

# The Timing of Political Ads

Chapter Six explores the timing of televised political advertisements by candidates, parties, and groups in the 2000 federal elections. It comes as no surprise that political ads tend to cluster near Election Day. Of course, there are notable exceptions to this clustering effect, depending on the particular needs of a candidate or buyer. For example, Dick Morris, a campaign consultant for President Bill Clinton's 1996 re-election campaign,<sup>1</sup> believed that early advertising was necessary for the candidate to overcome negative personal images over the course of the campaign. Other buyers of political commercials, especially special interest groups that have no protection under the "lowest unit charge" law,<sup>2</sup> may be compelled to buy earlier when the airwaves are less expensive.<sup>3</sup>

1. At the urging of consultant Dick Morris, the Clinton campaign launched an unprecedented barrage of television commercials more than one year before the election. In order to evade FECA's spending limits, the early television ads avoided using magic words of express advocacy and were sponsored by the Democratic Party and paid for in part from party soft money coffers. This flurry of "issue advertising" by the Clinton team was estimated to have cost \$34 million. Kathryn Tenpas, "The Clinton Reelection Machine: Placing the Party Organization in Peril," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (Winter, 1998) at 761.

2. In an effort to reduce the costs of campaigns and to prevent broadcasters from exploiting campaigns as the election deadline approaches, Congress passed a law in 1971 requiring broadcasters to provide candidates with the "lowest unit charge" for television spots within 60 days of the general election. The lowest unit charge law applies only to candidates, not to political parties or special interest groups that buy television time to influence elections.

But the FCC has allowed different pricing mechanisms to emerge that undercut the lowest unit rate law. Foremost among these pricing mechanisms is the development of different rate categories—the two most important being "fixed" and "preemptible." The "fixed" rate is the highest and guarantees the ad will be aired at the selected time; the "preemptible" rate is cheaper but allows stations to bump the ad if someone else will pay a higher price for the time slot. As Election Day nears, candidates cannot afford being bumped from prime time and so they compete with the parties and other political players in a spending "free-for-all" for television time. Competing against the parties which are awash in soft money, candidates are forced to pay the same high prices for ad time.

3. Television spots increase substantially in cost as Election Day approaches, reflecting the rising demand for the airwaves as candidates, parties and groups compete against each other as well as against commercial advertisers. Broadcast television spots increased in price about threefold between August and November of the 2000 election year, with the sharpest increases occurring in late October through Election Day, peaking at \$1,200 per 30-second spot in one study. David Magleby et. al, "Election Advocacy: Soft Money and Issue Advocacy in the 2000 Congressional Elections," (Feb. 26, 2000), at 11, available at [www.byu.edu/outsidemoney].

## FREQUENCY OF ADVERTISING BY WEEK

Despite these exceptions, the data clearly show that political advertising increases substantially among all buyers (candidates, parties, and groups) as Election Day nears. As one might expect, the majority of election ads are aired in the weeks closest to the day of election. Approximately 60% of all federal election ads were aired in the six weeks prior to the election.

The television advertising database shows that there were 940,755 airings of political television commercials in federal and gubernatorial elections over the 2000 calendar year in the nation's top 75 media markets—at a total cost of \$672 million. Of this total, 845,923 ads were aired in federal elections alone at an estimated cost of \$628 million. The greatest share of these airings occurred in the last few months prior to the general election.

Across all federal elections combined in 2000, candidates were the principal sponsors of most political television ads, with party committees running second and independent groups third. Candidate, party, and group ads shared similar advertising patterns over time. While candidate ads made up a larger percentage of ads overall, all three players meted out their messages in approximately the same proportions from week to week. In the final four weeks of the campaign, candidates aired 50% of their ads, parties aired 50% of their ads, and groups aired 60% of their ads (see Figure 6-1).

