

# Producer and Stage Manager

CREATING AND PRESENTING  
THE CAMPAIGN'S MESSAGES

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One of the largest stages in American politics is the Iowa caucuses where late on the night of February 1, 2016, a dramatic cliffhanger was playing out, starring Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton and upstart challenger Bernie Sanders. As the last results trickled in, Sanders trailed by less than 1 percent and had a shot at a major upset. “Holy shit, we could actually squeak out a win,” remembers Keegan Goudiss, who was running the Sanders digital campaign with his partner Scott Goodstein.

Bernie Sanders would not be giving any more speeches or making any more news in Iowa that night. He was still in Des Moines, but the senator was sitting in his chartered jet full of staff and reporters as it idled on the tarmac. A major snowstorm was coming. Sanders had a full day of campaigning scheduled the next day in New Hampshire where a must-win primary would take place in just eight days. Sanders wanted to get in the air, but there was a problem.

“The plane didn’t have Wi-Fi,” explains Goudiss. Once they left the ground, Sanders could not know the final results and would not be able to issue a news statement declaring victory or conceding a better-than-expected loss. Reporters traveling with Sanders would not be able to file stories. And, perhaps most importantly, campaign manager Jeff Weaver would lose communication with his war room at the Des Moines Airport Holiday Inn where Goudiss, Goodstein, and their digital team were waiting to craft the right message to spread to Sanders supporters and donors across the country. Phone calls and text messages bounced back and forth between the Sanders plane and the war room until, final results still unknown, the chartered Boeing 737 without Wi-Fi was forced to head to New Hampshire, two hours behind schedule.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier that evening, Sanders had appeared before a room of cheering Iowa supporters and enthusiastically declared, “While the results are still not known, it looks like we are in a virtual tie!” Says Goudiss, “We had a ‘win’ e-mail and ads ready to go, a ‘lose’ e-mail and ads ready. But we didn’t have a ‘tie’ e-mail or ad ready and we were basically tied in Iowa.” Out of touch with the Sanders mothership, the war room digital team watched the latest results. Goudiss and



C-SPAN

"A Virtual Tie!" said Senator Bernie Sanders to a cheering room of supporters as incomplete Iowa caucus results surprisingly showed underdog Sanders trailing favored Hillary Clinton by a fraction of a percent. An approaching snowstorm forced the Sanders campaign plane to depart for New Hampshire before the final tally was announced showing Clinton with 49.9 percent and twenty-three delegates and Sanders with 49.6 percent and twenty-one delegates. Polls taken three months earlier had shown Sanders trailing Clinton by 30 points in Iowa.



Photo courtesy of Revolution Messaging.

**Feeding the Bern.** An expectations-shattering \$232 million was raised online by Bernie Sanders during his presidential primary battle with Hillary Clinton. Keegan Goudiss (left) and Scott Goodstein (center) led the Sanders campaign's digital advertising and online fundraising programs. Here they confer with Sanders campaign manager Jeff Weaver (right).

Goodstein watched activity on the Sanders servers that took small online donations, the lifeblood of their campaign. Sanders's Iowa staffers were disappointed when it became clear that they would lose by a fraction of a percent. However, the digital team was seeing that Bernie supporters around the country were fired up. "His base was really excited about the results. We could already tell, just from ambient [unsolicited] online contributions coming in that people were going to respond well to whatever we put out," said Scott Goodstein. The narrow Iowa loss was shaping up to be an online fundraising win for Sanders.<sup>2</sup>

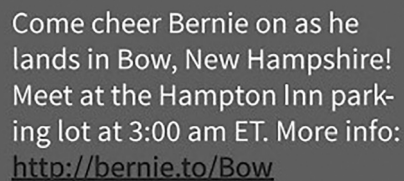
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## PRODUCING A 4:00 A.M. MEDIA EVENT

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It was around midnight in Iowa. The Sanders digital team was at work in the Des Moines war room as their candidate flew to New Hampshire. "I can't remember who it was, but someone said, 'Why don't we have a rally when they get to New Hampshire?'" recalls Goudiss, who at first was skeptical of the idea. "How are we going to get them there because they are not going to land until four or five in the morning?" he remembers asking and then hearing, "We can text them. It's late, but these people are still up watching."

The Sanders campaign had successfully been encouraging supporters to opt in to their text messaging program, giving permission for the campaign to communicate with them via texts to their cell phones. "You collect the zip code as part of that. We looked and saw that there are a couple of thousand people who live around the airport who are passionate Bernie supporters and might come out to a rally at four or five in the morning," says Goudiss. They got in touch with their New Hampshire director, who quickly began organizing an event at Bow Hampton Inn where the Sanders entourage would be staying. An event landing page was added to Sanders's website and the invitations went out by text. Sanders supporters' cell phones in New Hampshire began dinging. Some e-mails were also sent, Goodstein says, "but when the supporter reads that e-mail it's going to be at seven or ten in the morning and the event would be over." The ding of texts was crucial to getting attention and getting a crowd.



Come cheer Bernie on as he lands in Bow, New Hampshire! Meet at the Hampton Inn parking lot at 3:00 am ET. More info: <http://bernie.to/Bow>

Photo courtesy of Revolution Messaging.

**Early Morning Invitation.** In the wee hours of February 2, 2016, text messages were sent to Sanders supporters within a twenty-five-mile radius of the Manchester, New Hampshire, airport. An event landing page on the Sanders website gave details of a rally for the late-arriving Sanders after his near upset of Clinton in the Iowa caucuses.



**A post-Iowa pre-dawn New Hampshire welcome for Bernie Sanders.** Responding to geotargeted text messages delivered to their cell phones, several hundred New Hampshire Sanders supporters turned out at 4:00 a.m. to greet their candidate on February 2, 2016. Even though he had narrowly lost to Clinton in Iowa the night before, the Sanders arrival rally made him look like the winner.

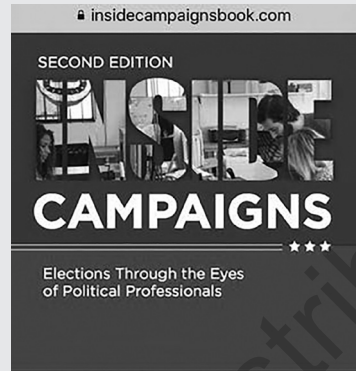
The campaign was hoping it might get fifty people to show up. Instead, several hundred cheering and sign-waving Sanders supporters turned out, creating a compelling visual for news photographers and videographers. Even though Sanders had narrowly lost to Clinton the night before, the text message-generated event enabled Bernie to arrive in New Hampshire looking like a winner, giving the Sanders campaign a momentum-building head start in the day-after-Iowa news cycle. CNN.com reported Sanders saying, “We’re going to fight really hard in New Hampshire and then we’re going to Nevada, to South Carolina, we’re doing well around the country.”<sup>3</sup> It was also good for the morale of the candidate and his staff. “You’re exhausted, pulling up into a cold airport in New Hampshire in February, and, all of a sudden, there are all these people cheering. I think it was a welcome sight,” said Goudiss.

Campaigns are improvised theater. The impromptu Sanders rally on the morning of February 2, 2016, was produced and directed by the candidate’s digital team and made possible by their opt-in text messaging program. Candidate events have always been a vital communications tool for campaigns that are always looking for new technologies to make the most of their candidate’s limited time. Campaigning for Louisiana governor in the 1930s, Huey Long invested in sound trucks with loudspeakers that would run ahead of the traveling candidate to build crowds in rural communities. As a 1948 US Senate candidate in Texas, Congressman Lyndon Johnson became the

first politician to fly by helicopter, using a bullhorn to draw small-town residents who came to see the new-fangled machine and then stayed for Johnson's speech. When Sanders flew to New Hampshire in 2016, his bullhorn was a network of cell phones built by Goodstein and Goudiss and the Sanders digital operation.

