimate.

To summarize, negative advertisements are acceptable if they are about issues, if they provide evidence, if they delineate differences in candidates’ positions, and if their focus is relevant to governing. On this basis, how do the three parties’ ads score in the 2008 election ads? We examined a total of thirty-six English-language ads, eleven each for the NDP and the Liberals and fourteen for the Conservatives, using a simple binary division between negative (as Geer defines it, above) and not negative. By this measure, eight (73%) of the NDP election ads were negative, seven (64%) of the Liberal ads were negative, and six (43%) of the Conservatives ads were negative. To a degree, then, the perception of the 2008 election as being dominated by negative ads was correct. The Conservatives had the lowest number because of the “sofa series” ads, which featured Stephen Harper sitting on a sofa discussing his values. These feel-good ads were designed to reframe Harper as a family man (in “Family Is Everything”), as compassionate (in “A Nation of Immigrants”), and as patriotic (in “Lest We Forget”). The NDP scored higher on the negativity rating because all four of their “chalk talk” ads used contrast to disparage other parties. Taking a page from the Liberal playbook, one of the NDP ads, “A New Kind of Strong,” had a soundtrack very similar to that of the Liberals’ infamous 2006 negative ads that featured austere text accompanied by a militaristic sounding drum. The Liberal 2008 ads either focused on the Green Shift and Dion’s support for the environment or used policy differences to attack Stephen Harper. Though the majority of the collective ads by the three parties were negative, they largely meet the criteria of acceptable negative ads.

What is quite striking about all parties’ ads in terms of their arguments is that the negative ads are more likely than the non-negative ads to include evidence. Every one of the negative Liberal ads had evidence to support its claims. This usually took the form of newspaper quotes, text from speeches, or
data from government or NGO reports. Only half of the fourteen Conservative ads had some evidence and the NDP ads were largely exhortative. Only one of the eleven English-language NDP ads had any evidence: the balance made claims about the economy, prosperity, or the environment without any evidence. In the past, an argument might have been made that as the party that spent the least on election advertising, the NDP needed to make more assertive and bolder claims in its ads just to get the attention of voters. As table 7.1 shows, however, in the 2008 election, the NDP outspent the Liberals on advertising, making them an equal player on that front. The higher negativity of their ads, as well as their relative lack of evidence, may instead reflect the strategy of a party that needed to criticize the government as well as distance itself from the Liberals. This element was found in all their ads.

Negative ads are also justifiable if they further a discussion about a policy. In terms of engagement with issues, all three parties’ ads in the 2008 election scored well. The Liberals scored highest on this test because all their negative ads were issue focused, although some, like the ad “New Low,” used policy to make claims about the leadership ability of Stephen Harper. On the surface, this ad was about an outbreak of listeriosis-tainted meat, but its real point was to draw attention to Harper’s support of his minister who made off-colour jokes about opposition members acquiring the disease. Because of the centrality of the Green Shift in the Liberal platform and because of the complexity of this central plank, five of the eleven English-language Liberal ads examined were about the environment, with the remaining being about economics. The Conservatives ran six negative ads, all of which were policy focused. Only one of their positive ads (“Lest We Forget”) was about an issue. The rest consisted of vague statements about Harper’s values, such as “I see people who are excited about the possibility of new opportunities” (“A Nation of Immigrants”) or “There’s no more exciting place for me, as a Canadian, than to go North” (“True North Strong and Free”). These feel-good ads were treated in the media more with gentle bemusement than as the vapid, informationless sound bites they were.

The harshest criticism of the Conservative’s negative advertising was reserved for their “Gamble” series, which used a scratch-and-play lottery ticket labelled “Dion’s Scratch ‘n Lose.” This series of three ads ran through a number of proposals by the Liberals with the tagline “You lose.” These information-dense ads raised issues about the Liberals’ position on the GST, a child
care benefit, and a carbon tax. Though they failed the test of providing evidence to support their claims, they were about policy rather than personality.