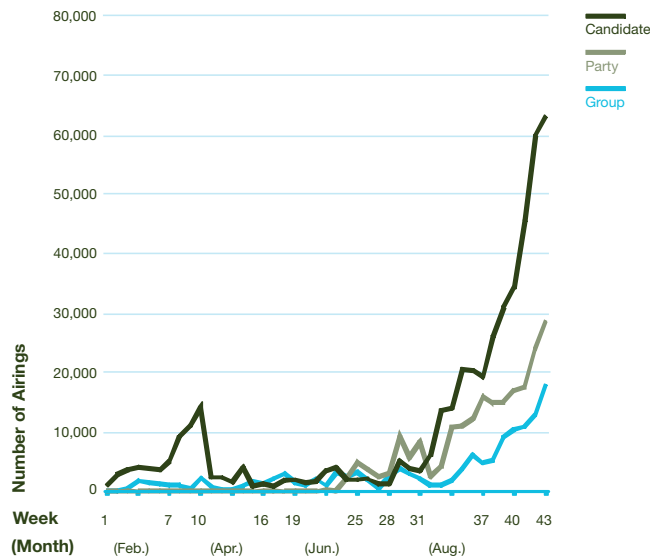


Figure 6-1. Magnitude of Ads by Sponsor, by Week

## CANDIDATE COMPETITION AND TIMING OF ADVERTISING

The competitiveness of candidate races also affects the magnitude and timing of political advertising.<sup>4</sup> As expected, television ads in competitive races began airing in greater frequency than ads in non-competitive races in July and August, and completely overshadowed ads in non-competitive races by October through Election Day. Interestingly, advertisements in races classified as non-competitive in October spiked ahead of the competitive races in the early primary season (see Figure 6-2). The early spike in ads in non-competitive races is due largely to the presidential primary elections. Some states which were competitive primary states were later considered non-competitive in the general election.

Looking at the congressional races, incumbents, challengers and open seat candidates aired comparable numbers of ads, until the final weeks of the campaign. In House and Senate contests alike, campaign advertising by incumbents clearly outstripped challengers, while candidates vying for open seats also placed more television ads in the waning weeks of the campaign than candidates challenging incumbents (see Figure 6-3).