Digital media consultants like Scott Goodstein and Keegan Goudiss are just beginning to rival the traditional preeminence of the political TV ad maker. (See Appendix A, *The Rise of the Campaign Webheads*, for deeper background on Goodstein, Goudiss, and Trump's digital media manager Brad Parscale.) Much more so than any other type of political professional, media consultants are likely to be the subject of news coverage—after Trump won, Parscale was interviewed on CBS's *60 Minutes*.<sup>4</sup> Media consultants have become political celebrities themselves, and some have developed reputations (and occasionally egos) comparable to those of their candidate clients. Campaign managers—who are often younger and less experienced than the media consultant—can sometimes find themselves mediating between the opinions of their media consultants, who are juggling multiple clients and operating outside the campaign, and the opinions of those inside the campaign, including the candidate and his closest advisers.

This was the situation facing a campaign manager we'll call Chet who was running a Democratic gubernatorial campaign in Pennsylvania. With less than a week to go until election day, the campaign's media consultant and pollster were arguing that the campaign should run a new and sharply negative television ad about the Republican candidate's background. Chet agreed on the need for a hard-hitting spot, but the candidate wanted to avoid anything that could potentially backfire. Chet would have to work with the advertising consultant, the candidate, and even the candidate's family to reach a decision.



## Resources for Students and Instructors

**See the most frequently aired 2016 presidential campaign TV spots,** watch other videos referenced in this book, and find updated resources at the authors' website, [InsideCampaignsBook.com](http://InsideCampaignsBook.com).

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## THE MAKING OF “THE GURU” SPOT

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It was just days before the 1986 election, and Chet really needed a win. A few years prior, he'd quit his job as a lawyer to pursue his passion for politics with a new career as a Democratic campaign manager, but so far all he had to show were two losses. Despite these losses, Chet was developing a reputation within national Democratic circles as a competent, hard-charging, and colorful campaign manager. Earlier in the year, Chet had been given his third chance to win when he took over the long-shot Pennsylvania gubernatorial campaign of Bob Casey. Chet knew his third chance at winning could be his last.

Like his campaign manager, Casey also desperately needed a win—he'd already run for governor three times and failed. Media consultant Bob Shrum, who was an early hire for Casey, had introduced Chet to Casey during the Democratic primary campaign in hopes that Casey would replace his existing campaign manager (whom Shrum thought was “out of his depth”).<sup>5</sup> According to Shrum, the straitlaced northerner Casey immediately hit it off with the foul-mouthed southerner Chet. Despite Chet not knowing anything about Pennsylvania politics, Casey hired him as his new campaign manager. Under Chet's guidance, the Casey campaign won the Democratic primary by 16 points.

But Casey was still the underdog in the general election, where he faced the state's young, attractive lieutenant governor, Republican Bill Scranton III. Twenty years earlier, Scranton's father had been a popular moderate Republican governor of Pennsylvania and had unsuccessfully bid for the Republican presidential nomination in 1964 against conservative Barry Goldwater. The younger Scranton III was more freewheeling than his father and had been a youthful practitioner of transcendental meditation. Despite his mustache and an admission that he had used illegal drugs in college, the Republican Scranton still managed to become Pennsylvania's youngest-ever lieutenant governor in 1978. Here's how Shrum remembers the 1986 matchup for governor:

Our opponent, Lieutenant Governor Bill Scranton, was the thirty-nine-year-old son of a former governor, a Yale graduate, and a self-confessed 1960s “hippie.” Casey's hometown was named for the Scrantons; they'd been the bosses living on the hilltop, while Irish immigrants like the Caseys lived in the valley and worked in the utilities and the railroad equipment factories owned by the Scrantons. Casey had a visceral sense that a Scranton victory would be unfair: he hadn't done anything to earn it; he was being handed the governorship just because of who he was and what he'd inherited. But Bill Scranton was moderate and pro-choice, exactly the kind of Republican Pennsylvanians tended to elect.<sup>6</sup>



After years of writing speeches for Democratic notables like George McGovern and Ted Kennedy, Shrum had entered the political ad-making business just one year before the Casey-Scranton contest when he and his partners scored a win in the Virginia governor's race. Now, in 1986, business for their new firm was good; in addition to Casey, Shrum's firm was handling the TV advertising in Senate races in Maryland and California.

In Pennsylvania, Shrum's new firm was facing the established and respected partnership of media consultants Doug Bailey and John Deardourff, who had a successful track record of electing mainstream Republicans like Bill Scranton. Although Shrum was developing a reputation for the deft use of negative TV ads, Bailey and Deardourff shared a reluctance to go negative.<sup>7</sup> Two weeks before the election, Scranton announced that he was taking all his negative ads off the air, a move that earned him favorable press coverage and boosted him to an 8-point lead over Casey in tracking surveys taken by Casey's pollster Pat Caddell, who had worked for Jimmy Carter's successful 1976 campaign and in Carter's 1980 loss to Ronald Reagan.

Behind in the polls with election day fast approaching, Chet and the rest of the Casey team had been put on the defensive by Scranton's pledge to forego any attacks on Casey. The reason for Scranton's move, according to Shrum, was to force Casey to take his anti-Scranton ads off the air. The negative ads had been working, damaging Scranton's image and helping Casey erase most of Scranton's early lead, said Shrum:

We tied Scranton's thin record to his privileged background. After college, the ad said, his family bought him a chain of small-town newspapers—and the photo of a long-haired Scranton filled the screen—“but he stopped going to work and the newspapers failed.” Then as lieutenant governor, he'd missed meeting after meeting of the state commissions he was on—one of his only real duties in that office. The spot concluded with, “They gave him the job because of his father's name; the least he could do was show up for work.”<sup>8</sup>

Chet and Shrum needed to unleash a new attack ad on Scranton but were worried by a possible backlash from the state's news media. How do we reach them? What do we tell them? These questions were uppermost in the minds of Casey's campaign aides. Some people close to Casey were advocating that the campaign produce an ad to remind people of Scranton's 1978 admission of past illegal substance use, an issue that had remained largely dormant in 1986. Such a spot might pull conservative Democrats and rural voters back into the Casey camp. But Casey himself had publicly promised not to do so. Chet's hands were tied, particularly in light of Scranton's recent no-negative ads pledge.

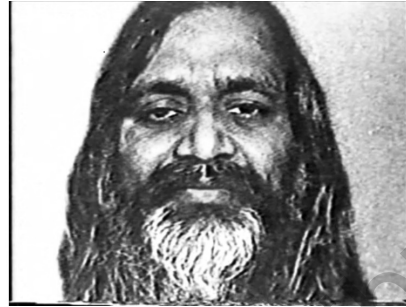
Suddenly, on a Saturday afternoon nine days before the election, Chet got the break he needed. A field staffer called to report he had a copy of a mailing from the Republican Party of Pennsylvania that attacked Casey. The mailing had been in the pipeline before Scranton made his pledge not to attack Casey. But details like that weren't a problem for Chet, who immediately had a copy of the mailer hand-delivered to a leading political reporter at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The story ran the next day, a Sunday. Chet and the Casey campaign could claim that Scranton had broken his no-negatives pledge and that Casey would be justified in launching another attack of his own. Shrum recalled how they crafted the ad, which later became known as "the guru" spot:

We had to claw our way back with one last "nuclear" attack on Scranton. We had discussed and rejected the option of an ad about his past drug use. I hated the idea. It was too risky. Instead, Caddell [the pollster] and I scripted an ad that skirted the line but didn't go over it—except visually. Scranton had been a devotee of TM (transcendental meditation) and had traveled the world with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. TM might be harmless, but it didn't sound that way to voters in the blue-collar precincts of mainstream Pennsylvania. With our editor Tony Peist, I was at Modern Video adding in Ravi Shankar-like sitar music to accompany the side-by-side pictures of the long-haired Scranton and the long-haired Maharishi when [Chet] walked in the studio to look at the spot.<sup>9</sup>

Chet agreed it was too risky to bring up the marijuana issue so late in the campaign. He also wanted to make sure that the new spot was not too subtle to get the message out in the last few days of the campaign. So Chet went rogue. Without telling Shrum or candidate Casey, Chet leaked to a reporter—through a third party—a rumor that Shrum was producing a spot about Scranton's past marijuana use. When the press clamored to know if the story was true, Chet said that he and Shrum had wanted to make the spot but that Casey was against it. Casey looked like the good actor, while Chet got fresh press coverage about the old story of Scranton's supposed marijuana use in college. The spot hadn't even aired yet, but Chet and Shrum were already generating free message impressions in the news media. Now all they needed to do was to convince Casey to put the guru spot on the air.