With the exception of two of the eleven NDP ads, all were about a specific policy and all but one of their negative ads were issue-specific. More than the other parties, in the 2008 election, the NDP ads followed a template that saw Jack Layton narrate the party’s position on different issues. Because their ads were largely exhortative, most of them lacked evidence, but they served the purpose of providing information to voters about various planks in their platform such as the economy, environment, leadership, or health care.

The final test for negative advertising is whether they speak about issues relevant to the voter. If they do, they can be said to be providing information to help determine voter choice. Negative ads are often derided for being about the superfluous, but what we find is that, with few exceptions, the negative ads of all three national parties in the 2008 election were relevant to the voter in that they discussed either policy issues or questions of leadership. One of the few notable exceptions was the Liberals’ “New Low” ad, which attempted to link a health issue (listeriosis) to leadership. The connection was tenuous and, arguably, the issue was not a salient one in the campaign.

In the Conservatives’ advertising campaign, only 43 percent of the ads passed the relevance test. The remaining 57 percent consisted of the “sofa series” of ads, which were positive ads but did not focus on relevant issues. Only one of the eleven NDP ads, a negative one, failed the relevance test: “A New Kind of Strong” responded to the claim that the Conservatives had “strong leadership” (a claim never made in any Conservative ads) by equating strong leadership with a number of economic, environmental, and health failures. The punchline was Jack Layton saying, “The new strong is about fighting for what’s right for you.” While leadership is certainly a relevant issue in an election campaign, this ad set up a straw man to pull it down.

The 2011 election saw mudslinging ads from all three national parties, suggesting that negative political ads are unlikely to decrease any time soon, for a number of reasons. First, these ads are much more memorable than positive ads, in part because they contain information that aids in understanding politics but also because they have emotional impact. Ted Brader’s research demonstrates the importance of emotions in political ads. Positive ads that elicit the emotion of enthusiasm are likely to reinforce status quo beliefs, whereas negative ads that play on fear are more likely to alter the bases of
political judgment by causing the viewer to seek out information that either corroborates or repudiates the message of the ad.4 Because of their visual cues (e.g., tanks) or soundtrack (e.g., drumbeat), or even their form of presentation (e.g., filmed in black and white or animated), negative ads draw our attention to the party’s message and resonate with us. Second, negative ads are an attempt by political parties to cut through the thicket of information overload. Communication scholars note that entropic messages—ones that have a high amount of novel information and are unexpected—are more likely to be remembered than redundant messages that reinforce existing knowledge and are routine in their delivery. Negative ads exemplify entropic communication. Related to this is the third reason why negative advertising is likely to continue. The media coverage of negative advertising provides a strong incentive for political parties to use advertising to gain earned or free media.

Canadian political parties are in a permanent campaign brought about by a number of factors that are structural (electoral system, party financing), evolutionary (parties’ fundraising abilities, their increasing reliance on public relations firms, and their use of the Internet, including social media), and circumstantial (the destabilizing effect of having four Liberal leaders in five years). As a result, political parties use advertising with greater intensity than they have in the past.

Negative election advertising may have a place in democratic practice. In this chapter, I examined some of the ads in the 2008 federal election to make a case that while all parties use negative ads, it may be time to analyze them with a view to helping voters evaluate them and make decisions at the ballot box. In the past, negative ads have been condemned in and of themselves; they have been seen as a poor form of communication that cheapens our democratic currency. A closer examination, though, suggests that they might have a legitimate role in providing information during an election campaign.

NOTES
3 Russell, Two Cheers for Minority Government, 133.
4 Ipsos Reid, “In Wake of Constitutional Crisis, New Survey Demonstrates That Canadians


David Taras, Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001), 93.


Ibid.


John Meisel, “‘Harperizing’ Our Minds,” Toronto Star, April 19, 2011.


Canada Elections Act, Sections 323 and 320.


33 See, for example, Thomas Patterson, The Vanishing Voter (New York: Knopf, 2002).


38 Ibid., 46–47.

39 Ibid., 68.

40 Quoted in ibid., 5.

41 For the one ad that included evidence, see “Chalk Talk—The Economy,” YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2gC-fvhRrY.