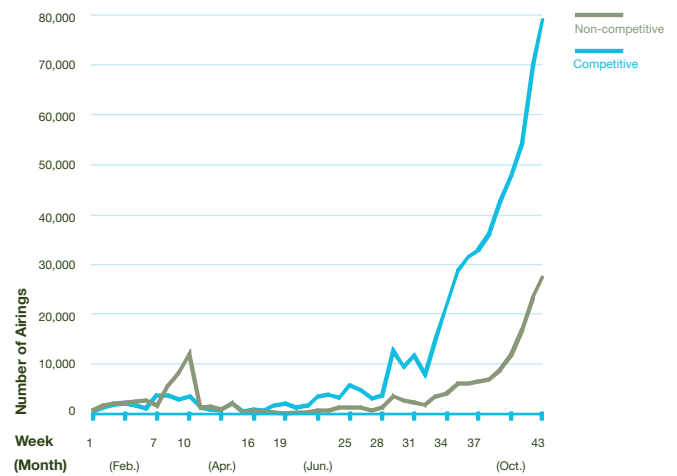


Figure 6-2. Frequency of Ads Between Competitive and Non-Competitive Races

4. For a description of “competitive races,” see Chapter Two, “Methodology of the Study.”

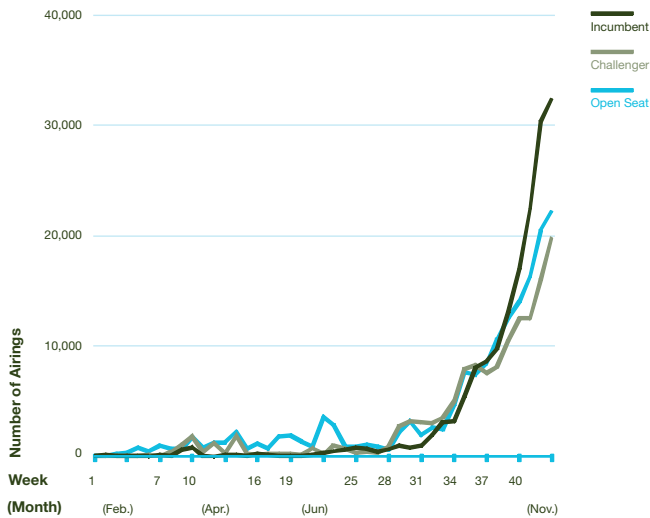


Figure 6-3. Magnitude of Ads by Incumbency, House and Senate Races

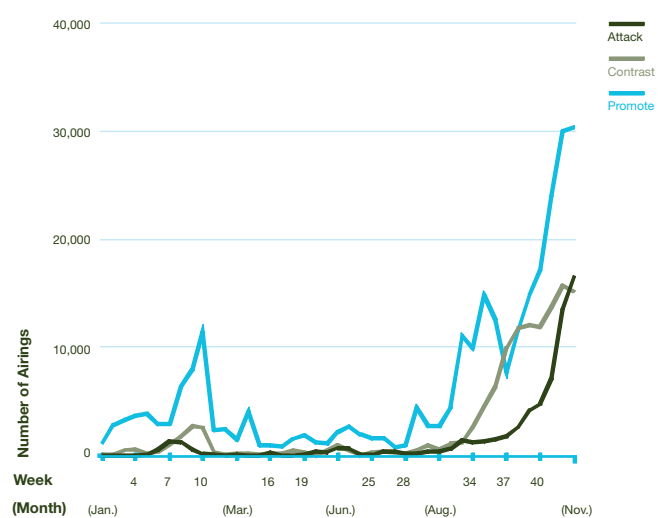


Figure 6-4. Tone of Ads for All Federal Candidates, Over Time

## TONE OF CANDIDATE ADS OVER TIME

Ads were coded for tone in one of three ways: negative, positive, or contrasting multiple candidates. Negative ads focused solely on an opposing candidate; positive ads focused on promoting a candidate. Contrasting ads portrayed and drew distinctions between two or more candidates. While the number of negative ads and positive ads increased significantly in the final weeks of the election, they remained in close proportion to each other. Positive ads outnumbered negative ads every week with three exceptions: two weeks in early August and the final week of the election (week 43). And only in the final week of the election did negative ads significantly exceed positive ads.

As noted in previous chapters, candidate ads tended to be the most positive compared to party and group ads. Contrary to popular perceptions, candidate ads tended to remain consistently positive over time. As Figure 6-4 indicates, among all federal candidates there were more positive ads than negative each and every week throughout the election. In the House and Senate races, candidates were highly consistent in their tone. Positive ads remained the dominant type of ad all the way through the congressional elections, though contrasting ads and attack ads increased in number immediately prior to the election.

However, candidate ads by Gore and Bush in the presidential race were far less consistent. Positive ads promoting the candidates were aired in high numbers early in the race, but candidates increased their proportion of contrasting and negative ads in the later stages of the cam-

paign. Interestingly, there was a discrete and significant window where neither candidate was airing ads on his own. Throughout the summer, the presidential candidates did not air ads in significant numbers. But with 12 weeks remaining before Election Day, the candidates began a dramatic escalation in their advertising. Spending on positive, negative, and contrasting ads all increased significantly, with negative ads leaping from almost zero airings to more than 7,000 in the last week alone. Despite vows to “change the tone in Washington,” the presidential candidates aired more than 90% of their negative ads in the final three weeks of the election. As a result, negative ads were especially prominent as the tight race went down to the wire (see Figure 6-5).

Senate candidates also utilized early positive ads in their campaigns. However as the Senate battles went on, contrasting and attack ads made up a greater and greater percentage of the overall advertising, though positive ads remained the most prevalent. House candidates followed a similar strategy, though they did not put as much emphasis on airing positive ads early. Throughout the election year positive, contrasting, and negative ads by House candidates remained in approximately the same proportion, even as the number of airings across all three categories increased from 1,500 in one week at the end of July to more than 20,000 in the week before the election.

