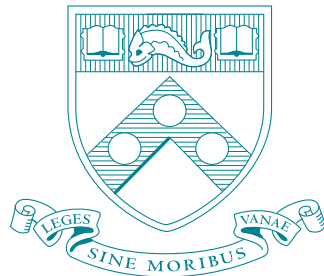


Free Time and Advertising: The 1997 New Jersey Governor's Race

A Report prepared by Paul Waldman for
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FOREWORD

The Annenberg Public Policy Center was established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg in 1994 to create a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania which would address public policy issues at the local, state and federal levels. Consistent with the mission of the Annenberg School for Communication, the Center has four ongoing foci: Information and Society; Media and the Developing Mind; Media and the Dialogue of Democracy; and Health Communication. Each year, as well, a special area of scholarly and social interest is addressed. The Center supports research and sponsors lectures and conferences in these areas. This series of publications disseminates the work of the Center.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson
Director

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The 1997 New Jersey governor's race was, by all accounts, relatively free of the kinds of harshly negative attacks and distortions that characterized the Senate race in that state the year before. Nonetheless, there were some problematic features of the candidates' advertising that emerged in our analysis.¹ On the other hand, the free time presentations that the candidates gave supplied voters with messages that were less negative in form, more accurate, and weighted heavily toward specific policy proposals. As such, free time was a superior format for the dissemination of information on the candidates.

In addition, the structure established for the free time messages required the candidates to address specific issues of concern to the people of New Jersey. The candidates recorded messages on each of five issues: auto insurance, economic development, urban revitalization, taxes, and education. Two of these issues, economic development and urban revitalization, were barely mentioned in the advertising.

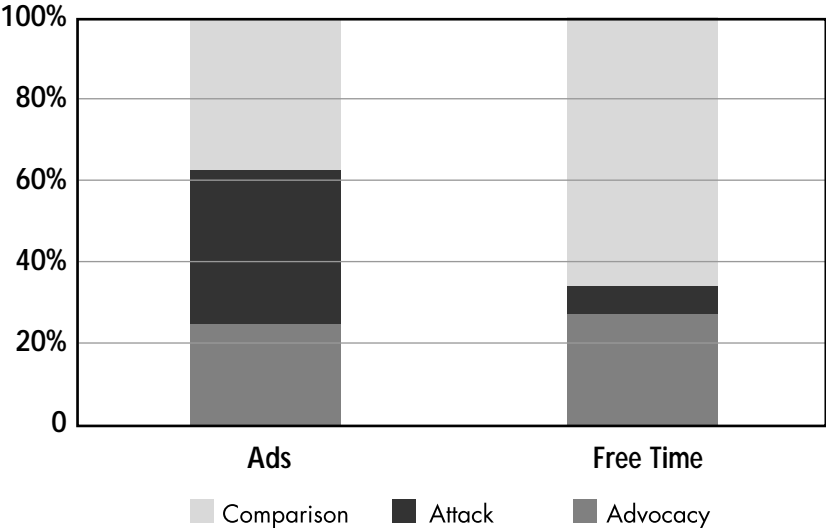
1 We analyzed thirteen television spots (six from Whitman and seven from McGreevey) and fifteen free time spots (five each from Whitman, McGreevey, and Sabrin). We obtained the ads through Leadership New Jersey, a non-partisan group to which the Whitman and McGreevey campaigns had agreed to provide their ads. Since Murray Sabrin did not provide his ads to Leadership New Jersey, we were not able to analyze the spots that he aired.

ATTACK, ADVOCACY AND COMPARISON IN FREE TIME AND ADS

One of the most readily apparent differences between candidate’s own ads and their free time messages is the relative lack of attack in free time. When candidates speak on camera, they are more accountable for the messages they disseminate and, as a result, less likely to attack their opponents. As the graph below shows, nearly forty percent of candidate arguments in ads were attacks on opponents with no mention of the sponsoring candidate’s position. Free time, in contrast, featured only a single attack in fifteen messages.

The dominant mode of discourse in free time was comparison, where the candidate both criticizes his/her opponent and states his/her own position on the issue at hand. Two-thirds of arguments in free time took this form. Although a campaign should balance advocacy, attack, and comparison, we believe comparison to be the most beneficial mode of argumentation, since it offers voters information on both candidates.

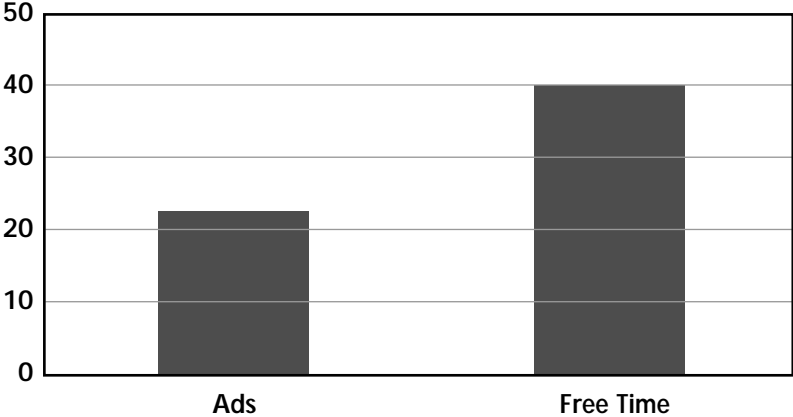
DISCOURSE BREAKDOWN: ADS VS. FREE TIME



An added benefit of free time in the New Jersey race was that since candidates' messages were shown together, voters were offered comparisons not only within each message but between the competing messages on the same topic. With ordinary campaign advertisements, voters receive messages at disparate times; making connections between them requires high levels of attention and memory. The free time format gives voters both sides at a single time, encouraging decision-making based on more complete information.

RELEVANCE TO GOVERNANCE

Percent of Arguments Offering Concrete Proposals



Another benefit of free time is that it encouraged the candidates to get down to brass tacks and tell voters what they intended to do if they were elected. We coded all the candidate arguments for the type of policy proposals offered. Each argument was classified as Non-Promise (no policy proposal), Symbolic (mentions of future outcomes without any particular action discussed), Actionable (general action promised without specifics), or Concrete (specific action promised). As the chart below shows, candidates were nearly twice as likely to offer a concrete proposal for action in free time as they

were in ads. Free time thus not only clarifies issues for voters but also puts the candidates on record with specific promises, increasing their accountability and offering voters means of assessing performance in the future.

While this chart shows only concrete proposals, the trend holds for all categories in this Relevance to Governance measure. Nearly half the arguments in advertisements were coded as Non-Promise, offering no plans for future action. Of the fifteen arguments in free time, only one was coded as Non-Promise.

ACCURACY

While there were no outright lies in any of the candidates' advertisements, our analysis located many claims that were misleading or distortions. These include both claims about the sponsor's record, and about his or her opponent. In all, seven different ads included questionable claims.

In free time, however, the misleading elements of these arguments disappeared. For example, one Whitman ad claimed, "Welfare rolls down thirty-one percent after Whitman turns welfare into work." In fact, the thirty-one percent figure is a drop measured from the time Whitman took office in 1993. Her welfare reform law did not take effect until 1997, so any decline in the rolls attributed to the law would be much smaller. In her free time statement, Whitman mentions the decline in welfare rolls but does not attribute it to the welfare reform law.

In contrast to the ads, none of the claims in the free time messages could be called misleading or false.

CONCLUSION

In sum, free time segments were less negative, more specific, and more accurate than candidate advertising. In addition, the format of the free time messages required the candidates to address important issues. Unfortunately, the advertisements were seen by many more viewers than the free time.

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