With Chet onboard, media consultant Shrum took the lead on selling the spot to Casey. Casey was on the campaign trail, and, in those pre-Internet and pre-cell phone days, there was no quick way to show the candidate the actual spot. In an interview with the authors, Shrum said he got Casey on the phone while he was in a Mexican restaurant about four blocks from the Philadelphia video studio where the spot was being edited. Like many campaign decisions about advertising, this one was taking place at the last possible moment. "It was





Bob Casey for Governor, 1986

**“The Guru” Spot.** The highly controversial 1986 TV spot was produced by Bob Shrum for Pennsylvania Democratic gubernatorial candidate Bob Casey. It used grainy still photos to tie the young, mustachioed Republican Bill Scranton to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, with whom Scranton had studied transcendental meditation. “The spot is mild by today’s standards,” Shrum said in an interview with the authors. See the spot at [www.nytimes.com/video/weekinreview/1194817112035/the-guru-ad.html](http://www.nytimes.com/video/weekinreview/1194817112035/the-guru-ad.html).

the Wednesday or Thursday before the election, and we had to get the spot hand-delivered to TV stations Friday morning,” said Shrum.<sup>10</sup> If the spot was not delivered by Friday, it would not air over the critical preelection weekend. Shrum remembered the conversation:

Casey was skittish about it. He was on the road. There was no way to show him the finished ad. I described it to him. He fretted that it might seem like we were bringing up drugs. The script never mentioned drugs, I said. I didn’t say that the look of the spot could evoke the drug issue without mentioning it. To defend the ad’s relevance, I went on, we had included a Scranton quote that he wanted to bring transcendental meditation to state government.<sup>11</sup>

Despite Shrum’s prodding, Casey remained skittish. Casey told Shrum that his family was strongly opposed to running the spot, particularly his eight children who were now mostly young adults. At Casey’s instruction, Shrum called one of Casey’s daughters:

She was worried sick that the spot would defeat her dad and destroy his reputation. As we talked, I realized that there were other Caseys on the call. I said bluntly that if we didn’t run the ad, her dad was going to lose. Was I sure the spot would work? one of the Caseys asked. No, but it was our best shot. Would I take responsibility for it? Yes, I said, knowing that if Casey lost, his “unscrupulous” consultants would be excoriated anyway.<sup>12</sup>

Shortly after his call with Casey's children, Shrum got the word: The candidate had approved the spot. The final edits were made, and videotape copies of the spot were rushed to television stations on the Friday morning before the Tuesday election.

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## JAMES CARVILLE'S FIRST WIN

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Casey's campaign manager—whom we've been calling Chet—was in fact Chester James Carville, the Louisiana "Raging Cajun" who went on to run Bill Clinton's winning 1992 presidential campaign (to learn more about Carville's career and the 1992 Clinton campaign, see Chapter 11, Strategy Enforcer). Thanks to Carville's and Shrum's shrewd decisions, the closing days of the campaign were dominated by talk about Casey's guru spot and by news stories about Scranton's drug use. On Tuesday afternoon at Casey headquarters in Scranton, while Pennsylvania voters were going to polls, Carville got some bad news: The first early round of network exit polls showed Casey behind. Carville ordered that Casey field staff and supporters who were driving to Scranton for the election night party should be diverted to Philadelphia, a Casey stronghold, where they could knock on doors and boost turnout. Carville knew this would make little or no difference, but he had to do something.

The extra canvassing in Philadelphia turned out to be unnecessary, and Casey's election night party in Scranton was a good one. Over the course of a couple of weeks, Casey had gone from being 8 points behind in his own polling to winning on election day by 2 points. Ten years later, after he had successfully managed Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign, Carville wrote about how he felt that Pennsylvania election night in 1986:

What I felt was not in any way the ecstasy of victory. It was just the sheer relief that I could go home for Christmas and not be embarrassed. I called my mother. "Mama we did it! We did it!" Governor of Pennsylvania, that was big. It dawned on me that I wasn't always going to be a failure.<sup>13</sup>

Carville says Casey was successful because his campaign's messaging revolved around a consistent central theme:

To me, the campaign turned into this heroic struggle between the son of a coal miner and the son of a coal mine owner, between people who were tenacious and resilient and those who had everything given to them. Holy Cross [Casey] versus Yale [Scranton]. This was a race of significance. Everything got viewed through that filter, and anything that didn't fit I just defined as information that the elites and the privileged class were trying to force-feed the populace.<sup>14</sup>

Shrum told us that the guru spot was successful because, on the eve of the election, it reinforced the campaign's central message as just described by Carville. After the campaign was over, according to Shrum, Governor Casey developed a lifelong aversion to hearing or talking about the guru spot: "[He] especially resented statements like one in *Wikipedia* that it 'depicted Scranton as a dope-smoking hippie.' It didn't, but that was a technical truth."<sup>15</sup>

Did the guru spot make a difference between losing and winning? "I believe the spot made a difference. In a race that close, everything makes a difference," answered Shrum. Years later, John Deardourff, Scranton's media consultant, recalled that the guru spot represented a watershed for campaign manager James Carville as well. "In a way," Deardourff said, "it launched Carville on the idea that this negative stuff worked. It continues to work."

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## WHAT DO WE TELL VOTERS?

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Campaign managers must build a messaging portfolio that includes both positive and negative content. They must also anticipate their opponent's messaging. In 2002, Graham Shafer, who ran Republican Van Hilleary's campaign for Tennessee governor, developed a "message grid" that consisted of some basic questions. The questions sum up how most campaigns approach decisions about messaging. The questions included the following: "What's your candidate going to say about themselves? What's your candidate going to say about the opponent? What's the opponent going to say about your candidate? And what is the opponent going to say about the opponent?" During the campaign itself, when Shafer and his team ran negative ads, they were sure to check what their ads were saying against the themes featured in their message grid. They had to be sure that they were sticking to their core arguments and issues.<sup>16</sup>

"Where do we meet that intersection of what we say about ourselves and what we're going to say about the opponent?" he and his colleagues asked themselves. "And what they're going to say about themselves?" Shafer's team also returned to glance at the message grid whenever their opponents launched attacks against Hillary. "I'm a big fan of the counterpunch when it comes to negative advertising," Shafer assured us. He argued that "a lot of times that counterpunch can be much more effective than the initial punch." But the punches thrown—the war about the campaigns' messages—were largely conditioned and driven by the message grid that Shafer and his team had initially developed.<sup>17</sup> The typical campaign message grid or box looks something like Table 8.1.

There is no magic formula that managers have when crafting an effective message grid. In fact, almost every campaign starts out with a blank message board. Rarely, campaign managers told us, do they have preordained messages they have successfully hammered out before the campaign is even launched. The

**TABLE 8.1**

Campaign Message Grid/Box

|             | <b>Us</b>                  | <b>Them</b>                        |
|-------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Us</b>   | What do we say about us?   | What do we say about them?         |
| <b>Them</b> | What do they say about us? | What do they say about themselves? |

general political environment in a particular year and a particular state or district sets the context, and the campaign manager must work with his or her team and the candidate to figure out what they are going to tell the voters—what they will say about themselves and what they will say about their opponents.

As our campaign flowchart showed you (see Chapter 1), all campaigns have to answer some variation of the five core questions—(1) Who are our target voters? (2) How do we reach them? (3) What do we tell them? (4) How are we doing? (5) What are they doing? Once campaign managers have done the math and figured out what voters they need and how their campaign is going to reach the targeted voters, they need to figure out what goes inside the campaign’s communications box. What, in other words, are they going to tell the people?