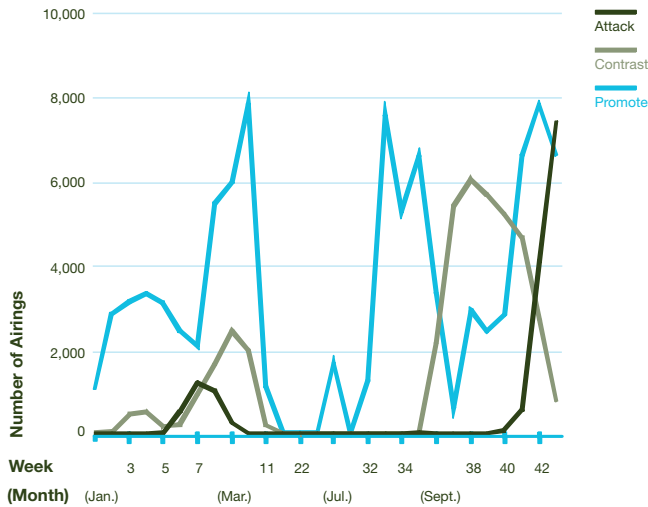


Figure 6-5. Tone of Presidential Candidate Ads

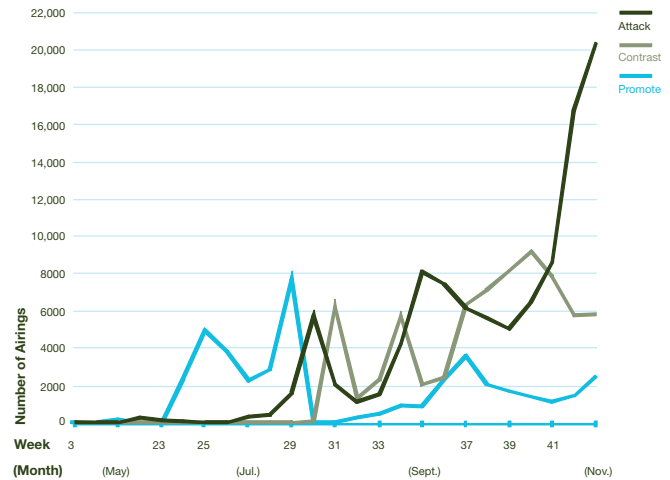


Figure 6-6. Tone of Party Ads in Federal Elections, by Week

## TONE OF PARTY ADS THROUGH THE ELECTION CYCLE

When looking at ads sponsored by parties and groups, however, a very different picture emerges—a picture that most Americans witnessed on television and helped lead to popular disillusionment with campaign advertising. While for most of the election, candidates concentrated on promoting their own image and providing the viewer with a positive message, parties chose to rely heavily on contrasting and negative ads. In the 2000 elections overall, party ads were primarily positive until 13 weeks (August) before the election. With 13 weeks left, the party transformed its television presence into one that was heavily negative and heavily contrasting. Only a small number of party ads aired in the three months before the election focused exclusively on the qualities of the favored candidates. Negative ads accounted for more than half of all ads aired by the parties in the final two months of the election, as the parties pounded viewers with thousands of exclusively negative ads (see Figure 6-6).

Party advertising in the House races was extremely negative. Negative ads were more prevalent than contrasting ads and positive ads for the entire 2000 calendar year. Moreover, negative ads increased at a dramatic rate in the six weeks prior to the election, mushrooming to two, then four, then six, and finally eight times the number of positive ads. Contrasting ads were also used by parties, but not to a great extent. Even at their peak, contrasting ads barely amounted to half of the negative ads, and in the final week of the election, 9,327 negative ads were aired

by the parties, compared with 2,451 contrasting ads and 935 positive ads. Thus in the last seven days of the House races, for every positive ad aired by the parties, the parties aired 10 negative ads.

Party involvement in Senate campaigns was not quite as attack-oriented, but nor was it positive in tone. In the Senate races, parties made no serious effort to promote their candidates with positive ads. In the final two months of the campaign, viewers saw three times as many negative and contrasting ads as they did positive ads. Airings of positive ads remained at late-summer levels while negative ads and contrasting ads increased dramatically as Election Day approached. Additionally, attack ads were more prevalent than contrasting ads until two weeks before the election, when contrasting ads became most common.

The overall negative pattern of party advertising held true for the presidential race. Party ads were all but entirely positive for the spring and summer months, and then with roughly 13 weeks left, ads promoting candidates disappeared and were replaced by thousands of contrasting ads and attack ads. Contrasting ads exceeded attack ads until three weeks before the election, when contrasting ads dropped off and attack ads increased in number. Positive ads by the party were barely a blip on the screen over the final 10 weeks of the campaign (see Figure 6-7).

