

Negative Campaigning as a Global Perspective

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Review of: David Mark: *Going Dirty. The Art of Negative Campaigning*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2006, 267 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0742545014.

Global Coverage

Negative advertising as an instrument of election campaigning is now basically a global phenomenon. What gradually came from America via Britain to Western Europe can now be seen in election campaigns in Central-Eastern Europe and in many consolidated or new democracies throughout the world. In what way are these trends transferred in political communication and election campaigns? In literature one can most often read of the 'transnationalization' of politics, industrialization of the electoral management, Americanisation of election campaigns, and global homogenization of media systems and the public sphere (Esser and Pfetsch 2004, Lees-Marshment 2005, Plasser and Plasser 2002). In an analysis of what negative advertising brings to politics, what parameters and functions this election strategy has, it is necessary to start from the American experience. There the tradition of the application of this tool in politics goes into the early history of the USA and the handling of this 'trade' is most developed there.

In the Czech Republic negative campaigning enjoyed a new wave of interest when Parliamentary elections were held in 2006. Negative ads was used much more in elec-

tion campaigns than was previously common. The frequent question asked was: Why do politicians and the hired professionals who help them manage their campaigns resort so often to the methods of negative advertising, i.e., negative campaigning? The various motives of this approach, the development of negative advertising and practical examples of its application in American election campaigns are described in the book by David Mark. Although it is a popular and instructive book rather than a classical professional monograph, it gives interesting insight into the issues of negative campaigning in the United States. David Mark is editor-in-chief of the noted American periodical *Campaigns and Elections*, published in Washington D.C., and the author is very familiar with his subject. On the other hand, his approach to this area is mainly from the journalistic and practical, not from a scholarly aspect.

Negative Campaigning in the Eye of the Beholder

In the first chapter the author briefly treats the definition of the concept of negative campaigning and offers several interesting observations. He says that although the candidates often agree in defending the 'aggressive negative tactics', few of them openly admit to waging a negative campaign. (pp. 2) He also reminds us that the definition of negative campaigning mainly depends on the angle of observation:

'Tactics that to one voter seem misleading, mean-spirited, and immoral can impart to another one important and relevant information about how the candidate would perform under the pressures of public office. Negative campaigning, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.' (pp. 2)

Mark emphasizes that negative campaigning must contain at least a 'kernel of truth.' This is to be distinguished from so called 'dirty tricks' or 'cheating.' (pp. 2) Elsewhere in the first chapter he deals with the question of what makes the candidates use the element of negativity in their campaigns, i.e., why must candidates go negative? At first he deals with the generally known fact, which appears in every discussion on negative campaigning, namely that negative campaigning is, in principle, something bad in electoral competitions:

'Negative campaigning has become a catchall phrase that implies there is something inherently wrong with criticizing an opponent. Negative campaigning is one of the most bemoaned aspects of the American political system, particularly by academics and journalists who say it diminishes the level of political discourse and intensifies the divisions among voters. These complaints emerge each election cycle.' (pp. 3)

Then the author answers his own question of why negative campaigning is such an efficient tool in the election struggles that the candidates so often resort to it: 'Going negative on the opponent is the best way to draw clear differences and run on the issues the challenger favors.' (pp. 4)

In the last section of the first chapter the author discusses various partial strategies of negative campaigning and gives examples from the history of American electoral campaigns. The chapter is concluded with the statement that negative tactics in electoral duels has always been part and parcel of American politics and that only the methods of its application in the campaigns change. (pp. 12)

Developments in Negative Campaigning

In the second chapter Mark looks fairly extensively at to the development of negative campaigning in the U.S.A. – from the late 18th century to the beginning of the Cold War. He gives examples of campaigns featuring, to a smaller or greater degree, the tactic of negative attacks against the opponent or the use of this tactic made with special ingenuity. Thus we are told that as early as in the 18th century, a favourite technique of the election campaigns was presenting the political rivals as “drunks” or “womanizers.” The candidates also frequently made attacks against the opponent’s religious faith, and the like. Mark gives many examples of aggressive attacks found among the candidates in the early electoral campaigns in the U.S.A., e.g., encounters between Federalists and Democratic Republicans: ‘Federalists claimed Jefferson was, among other things, an “atheist,” “anarchist,” “demagogue,” “coward,” and “trickster”, and said his followers were “cut-throats who walk in rags and sleep amid filth and vermin.’ (pp. 18) Various accusations of this type preceded the later negative campaigning, which gradually became an inseparable part of electoral campaigning of the candidates.

The beginnings of the television era of negative campaigning are discussed in the third chapter, entitled ‘Going Nuclear 1964: The Rise of Television Attack Ads’. Mark makes a detailed analysis particularly of the television spot of the presidential candidate, Texas Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, which represents a radical shift toward the strategy and character of election campaigning. The legendary spot by Tony Schwartz, ‘Daisy Girl’, takes its name from its content. In the spot a little girl appears who plucks the petals of a daisy flower, while in the background the audience can hear the countdown for a nuclear detonation. In a detailed shot of the reflection in the little girl’s eye is seen a real nuclear explosion. Through this television spot, candidate Johnson attacks his Republican rival, Senator Barry Goldwater, and his war-like rhetoric. In the ad, Goldwater is presented as a man who would not hesitate to drag the world into a nuclear conflict. The spot in a masterly way exploits the emotions and sentiments of the audience, which already fears a nuclear war and a worldwide conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. This television spot gave an overwhelming victory to Johnson, so that in this respect it was extremely successful. It represented the arrival of aggressive,

negative TV spots, which in present-day American election campaigns often prevail in political advertisements. It is no accident that David Mark devoted a separate chapter to the TV spot of 1964 because in the development of negative publicity this spot was a breakthrough. He showed in what ways negative campaigning could exploit the already existing ideas and emotions of the voters to turn them against the political opponent.