The campaign message is really the stuff in the message box—what the campaign says about the candidate and what the campaign tells voters about their opponent. The box is supposed to offer campaigns a consistent message and a rubric that instills “message discipline.” Still, all messages must be at least a bit fluid too, in response to how their side is faring in the race and what the opposition is saying and how it is performing.

It’s also true that microtargeting—which has recently become a prized tool of most campaigns—makes little sense if there is no relevant message reaching targeted voters. The message box can be and often is multidimensional. It is both the box writ large for the entire campaign and the box that features the messages targeted to specific groups the campaign is trying to mobilize and sway. Let’s say a Democratic campaign manager is trying to peel off a handful of Republican voters. Well, she needs to figure out what the campaign is going to say to persuade these skeptical voters to support her side. Now let’s say a Republican campaign manager is attempting to increase turnout among her side’s partisans. She needs to figure out which messages will be the most effective way of boosting turnout.

In Chapter 2, we showed you that campaigns can get to 50 plus 1 by some combination of turning out their own partisan supporters, persuading fence-sitters to vote for their side, depressing the other side’s turnout, peeling off some of their supporters, or expanding the size of the electorate in ways that

favor them. Thus, the messages can be calibrated according to which of these five strategies the campaign is using. Put differently, campaigns figure out what they will tell voters after assessing the five options for achieving victory that are available to them. Campaign managers understand that messaging, like campaigns overall, is fluid and that they must also continually ask, “How are we doing?” and “What are they doing?”—and if necessary readjust their messages and strategies based on the answers to these core questions.

Still, it would be a mistake if students finished this chapter thinking that the message is totally malleable. It is not. Most campaign managers don’t want a message that drastically shifts depending on who’s being targeted or what’s happening in the world. According to the campaign managers we surveyed, campaigns lacking a consistent message are often losing campaigns—witness Hillary Clinton’s shifting messages in 2016 versus Trump’s consistent “Make America Great Again” message.

Campaigns, as Michael Bloomberg’s 2005 campaign manager Kevin Sheekey told us, need a “story arc.” And on that race, he “started developing themes early.” Sheekey had “to figure out who our electorate was and how we were going to target them and how we were going to move them.” Sheekey and his team went so far as to design attack ads themselves to simulate what they thought their opponents would throw at them—so they could anticipate the most effective responses.<sup>18</sup> As we noted previously, campaign managers prize message discipline—with good reason. If they can force voters and the media to focus on the issues that most advantage their side, they then increase their odds of influencing elections on the margins—and it’s the marginal variance that often determines who loses and wins the election.

Some political professionals (including the authors) are wary of consultants who use a simplistic “box” to demonstrate how they are going to win the election. As a rule, it’s smart to beware of consultants wielding boxes—and we try to spare you the use of many boxes in this book. That said, the message box is a case of a box that actually makes some strategic sense, and it is often effective. Above all, though, a message box is used by many campaigns as they determine what they are going to tell voters—and attempt to stay “on message” during the ups and downs of the contest.

As Shafer argued, a message grid can help the campaign stick to the issues that resonate with voters and on which they perform well. Further, a grid can enable campaigns to anticipate what their opponent will be saying regarding those same issues—and how to respond swiftly and forcefully.

Once an effective message box is set and the themes are in place, a campaign can then combine that message box with its various demographic and political targets. This will help a campaign make sure it is right on the issues that are most important to the people in the areas where it counts the most.

Let's keep in mind that determining the message is a dynamic process. In most campaigns, each side must decide for itself what the campaign is going to be about. Often, they agree on the focus of the message war. During George W. Bush's 2004 election contest, for example, both the Kerry and Bush campaigns concluded that the campaign was going to be about Kerry, the challenger, rather than the incumbent, Bush.<sup>19</sup> This seemed like an odd conclusion at first blush, but it actually made perfect sense. In 2004, President George W. Bush had approval ratings that were virtually impossible to move. He was well known and admired by many Republicans and disliked by many Democrats. At the same time, Kerry, despite being a long-serving senator, was still relatively unknown to the American electorate.

The Bush team set out to define Kerry for the voters before Kerry could define himself. Their goal was to portray Kerry as a flip-flopping liberal who couldn't be trusted in times of crisis. Thus, the two campaigns agreed that the message war wasn't about Bush but about Kerry. Kerry pollster Mark Mellman explained that "Kerry was the variable. He was the thing that could be changed . . . and therefore, even though the election is not primarily about John Kerry, what gets communicated in the campaign is primarily about John Kerry because that's the one place where there's room for change."<sup>20</sup>

The 2004 ad-tracking data demonstrate how the negative messaging was focused much more on Kerry's statements and qualifications than on Bush's. Only 2.4 percent of Kerry's ads focused solely on George W. Bush, whereas 59.5 percent of Bush's ads focused solely on John Kerry. The Kerry campaign spent 61.8 percent of its advertising talking about Kerry's positives, whereas the Bush campaign spent only 26.9 percent of its advertising talking about their candidate's positive characteristics.<sup>21</sup>

But did any of this back and forth even matter? Kerry lost to Bush by nearly 120,000 votes in Ohio, which, had it gone for Kerry, would have flipped the election. Bush's campaign ran an ad showing Kerry windsurfing as a narrator highlighted Kerry's inconsistencies on the Iraq War among other key issues. A third-party group, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, also questioned Kerry's war credentials and his patriotism. These negative ads did not by themselves win the election for Bush. But in a tight contest, they probably mattered, raising enough doubts about Kerry that made it harder for him to gain separation from Bush. If Bush hadn't defined Kerry first, could Kerry have won the election? We'll never know, but it's not unthinkable.

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## HOW THE MESSAGE MATTERS

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Here, we need to ask if the message matters, and if it does matter, how does it matter? How do campaigns determine what they are going to tell voters? Is negative advertising effective? If so, how? When does it backfire? What do America's campaign managers think?



As we discussed in Chapter 2, some scholarly theory holds that political messages have little to no impact on campaigns and election results. Even much-discussed negative ads, scholars say, don't really affect who wins and who loses elections. According to this theory, each campaign is so well armed that typically their ad barrage is equal in firepower and offsets the other side. Scholars argue that even if this were not true, folks tuned in to Rush Limbaugh or Rachel Maddow on MSNBC likely pay attention to those shows because of their strong partisan predispositions. And ads that reach fewer ideological voters rarely penetrate so much that they turn out unlikely voters and persuade voters to vote a particular way, other scholars have said.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, pundits see in political ads and message moments a series of game changers that determine the election's outcome. Popular culture, as well, is equally off base when films and TV shows depict political advertising wizards working under the cloak of night to manipulate the masses into voting for a candidate based on fundamental deceptions. Consider, for instance, Robert De Niro's character in *Wag the Dog*. The famous actor portrays a message maven who orchestrates a fake war with Albania to distract attention from a president up for reelection after being caught in a sex scandal.

Neither the scholarly theories nor the popular image fully captures the true impact messages can, and do, have on the electorate during the closest races. If the margins matter, then messages matter. But they don't always matter; don't necessarily matter in the same way on every race; and have different effects, depending on the circumstances. Still, there is no better way to affect a campaign's share and performance during a hard-fought election than to use smart messages targeted at the right voters, backed up by the right amount of resources, to help campaigns reach their vote goal of 50 percent plus 1. And, as we saw in Chapter 7, paid television advertising remains the overwhelming focus of such efforts, although messages delivered on digital platforms and via social media are becoming more important all the time.

Candidate speeches, press releases, e-mails, tweets, and yard signs can all motivate people to donate money, volunteer, and vote. But it is the televised ads that come over broadcast (and cable, to a lesser extent) channels that traditionally have had the most significant effect on the all-important margins of the electorate. Messages communicated through televised ads enable candidates to define their opponents (as Bush did with Kerry), defend their own records, connect their biographies to voters' lives, and articulate what they would do in office. But there is now a robust debate about the right mix of television and digital advertising campaigns should use on Facebook, Snapchat, and YouTube among other social media sites in order to reach their targeted voters. For example, in their winning 2016 campaign, the Trump forces spent an unprecedented 50 percent of their budget on digital advertising.