In all federal elections, and especially the presidential race, the candidates and the parties seem to be playing the game of “good cop, bad cop.” The candidates want to come across on the television as generally positive and attentive to social concerns. The parties, on the other hand, apparently feel comfortable attacking opponents

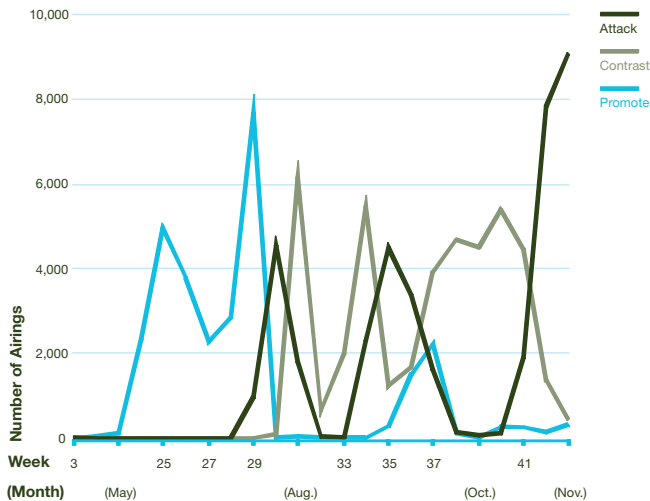


Figure 6-7. Tone of Party Ads in the Presidential Race, by Week

and sounding the bells of negativity, deriding personal qualities as well as political viewpoints. Parties apparently assume that voters will not associate the negative party campaign with the candidate being promoted.

## GROUP-SPONSORED ADS IN THE 2000 ELECTIONS

If party committees appeared unabashedly negative in tone in the 2000 elections, independent groups were downright ugly. Taken as a whole—including both genuine issue ads and electioneering issue ads—group-sponsored ads tend to replicate the general negative tone of party ads. But when focusing on electioneering issue ads, an entirely different picture emerges.

As discussed in Chapter Four, special interest groups sponsored both genuine issue ads (urging action on a public policy or legislative bill) and electioneering ads (promoting the election or defeat of a federal candidate). In the 2000 election, genuine issue ads are rather evenly distributed throughout the year, while group-sponsored electioneering ads make a sudden and overwhelming appearance immediately before elections (see Figure 6-8).

Among all group-sponsored ads, negative ads were highly visible in the House races. Beginning early and remaining dominant throughout the 20 weeks preceding the election, negative ads were the major story in group advertising in House races. Positive ads were also very visible, building slowly from roughly 1,000 ads a week in September to 3,000 ads per week by the end of October. But

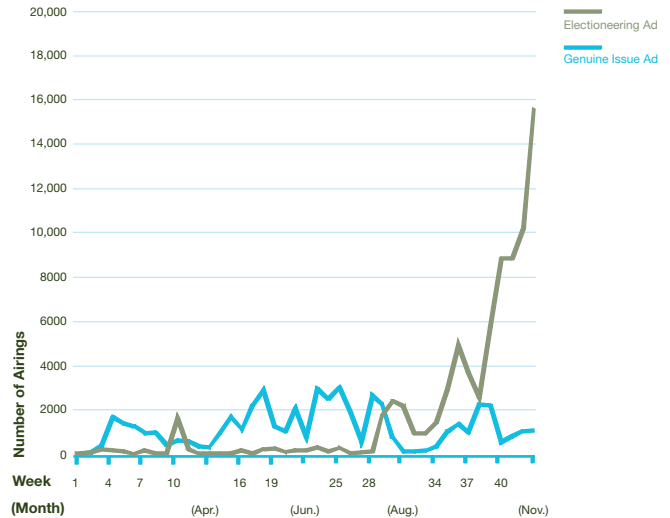


Figure 6-8. Distribution of Genuine Issue Ads vs. Electioneering Issue Ads Through the Calendar Year 2000

negative ads were more prevalent overall, accounting for 63% of the group ads in House races.

Senate races attracted significant amounts of group ads as well, with roughly half of the ads being negative. Contrasting ads did not become prominent until seven weeks before the election. Positive ads outpaced negative ads for much of the election but with three weeks remaining in the race, negative ads grew to more than double the number of positive ads. Still, compared to the presidential race and the House races, group spending in the Senate races was the least negative, garnering 49% of the total airings.

Group ads in the presidential race became even more extreme. In the 2000 presidential contest, all group-sponsored electioneering ads were generally hostile toward the candidates—either attacking a presidential candidate or contrasting two or more candidates. *Not a single group-sponsored ad aired in the 2000 presidential race promoted a candidate.* About 88% of group-sponsored electioneering ads were negative, with contrasting ads barely showing up on the radar screen. Negative ads accelerated as the election approached, peaking at more than 7,000 airings in the final week of the election.