Negative Campaigning in the Post 9/11 World

In the next chapters Mark analyzes the specific aspects of negative campaigning in the American context. In Chapter 8 he discusses a new element in negative campaigning, which appeared in the world after September 11, 2001. With increased intensity, politicians started operating with fear, the so-called politics of fear, and the application of anti-terrorism measures. The candidates in their campaigns began to present themselves as the best guarantee for the country's protection against terrorism, and at the same time presenting the opponent as a far less capable person in safeguarding the security of the citizens: 'Questions of who could best protect America from terrorists, previously off-limits in political discourse, became fodder for 30-second campaign ads, like other partisan issues such as tax cuts, health care, guns, and gay rights.' (pp. 129) Next, the author deals with the changes brought about in the U.S.A. by the reform of financing the campaigns. This also increased the negativity in the campaigns.

In the chapter 'A Double-Edged Sword: When Negative Campaigning Backfires', David Mark discusses the situations when negative campaigning turned against the originator of this type of publicity, which is a fairly frequent phenomenon in election campaigns. For this reason, some political advisers recommend their clients to use negative advertising with caution and thoughtfully and not to launch too personal attacks against their opponents (see also Swint 1998). Many surveys of public opinion in the USA (see Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991: 10) also show that the public accepts some areas as acceptable for criticism in the form of negative campaigning, e.g., criticism of the candidate's electoral activities and attitudes, in other areas, however, it is less tolerant to negative attacks. For instance it rejects attacks against the candidate's family and his or her religion.

In general it is obvious that the public perceives negative advertising in a rather negative way – and this is not limited to the United States. At the same time, however, this method is efficient during the electoral competition. The voters perceive it in a much more intensive way than the classical positive campaigning and also remember it better. For this reason political professionals often resort to it although they realize its potential hazards.

Permanent Negative Campaigning: Our Future?

In the conclusion to this book, the author gives some thought to the issue of what has changed in the use of negative campaigning during the last millennium. He stresses the fact that advertising, due to new communications technology, has come closer to us; it has entered our living rooms. This chapter bears the title 'It's in the Mail: Negative Campaigning Comes Home'. The very last chapter is devoted to the future of negative campaigning. Here the author speaks of his own observations on the next development of negative campaigning. Of interest is his idea that new technology and new processes, e.g., micro-targeting, which makes it possible to address small groups of voters by supplying them with specific messages, will gradually make negative campaigning individualized and will no longer address such a wide spectrum of the voters as it does now. (pp. 234) At the same time the author points out that new technology also represents a certain limitation for negative campaigning and for advertising in general. Modern technology, e.g., digital video recorders, etc., enables the voters to leave out or skip the programme or change the channel whenever an ad appears on the screen. Thus it is actually more difficult to win and keep the spectator's interest and make him view the entire ad.

Mark also writes of the trend of permanent action is being carried over into areas of negative campaigning, as it is known from classical election campaigns. For the first time this was pointed out by the American journalist Sidney Blumenthal in 1980 in his book *The Permanent Campaign: Inside the World of Elite political Operatives*. Mark in his book claims that even negative campaigning has its scenarists and director who produce their programs so that they could continually return and repeatedly influence the voters:

'Campaigns now have scriptwriters, video editors, and voiceover artist on standby to create almost instantaneous comebacks. In late September 2004, the Bush campaign released an ad that showed Senator Kerry windsurfing in opposing directions, charging that his positions changed "whichever the wind blows." It took little more than an hour for Kerry campaign media specialists to put together a counterattack, in the form of a television ad that decried U.S. casualties, kidnappings, and beheadings in Iraq. The Kerry spot sought to turn the tables on the president, declaring, "George Bush's answer is to run a juvenile and tasteless attack ad." Naturally, the Bush campaign then quickly sent out an e-mail to counter Kerry's attacks.' (pp. 234)

Mark thus describes the current state of American campaigns, where negative attacks continue long after the elections are over. He speaks of permanent negative campaigns: 'American politics, at least in the future, is likely to see all attacks, all the time, even when no election is looming immediately' (pp. 235). Mark believes that this state is due to the relative balance between the parties, i.e., relative partisan parity:

'The ultimate winners in permanent negative campaigns will be those who take the most effective control of the language and vernacular of politics. How an opponent is described or an issue framed goes a long way toward influencing voter perceptions.' (pp. 236)

This outline of the final chapter in the book by David Mark makes it evident that negative campaigning will not disappear from the political stage. The themes and the methods will be different but the tactic itself will survive, although voters, academics and many political commentators and journalists may not like it. The truth is that negativity as a manner of criticism of the rival has always been present in politics. Mark's book brings many interesting observations on the development of negative campaigning in the United States and supplies stimulating information for anyone interested in the problem of elections, election campaigns, or general advertising, marketing and the mass media. It also shows that besides some shady aspects the negative campaign even offers several positive aspects, for instance mediating relevant and important data on the opponent, which otherwise might remain hidden from the voters. The author believes that negative campaigns can also reveal how the candidate, if elected, would respond to criticism and how he is going to behave toward the public while in office. In this connection the question arises whether a parallel holds for countries in which negative campaigning is still in its beginnings. Did the negative campaigning preceding the 2006 election in the Czech Republic demonstrate, as pointed out in the introduction, the ability of politicians to face criticism and hold their own when in office? This book by David Mark is sure to help find an answer to this question.

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