But what is a campaign message? Almost all campaigns come down to a debate in which one side is for change and the other is for the status quo—as Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign famously framed it, “hope and change” versus the status quo. James Carville told us that electoral politics has long been about this basic change versus more-of-the-same proposition. “The first guy that stood up in the town square in Athens said something to the effect that this election’s really a choice, you know, between somebody that wants to do this and I want to do that,” Carville explained. “And the campaign fifty years from now is going to be that.”<sup>23</sup>

A message is also part of an extended argument over which side is best suited to be entrusted with holding office and wielding power. One campaign manager we spoke to asserted that in order to win over “a persuadable voter . . . you need somebody that has argument and an agenda that will win them over,” and that means “having a . . . sound message, a good agenda, and a person at the top that people can believe in and trust.”<sup>24</sup>

Now, let’s turn to the matter of how campaign messages get developed. Contrary to impressions fostered by *House of Cards* and other popular TV shows, messages are not created by a single Machiavellian campaign brain; rather, as campaign managers told us, mostly messages get developed through a series of conversations held between candidates, their families, campaign managers, pollsters, and media advisers. There is no formula that all campaign managers follow when they go about figuring out “what we tell them.” Still, as a rule of thumb, drafts of messages get tested in focus and dial groups and are refined through field experiments, with polls and Internet surveys, and opposition research and counteropposition research. Not all campaign messages have the same audience, either.

Some messages are particularly aimed at mobilizing one side’s partisans to show up and vote, whereas others target so-called swing voters who are unsure which candidate they support but are likely to show up and vote on election day. And a campaign’s message can be adjusted over time, depending on what opponents are doing and what third-party groups (mostly super PACs) are doing. Achieving message discipline while also retaining sufficient flexibility to adjust when needed is a key to many successful campaign operations.

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## WHY CAMPAIGNS “GO NEGATIVE”

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And let’s recall that not all campaign messages are bleak and harsh; in fact, some are more inspirational (think *West Wing*, the TV series) than cynical (*House of Cards*). Some of the campaign managers we talked to argued that a forward-looking message—defining their own brand, their own agenda, what they would do in office—was as important as “going negative” on the

opposition. Campaigns that lacked what former president George H. W. Bush called “the vision thing” typically deprive themselves of a positive rationale for winning the job. Franklin Roosevelt’s 1932 pledge to enact a “New Deal” was a potent catchall that rallied Americans fearful during a great economic collapse. Ronald Reagan’s 1980 reminder of America as “a shining city on a hill” evoked national greatness and called for a return to prosperity. Trump, for all his controversial campaign statements and bluster, vowed that he would “make America great again.”

But, if close campaigns must make the race about choices, then they must almost always go negative at some stage of the race in order to underscore differences and gain separation from opponents. And let’s not forget that all negative ads are not alike. They have distinct tone, themes, and emphases. Some negative messages are contrast spots that highlight the differences between the candidates on particular issues (contrast ads), whereas other negative ads are efforts to eviscerate the opponent’s character, making her unelectable. Although some Americans believe that campaigns have become harsher, more personal in recent years, since the nation’s founding, campaigns have been focused on gaining separation from one’s opponent to affect the vote total at the margins. Rick Ridder, who managed Colorado Democrat Diana Degette’s congressional races, told us the following:

If I got it right, within the first few chapters of the Bible, God goes pretty negative on Adam and Eve. I think it’s how you go negative. You have to make sure that it’s accurate and you have to make sure that you detail precisely what it is. You know, when they uncovered Pompeii, they found on a wall that had been covered in rubble for a thousand years the words, “Crassus is a crook.” Crassus had turned out to be a local mayor. And as early as that time, you know, 100 AD or whatever, they were going negative on their politicians.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, the early Republic was replete with examples of negative campaigning, making it something of a national pastime. In 1796, Federalist John Adams attacked Democrat Thomas Jefferson as an “atheist,” “anarchist,” “demagogue,” “coward,” and “trickster.” In 1800, Jefferson’s supporters started a rumor that John Adams, Jefferson’s presidential campaign opponent, intended to marry his son off to George III’s daughter and restore British rule to the Americas. Adams supporters then cast Jefferson as “the son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father . . . raised wholly on hoe-cake made of coarse-ground southern corn, bacon and hominy, with an occasional change of fricasseed bull-frog.” (George W. Bush never accused John Kerry of eating “hoe-cake.”) In 1828, Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams ran against each other for president

and ended up attacking each other's wives; Jackson's supporters claimed that Louisa Adams was an illegitimate child who had been having sex with Adams before marriage. Adams supporters charged that Rachel Jackson married Jackson before her previous marriage had legally ended.<sup>26</sup> In 1884, Republican James Blaine suffered attacks when he refused to distance himself from a Protestant minister's anti-Catholic slurs, including that the Democrats were the party of "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion."<sup>27</sup> Grover Cleveland, his opponent, was assailed for having fathered an illegitimate child, leading to Blaine's campaign slogan, "Ma, ma, where's my pa?"<sup>28</sup>

But why do campaigns still use negative messages and advertising in particular? And how do such messages affect the election at the vote margins? Do these messages truly matter? How so? Campaign managers argued that simply by affixing the negative label to an ad, it is another way of saying, "any ad run by my opponent that I don't like." But calling a message "negative" reveals little about its taste, accuracy, or purpose. Some positive ads are wildly misleading, whereas some negative ads are calm, factual critiques of an opponent's record.

Negative ads, campaign managers told us, serve several purposes. They often feature more truthful information than positive ads. They give voters information about the key differences among the campaigns and signal to voters that the stakes are high and the election is consequential. In 2008, Hillary Clinton ran the "3:00 a.m. phone call" ad that questioned Barack Obama's experience in international politics.<sup>29</sup> The message was deemed a "negative" ad—yet was it a disservice to the public to challenge the qualifications of the man who would later become the leader of the free world?<sup>30</sup> Similarly, during the 2008 campaign between Obama and McCain, was it "negative" of Obama to question McCain's apparent lack of interest in the economy?<sup>31</sup>

Most campaign managers agree that positive ads—although important—are often less impactful than negative spots. According to Vanderbilt political scientist John Geer, "If we only listen to the candidates' positive advertising, we would believe we have a choice among these perfect candidates who are going to balance all budgets, solve all educational problems, and end the problem of global warming within four years."<sup>32</sup> Geer, who authored a book called *In Defense of Negativity*, added, "That's a preposterous position. You need the other side of the coin. And the other side comes from these attack ads."<sup>33</sup> And most campaign managers agree with that.

Campaign managers are also acutely aware that much of the public has a love-hate relationship with negative televised advertising. But managers told us that these ads could be highly effective in focus groups and at least partly responsible for why they both lost and won particular races. Steven Law, who managed Mitch McConnell's 1990 Kentucky Senate campaign, described how he and his campaign team cut a series of negative spots and tested them on focus groups.

# MURDER WILL OUT!!

**Truth is mighty and shall prevail!**

Four years ago I charged General Andrew Jackson, in an address printed and published in Nashville, with various acts of cruelty and dishonesty when acting officially. His cruelty has been established beyond doubt by the Documents furnished from the War Department, in ordering the execution of six innocent militia men and twelve regular soldiers, the first on the 22d and the other order for the twelve dated the 28th January 1815, in the midst of his rejoicing in New Orleans and after the defeat on the 8th Jan. and retreat of the enemy. Seven or eight of these regulars were shot almost in secret near this place by a few men, separately, at one stake, their blood running together and they were buried in one grave. They shot the first man, named Jones, about 12 o'clock (he had to be shot twice) and did not finish the butchery of the whole until near night. A part of these regulars were poor men from Dixon county, who first volunteered for a short time, but a dispute arising respecting the length of their term, they were frightened to enlist; but considering themselves treated ill, they attempted to procure their liberty by desertion in a fit of desperation. They soon repented, and of their own accord went and delivered themselves up to Col. Joslin of the militia, whom they knew, and he delivered them to their officers in Nashville. Jackson ordered a Court Martial; they were found guilty, and notwithstanding their voluntary surrender to Col. Joslin they were ordered to execution by an order from Jackson, dated at New Orleans, in the midst of his rejoicings, without giving the President of the United States time to interfere and pardon them according to his duty.