An even more negative picture develops when looking at group-sponsored electioneering ads rather than genuine issue ads. As shown in Figure 6-9, group-sponsored electioneering ads in all federal elections almost always are predominantly negative in tone, begin outnumbering positive ads by 20-to-1 as early as two months before the election, and completely overwhelm positive and contrasting electioneering issue ads in the last few weeks of the campaign.

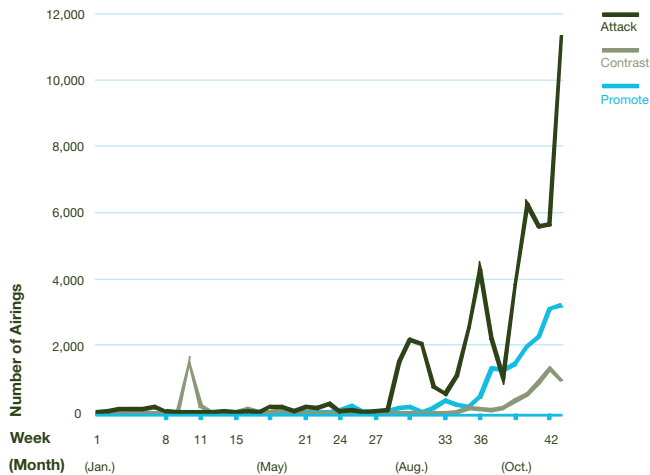


Figure 6-9. Tone of Group Electioneering Ads in All Federal Elections

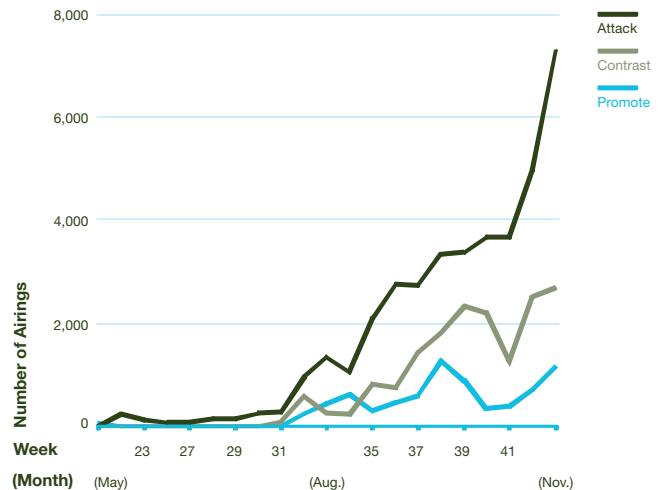


Figure 6-10. Tone of Party Ads in Incumbent-Contested Races, by Week

## EFFECT OF INCUMBENCY ON THE TONE OF ADS

The tone in congressional open seat races—races one might expect to be more bitter given both parties’ heightened desire to win the seat—did not differ markedly from the tone in congressional races overall. While the open seat races saw more spending and ads overall, the tone of the ads was similar to the incumbent-contested races.

Candidates utilized negative, positive, and contrasting ads in roughly the same proportions in incumbent-contested and open seat races. Roughly 60% of the candidate ads in incumbent-held and open seat races were positive ads, while between 26% and 30% were contrasting. Incumbents, challengers, and open seat candidates alike ran comparable races in terms of tone of campaign advertising. Even in select races that were considered the most competitive, the proportion of positive and negative ads were similar among all candidates. This was the case by party affiliation as well. Candidates aired slightly more negative ads in Republican-incumbent races than in Democratic-incumbent races, 16% negative as opposed to 11% negative. Candidate ads in open seat races were 16% negative. The most notable trend, of course, was that incumbents, challengers, and open seat candidates alike increased the airing of negative ads closer to Election Day, though the greatest bulk of candidate advertising remained positive in tone.

By contrast the tone of party ads differed significantly across different kinds of races. In open seat races, party

ads began as primarily, if not exclusively, positive in tone, promoting their candidates early in the election season. The tone of ads fluctuated thereafter, until the final week of the general election campaign when the parties then saturated the airwaves with attack ads. While party advertising in open seat races was 60% negative, the tone in incumbent-held races varied. Party ads in Republican-incumbent races were 64% negative, while party ads in Democratic-incumbent races were 52% negative. Just 15% of the party ads in Republican-incumbent races promoted the candidate, and only 8% of party ads in Democratic-incumbent races did the same. Over time, party ads in incumbent-contested races consistently remained attack-oriented (see Figure 6-10).

As usual, group electioneering ads were incredibly negative across categories, though the intensity of the attack ads varied. Open seat ads by groups were extremely negative: 72% of the ads were negative, 8% were contrasting, 20% were positive. Ads by groups in Democratic-incumbent seats were also very negative. About 69% of the ads were negative, while 17% were contrasting, and 14% were positive. The pattern in Republican-incumbent races was quite different, however, as groups spent significant sums on positive ads. While 56% of the ads were negative, 38% were positive, and just 6% were contrasting. These positive ads were aired primarily by pro-Republican groups who sought to establish positive images for Republican House incumbents.



## POLICY CRITICISMS VS. PERSONAL INNUENDO

While parties and groups aired negative ads at high volume in the 2000 races, most of the negative ads focused on policy positions of the candidates—claiming that candidate X was on the wrong side of a given issue. In most cases, electioneering ads by the parties and groups focused on the candidates' views on policy issues exclusively, although a large portion of ads involved both policy positions and personal traits of the candidates. Very few of the negative ads by parties and groups consisted exclusively of personal attacks against candidates.

Across categories, personal attack ads were not a significant part of the ad war in the 2000 race. While ads dealing exclusively with the candidates' views on policy increased dramatically as Election Day approached, the number of ads focusing solely on personal issues remained flat through October and November. This is the case regardless of level of office and competitiveness of the race. Despite using large amounts of negative advertising, groups and parties avoided exclusively personal attack ads, focusing most often on critiques of the candidates' views on policy and, less frequently, mixing policy positions with personal traits of the candidates.

Most attack ads focus on a candidates' policy positions, but this fact runs contrary to popular perceptions of the campaign ad war in 2000. The ads that denigrate a candidate's character apparently tend to stick in the public's consciousness. Whether personal attack ads are more effective, or simply more offensive, they seem to be more memorable and taint the general image of all campaign ads.

## SIXTY DAYS BEFORE THE GENERAL ELECTION

In the two months prior to the 2000 election, very few of the group issue ads were aired to promote an issue; most group issue ads encouraged the election or defeat of candidates. Within 60 days of the election there were 50,950 airings of group-sponsored ads featuring candidates for federal office. Of these, 331 airings were genuinely about an issue or bill pending before Congress. About 80% of the genuine issue ads featuring candidates were aired well before the 60 days of Election Day. This is consistent with the general understanding of political debate. Congressional debate of policy issues occurs throughout the year, with most votes on key decisions occurring before Labor Day. This year-long debate is when most genuine issue ads should be expected to air. Conversely, the weeks immediately prior to the election, especially after Labor Day, are the time for electioneering and advertisements about candidates for office. Television spots also become increasingly expensive in the final weeks, driving many other potential advertisers temporarily off the air. Ads referring only to issues and not to candidates are less likely to be found in the months immediately preceding a race.

In the 2000 election, the majority of group ads lacked magic words—and thus were labeled issue ads—but the majority of them promoted or attacked candidates, rather than raised awareness about an issue or pending legislation. Since most of the group issue ads had an electioneering purpose, the fact that 75% of the group issue ads aired within 60 days of the election should not be surprising. As in 1998, genuine issue advocacy became overwhelmed by group-sponsored electioneering issue ads with the increased proximity to Election Day (see Figure 6-11).

The ramification of this qualitative change in the nature of issue ads within 60 days of the general election will be discussed in greater detail as it relates to campaign finance regulations in Chapter 8.

	Number of Airings	% of Total Group Airings	Distinct Ads	% of Distinct Group Ads	Cost	% of Total Group Ads
Total Group Ads	142,421	100%	393	100%	\$97,878,367	100%
Total Group Ads w/o "Magic Words"	130,999	91.98%	343	87.27%	\$91,093,834	93.06%
Group Ads w/o "Magic Words" Aired within 60 days	69,901	49.08%	192	48.85%	\$48,051,553	49.09%

*Figure 6-11. Group-Sponsored Advertising in 2000 Federal Elections*