As to the charge of dishonesty, I have just completely trapped him. I charged him with contriving ways to get land slipped into his own or his friends' hands when he was acting in a public capacity as Commissioner to treat with the Indians. This I offered to prove in the case of Colbert's reserve on Tennessee river, by evidence of James Jackson, if he would call on him to speak out and show papers which I believe he holds, in Gen. Jackson's own hand writing, and signed by him. I did prove the guilt and connexion of John Coffee, Surveyor General and kinsman of General Jackson, and that of Andrew Jackson the General and Commissioner, and James Jackson, a private gentleman, as well as that of Senator Eaton, by a chain of circumstances of irresistible weight, to their faces, and have published the same to the world. I do not think that Eaton was to have had much, if any, of his pay out the reserve. The three others named above, Andrew Jackson, James Jackson, and John Coffee, were to have had all or nearly all of the reserved land. The whole of this villany, I am confident, can be proved if Gen. Jackson would call on James Jackson to speak all he knows and show all the papers he has in possession on the subject. I have travelled 200 miles to catch in this town of Nashville, at this time, James Jackson and John Coffee, who live in Alabama, and Senator Eaton and General Andrew Jackson, who live near this place within three hours ride, and also to catch all of their eighteen Committee gentlemen, all of whom I have found here present, or in the immediate vicinity; and I have been here at the City Hotel thirteen days, charging them to their faces in print and by word of mouth with this monstrous act of villany, and I have been and continue to so charge; and I have offered, and I hereby again offer to be shot on the Public Square in Nashville, on condition that James Jackson's evidence shall be called for by General Jackson and heard, and a fair exhibition by him of every thing in his power concerning the above transaction. And I further offer to acquit all of guilt unless it is irresistibly and conclusively proved.

General Jackson and his Committee have not dared and will not dare to make the call, and I hereby PROCLAIM the whole affair to the WORLD in its nakedness. May God save our country!

**JESSE BENTON.**

CITY HOTEL, Nashville, Oct. 13th, 1828.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Printed Ephemera Collection

An anti-Andrew Jackson editorial from 1828—an early example of negative messaging.

He was surprised when he learned how voters responded, “by giving a high believability score to our most negative ad, which was what we ended up putting on the air. The most negative ad had the most concrete information and that’s what [the voters] responded to. It was the hard information in the ad rather than the harsher tone.”<sup>34</sup> One southern campaign manager said that negative ads were essential to informing voters about the choices they faced. “I would be perfectly happy if every voter out there would just take it upon themselves to go to the candidates’ websites, to read the articles about them, do their own research on it, and make up their own minds,” this manager told us. “But they’re not. I mean,



we're lucky if we get 50 percent of the electorate to actually turn out to vote, let alone how much smaller the person that actually takes the time to research their own candidates before they vote, as opposed to those who just vote straight ticket as to the ones you actually can affect with your own advertising. So, you know, you pull out every weapon in your arsenal [including] . . . running negative ads."

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## A "HUGGING CONTEST"? WHY NEGATIVE ADS AFFECT ELECTION MARGINS

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Managers further said that negative ads were often highly effective at contrasting their campaigns against their opponents', gaining separation for their candidates in small and crucial ways on the electoral margins.

Casey Phillips, who managed Delbert Hosemann's 2007 Mississippi Secretary of State campaign, spoke for other managers when he called negative advertising "a necessary evil." "Every campaign that is behind has to use it to close the gap," he told us. Phillips added that "there's really no such thing" as going too negative. "In this country, I am convinced that people secretly love gossip and negative and nasty campaigns, but they just can't admit it to themselves. Football games and boxing matches draw huge crowds and they are rough; how many people could you pack into a stadium for a hugging contest? The future of our country is at stake, don't be afraid to figuratively punch your opponent in the face."<sup>35</sup>

Again, it's important to recall that not every negative message is the same. Based on our survey of campaign managers, there is no iron law about how campaigns are best able to use negative ads and messages. It really depends on the circumstances, as we showed you in the 2004 case of Bush and Kerry. What's surprising is that numerous campaign managers reported to us that in their extensive experience, candidates were reluctant to "go negative" on their opponents. They had little affection for the jugular. Yet they also tended to relax their inhibitions once they came under attack from the other side.

Mike Hamilton ran Alabama Republican Martha Roby's 2010 congressional campaign, and he revealed that Roby was opposed to running "harsh negative ads from the get-go. . . . Martha's test was that, 'I want to be able to go to the Publix grocery store with my kids after the elections and still be able to have a smile on and have people respect me.'" So, Hamilton says, the campaign never unleashed harshly negative spots, although he was able to persuade Roby to nationalize the race by running "a harder-hitting contrast ad" against her opponent Bobby Bright, a Democrat who had voted for Nancy Pelosi to be the House Speaker. "Very few [candidates] start off a race saying, 'Hey, I want to go for the jugular,'" Hamilton concluded.<sup>36</sup> Roby won 51 percent on election day, hitting her campaign's goal of 50 percent plus 1. The ad helped Roby gain separation,



nationalizing the contest and enabling her to unseat a Democratic incumbent in an anti-Democratic year.

Campaign manager Casey Phillips echoed Hamilton's observation. "As a campaign manager, the hardest thing about negative advertising is getting your candidate to go along with it, because if you're a journeyman like me, you can be out the door and on to the next state and the next race the day after the election," Phillips told us. "The candidate and his or her family have to continue to exist in those communities and make a living win or lose. . . . It's a game . . . with real-life consequences."<sup>37</sup>

There is no formula for creating messages that affect the margins that often decide elections. Some ads that are expected to be effective ultimately fizzle, whereas others that might seem odd at first blush ultimately resonate. In 2010, Republican California Senate candidate Carly Fiorina ran what has since come to be known as the "demon sheep" ad against her primary opponent, Tom Campbell. To make the case that Campbell was a "fiscal conservative in name only (FCINO)," Fiorina's ad featured an individual dressed as a sheep with glowing red eyes, crawling on all fours among other actual sheep. Although the ad puzzled political professionals, political newcomer Fiorina was able to defeat former congressman Campbell before losing in the general election to her opponent Senator Barbara Boxer, a longtime Democrat. Did the ad, which never actually aired on television, change the primary election outcome? Probably not. But trailing Campbell in the polls, Fiorina spent millions of her own fortune on ads that helped persuade Republican primary voters that she was authentically conservative. The demon sheep spot earned news coverage and shored up her credentials while calling Campbell's into question.<sup>38</sup>

Other factors compel campaign managers to endorse and convince candidates to accept the fact that they must sooner or later in tight races "go negative." For example, some campaigns deliberately make the election a "mudfest" right out of the gate to bait their opponents into getting into the mud with them. Some campaign managers believe that mudfests leave voters unhappy with both sides and lead to a low-turnout election that aids the incumbent; if fewer new voters turn out, there is less chance of a surprise.

In 2008, when Democrats swept to power across the country, Missouri Republican representative Sam Graves faced Democratic challenger Kay Barnes in what was expected to be a tough election fight. Yet Graves's campaign was led by Jeff Roe, Graves's former chief of staff who was no stranger to flinging mud. In 2006, Roe and Graves had charged that a sixty-three-year-old grandmother who was running against Graves was actually a pornographer on the theory that she had once sold advertising for the science magazine *Omni*, which at the time was owned by *Penthouse*.<sup>39</sup> In 2008, Roe was again able to lure the opposition, this time Kay Barnes, into a negative slugfest.



Carly Fiorina produced a famous ad against primary opponent Tom Campbell that featured “demon sheep.”

The strategy was effective. Graves likened Barnes to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi with ads denouncing the “San Francisco lifestyle” and one spot that accused Pelosi of “throwing a party for Kay Barnes.”<sup>40</sup> Barnes, for her part, ran an ad that called Graves “pathetic.” Election day wasn’t even close. In a very good year for Democrats, the Republican, Graves, crushed Barnes, 59.4 percent to 36.9 percent.<sup>41</sup> By going negative early and turning the campaign into a mudfight, Graves was able to tarnish both sides and do what he needed to do to hold on to his job. It may have been winning ugly, but the negative onslaught worked.

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## WHEN GOING NEGATIVE BACKFIRES

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Just as no sure formula exists for going negative, sometimes negative messages also backfire. Mike Hamilton argued that “harsh” and “personal” attack ads were more politically dangerous to run than “issue-based,” “contrast” ads. “You can go over the line and it can backfire,” he told us.<sup>42</sup> Other managers argued that if one candidate is ahead in the polls, running negative ads can have an adverse effect on the election results. Michael Sullivan, who ran Republican Patrick Hughes’s losing 2010 US Senate primary race, argued that going negative when a campaign led in the polls can boost the name ID of the opposition. Sullivan recalled working on a campaign where the campaign manager wanted to go negative, and Sullivan opposed doing so. Going negative, he argued, would raise the opponent’s name ID and remind voters that they had “another option.” Another lesson Sullivan has learned is that when campaigns turn negative, the

campaign becomes a tussle over “who can seem the least dirty.” “You can win on good advertising and a good candidate,” he concluded.<sup>43</sup>

Negative ads are also held to a higher standard, and that’s a positive development overall in the world of campaigns, argued campaign manager Steven Law.<sup>44</sup> Today’s press corps, Law reasoned, will not allow campaigns to “just run a spurious ad” and get away with it. Law hypothesized this about voters:

[They have become] much more sophisticated consumers of political information than they used to [be] largely because of the Internet. . . . I think it’s harder to move people than it used to be because they have information sources that they’re shaped by that your advertising may impact or may not. . . . I think it’s much more of an art than it used to be when you could just run 1,000 points behind a negative ad and you could—as [the late Republican ad maker] Greg Stevens used to joke, “make it true.”<sup>45</sup>

He added that “the old . . . three negative points on a graph with an ugly picture of your opponent doesn’t work anymore.” Voters don’t necessarily know all of the facts, Law said, “but they have deeply ingrained perceptions that shape and condition how they view things.”<sup>46</sup>

Another check against unrestrained negativity is the voters themselves—if a candidate attacks in an overly personal manner, crosses an ethical line, or blatantly lies, their campaigns can be engulfed in negative attention, and they can suffer at the polls. One example of breaching such boundaries occurred in the 2010 California congressional race, when Republican state assemblyman Van Tran came up with a novel way to turn voters against his opponent, Senator Loretta Sanchez (D-CA). Tran sent out mailers with the words, “Open for a fragrance sample of ‘Loretta, the Scent of Washington’” printed on the outside.<sup>47</sup> When the recipient opened the mail piece, they were assaulted with the smell of human feces, and “Something smells rotten about Loretta. It’s the stench of Washington.”<sup>48</sup> (One GOP staffer told the *Atlantic Monthly* “it is a horrible odor—like a combination of five or six of the worst possible scents you can imagine.”)<sup>49</sup> When the mailer hit voters’ doors (and olfactory senses), they were aghast. Many complained that it even made their house smell foul while sitting in the trash. Tran ended up losing to Sanchez 51 percent to 42 percent in a district that used to be reliably Republican (although it is now 69 percent Hispanic, a mostly Democratic voting bloc).<sup>50</sup> Had Tran’s mailer never existed, Sanchez still might have won the election, but the margin probably would have been tighter than 9 percent.

Negative advertising—this time by a third-party group—can also unintentionally do damage to candidates who have no control over the third-party messaging. Recall that the campaign manager plays many roles and that campaigns are seeking to answer five core questions to affect the election at the margins. But it's equally important to note that much remains beyond any campaign's control, and that's become especially true with the rise of super PACs, which are essentially third-party groups funded by anonymous donors that engage in mobilization and persuasion activities (through television advertising) yet aren't allowed to coordinate with the official campaigns.

One glaring instance of a third-party ad that backfired happened during a 2011 special election for a Los Angeles-area congressional district. In June, a group called Right Turn USA created a controversial web video charging that Democratic candidate Janice Hahn supported a program that allowed former gang members to receive time off prison sentences for mentoring current gang members.<sup>51</sup>

Yet the video, which some have labeled the most offensive campaign ad of all time, featured two black males shooting machine guns into the air while stuffing dollar bills into a stripper's underwear. There is simulated oral sex, while the lyrics "give me your cash, bitch!" play over a hip-hop beat. Pictures of famous outlaws (including, for some reason, Charles Manson) pop up on the screen, insinuating that Hahn's support of the mentoring program meant she favored sending taxpayer money to violent criminals.<sup>52</sup>

Naturally, the web video created a firestorm of controversy, generating nearly a half million views in its first week online. Hahn's Republican challenger, Craig Huey, quickly denounced the ad and attempted to distance himself from it. But his comments had no impact. In a shrewd political move, Hahn actually tried to keep the web ad in the news, filing an official complaint with the Federal Election Commission (FEC) tying Huey's campaign to it.<sup>53</sup>

The web video's producer, a controversial filmmaker named Ladd Ehlinger Jr., who on his website compares himself to filmmaker Orson Welles, complained that Huey was "missing an opportunity" by not embracing his message.<sup>54</sup> The controversy undercut Huey's image and helped sink his chances. On July 13, Hahn defeated Huey by a 55 percent to 45 percent margin. Third-party ads are clear cases where campaign managers lack control over what outside groups are doing. They serve as stark reminders that as much as campaign managers seek to influence share and performance, they sometimes have little control over the actions of third parties and events in a city, state, or country that nobody controls.

One northeastern campaign manager told us that negative ads backfiring were a growing problem, and he approached his campaigns by sticking to some advice he received when he was starting his career.



Two alleged “gangsters” stuff money into a stripper’s underwear in this 2010 anti-Janice Hahn ad run by Right Turn USA.

The first person to ever tell me about messaging said, “Don’t ever lie in a negative attack because that’ll actually hurt you more than it hurts them.” And so I’ve never put anything out there that’s untruthful. I’ve never put anything out that’s completely slanderous or just making stuff up.<sup>55</sup>

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## GOING NEGATIVE IN A PRIMARY

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How the message matters in a primary differs from how it matters in a general election. In a general election, going negative on an opponent is like checkers. One side attacks and hopes the opponent’s voters either switch to that side’s candidate, decide not to vote at all, or their partisans are even more motivated to vote. But going negative in a crowded primary is more like chess than checkers. If one candidate attacks another candidate, there’s no guarantee voters will switch over to the candidate responsible for the ad—they may have a number of other moves they can make. Furthermore, when a candidate attacks another candidate in a primary, it’s typically true that the person is attacking someone with many of the same policy positions that the attacker holds. The result is that both attacker and the object of the attack end up getting tarnished in the eyes of the primary electorate. And primaries tend to be such low-turnout affairs that the margins, at times, can matter even more than in some general elections. This fear of Republican-on-Republican fratricide partially explains why so many GOP presidential candidates were reluctant to launch negative barrages against

front-runner Donald Trump during the 2016 GOP primary. They wanted Trump out of the race but feared that if they attacked they'd go down with him.

Katie Packer, who served as Mitt Romney's deputy campaign manager in 2012, viewed Trump's front-runner candidacy with growing concern; she thought Trump was not a true Republican and unfit for the presidency, and wanted him out of the race. Trump had a real shot at winning both the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary, however. Back-to-back victories in those states would make him unstoppable, Packer figured. In an interview with the authors, Packer explained how she ran an anti-Trump super PAC that took on Trump in Iowa. With funding from the super-wealthy Ricketts family, Packer's super PAC "did a full-court press. We were on television, we were in the mailboxes, we were on the phones, we were online. It was a fully three-dimensional campaign, with earned media support, for three straight weeks, in a state that's pretty small."

Their message, as she described it, "was one, Trump isn't really a Republican, and two, he's kind of an embarrassment." Packer's group drew on opposition research based on Trump's past statements and ran waves of advertisements that "showed him being on both sides of virtually every issue that matters to Republicans."

We had lots and lots of video of him saying he was pro-life, saying he was pro-choice; saying he was for the Second Amendment, and saying he wanted to curb their rights; saying that we would repeal Obamacare, saying we need to have a national health care system paid for by the government. We had him, on video, virtually on every side of every issue. We also had him on both sides of immigration, which was his signature issue. He had kind of catapulted to the top on this notion of Mr. Tough Guy on immigration. We had him on video saying, "You can't deport people that have lived here for a long time. You have to have a path to citizenship."<sup>56</sup>

Trump ultimately finished second in Iowa, about 4 percentage points behind Texas senator Ted Cruz. Packer, for one, thought the super PAC attacks on Trump generated enough questions about Trump's Republican bona fides that he couldn't prevail. But Packer's group only had enough money for Iowa and couldn't duplicate the feat in New Hampshire or anywhere else. "We just never really had the resources, early on, to be successful beyond Iowa. The next place that we were able to marshal significant resources was Florida, but it was too late."<sup>57</sup> Trump won the nomination, thanks partly to other candidates' reticence about attacking him in the primary and the inability of any super PAC to sustain its anti-Trump campaign. The delicate challenge of launching negative messages amid a crowded primary field is one factor that explains how a real estate mogul distrusted by Republican elites could win the party's nomination.



Chris Durlak, who ran Chuck Volpe's 2010 state senate campaign in Pennsylvania, explained the problem of developing a message and engaging in contrast during a primary with multiple candidates running. For example, he said, "In a six-way primary, it's hard to be aggressive. We wanted to be aggressive. We knew we needed to be aggressive, but the problem in a six-way primary is if you attack someone else, they don't necessarily come to you. They have multiple other places to go." He cited the 2004 Democratic presidential primary, arguing that Howard Dean was winning Iowa when he unleashed an attack on former House minority leader Dick Gephardt. Gephardt then turned around and attacked Dean. "They start fighting on TV. What happens? John Kerry and John Edwards one and two, Howard Dean three, distant three, Dick Gephardt four. It's murder-suicide."<sup>58</sup>

Thanks to Volpe's own wealth, Durlak's campaign had the most money and ultimately spent more than \$600,000 on a single state senate seat in Pennsylvania. Durlak said the question hanging over Volpe's race was this: When are you going to attack this guy? In the end, their strategy came up just short.

Volpe lost to a dark-horse candidate, John Blake, by fewer than 800 votes. The inability to launch an effective attack in a six-person primary was a blow to Volpe's campaign, and Durlak's story is a reminder that money matters and the message matters, but money by itself does not buy elections.<sup>59</sup>

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## RESPONDING TO NEGATIVE ATTACKS

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Finally, recalling the question "What are they doing?" campaigns must also figure out how they respond when they are hit with a negative attack. If a candidate is in a competitive race, chances are high the opponent will go negative eventually. And the closer the race is, the more the margins matter and the nastier the attacks may become as campaigns fight for every last vote. Campaign managers argued that the best defense against such attacks was to be prepared. One of the first tasks of any campaign was to research one's own candidate and anticipate how the opposition is going to attack one's side, they consistently stressed.

Some attacks, however, are so far out of the blue that they can't be anticipated. One campaign manager who wished to remain anonymous described a particularly odd attack their candidate faced:

It was a really hardcore attack. And I remember very vividly it actually accused—this is actually something I use as an example all the time in my work right now. It accused my candidate of using Chinese-bought pencils in his role at the Michigan lottery. Chinese pencils. I mean, they showed the pencils on the TV. Chinese pencils. You just can never forget that, right?

That was the first negative ad. There were three. And so, you know, I think that we all came together as a team and had to really decide, “What do we do?” Because you never want to react on their message. You want to always be on your message and communicate on your terms, right? So we didn’t want to change what we were talking about to go react to what they were talking about. And we needed to decide, well, do we make a decision to change what we’re talking about because we think that what they’re saying is going to so affect voters that we need to change what we’re talking about? And we made a decision that it didn’t. We made a decision that we were communicating with voters enough with a message that we didn’t need to change what we were talking about.<sup>60</sup>

If an opponent is spending money on advertising that doesn’t make a dent, campaign consultant Evan Tracey argued that campaigns are better off just ignoring the attacks. “Never interrupt your enemy when he’s making a mistake. Very good political advice. Too many people try and come in when someone else is self-destructing. Just resist the urge. Seriously, resist the urge and let them do it themselves.”<sup>61</sup>

When former member of Congress Charlie Melancon first ran for the US House, he was surprised by one attack he received. Melancon’s opponent, Republican Billy Tauzin III, began running an ad accusing Melancon of supporting sex education for third graders while a member of the state legislature.<sup>62</sup> Melancon’s campaign manager, Brad Beychok, described how his campaign reacted to the sensational charge.

The first instinct when you see an ad on TV that says he voted for sex education for third graders is, “Where’s the research?” Like you yell for your researcher to come in here and tell you why this is not true. Or if we didn’t see it was coming, well, how did we miss this? And it’s never a good conversation if they’re like, “I got to get back to you.” They’ll give you an answer within seconds. If they can’t give you an answer within seconds, you’re in deep shit.

Now see, we had this in 2004, they ran an ad against us, against Melancon, that said that he voted for sex education for third graders. The firm that did our self-research, it was not in our book. He voted in the state legislature on some goofy bill that somehow had some sort of money for third graders to have sex education. And that was something you’d like to have caught. I think you have to be prepared.<sup>63</sup>

—Bradley Beychok, campaign manager,  
Charlie Melancon for Senate, 2010 (LA)

In the course of researching one's own candidate, campaign managers wanted to tie up any loose ends the research finds. Beychok explained that during another campaign he ran, the candidate had to quickly resolve some tax issues before their opponent made them an issue.

So I'll give you another example. I've done self-research on a candidate where we took—after we did our own research, we found out that our candidate had taken a homestead exemption in both Washington and the state that we worked in. And it was an honest mistake of a CPA not realizing that they took an exemption in both areas. But it was one that would come back and bite you in the ass.

So in that sense, speed is important because what do you do? You go back to the D.C. tax office, say, "Hey, I owe this much money according to my records and taxes, I made a mistake." You clear it up, and then that issue is over, dealt with, and done.

If you let someone come to you and say, "We think you took two home exemptions, didn't go pay it," you say, "I took care of it," you've gotten busted. And so it's very important I think to do your own research on yourself and know what those attacks are going to be.<sup>64</sup>

—Bradley Beychock, campaign manager,  
Charlie Melancon for Senate, 2010 (LA)

If campaigns know a specific attack is coming, they then often try to break the news on their own terms. But they can't always anticipate it in time and find themselves blindsided.

During the 2011 Republican presidential primary, for example, Texas governor Rick Perry called Social Security a "Ponzi scheme." But Perry wasn't prepared for any backlash. One of Perry's opponents, Mitt Romney, shredded Perry for wanting to "eliminate" Social Security. Perry was made to look like he disliked the program and wanted to gut it. Perry faded quickly and never seriously challenged for the GOP nomination.

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### "WHAT DO WE TELL THEM?"

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This is the core strategic question guiding the message development of every campaign. And most campaign managers explained that if done artfully and under the right circumstances, it was fair and responsible to run ads showing why

the other side's positions would do damage to their constituents. Campaigns, ultimately, are about choices—"change versus more of the same." Campaign managers said they wanted to inform the voters with credible information so voters could make the best-informed choices, could know that the stakes were high, and that every vote mattered.

Campaigns have long been fueled by efforts to define the opposition. And although the means by which campaigns deliver their messages have evolved through the decades, the fundamental messages coming from campaigns have not changed much at all. The next chapter is also about "What do we tell them?" It explores how campaign managers use "earned media" to deliver their messages and how they navigate an increasingly complex media landscape that's speedier, more fraught, and more exciting for campaign managers than it has ever been.

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