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# “That Dog Don’t Hunt”: Persuasive Language and Imagery in an NRA Advertisement

**JAMES WHITTLE**

James Whittle graduated from Bridgewater State College in January 2007 with a BA in English. This piece was originally written for Dr. Anne Doyle’s seminar Research in Composition and was revised in Dr. Doyle’s Writing Portfolio Workshop. James would like to thank Dr. Doyle for lending her time, mind, and energy to the project

**T**he purpose of any advertisement, obviously, is to persuade. When we think of why companies advertise we can boil it down to a short, catchy series of “p-words”: Persuade People to Purchase a Product to gain Profit. This theory is simple enough when discussing product sales, but what about a different p-word that also uses advertising to persuade? This word is Politics, and the “product” is usually a campaign slogan, name, and/or idea.

Whether or not the intended outcome of political advertising is ultimately profit-driven or if the campaign truly wants to improve our society, is another, much larger question altogether. I don’t plan to touch it, and I’m not asking the rather esoteric question of “what are the campaign’s/ad’s true intentions?”

Rather, I am looking at the phenomenon that is political advertising and how it works: what methods of persuasion are used, both in language and in imagery, to convince the people to support that particular slogan, name, and/or idea. Also I am asking why these methods work. And finally, if and when they don’t work, as when they dissuade voters from voting at all, then why do political organizations still continue to use them?

To understand the question of why these methods work, I must first explain what type of ad I will be looking at, and its importance. The ad I will examine is a negative advertisement, or, in short, an advertisement which a campaign or organization uses to attack opposing candidates by exposing their character flaws, hypocrisies, or instances of weak decision-making. While issue advertising, where candidates champion their own “selling points” or appealing qualities to voters, is still perhaps the most traditional form of campaigning, the use of negative/attack advertising has grown immensely in recent times. According to a study released in 1981 by Larry Sabato, entitled “The Rise of Political Consultants: New Way of Winning Elections”:

Even when television is used to communicate political truth (at least from one candidate’s perspective), the truth can be negatively packaged—attacking the opponent’s character and record rather than supporting one’s own. If there is a single trend obvious to most American consultants, it is the increasing proportion of negative political advertising....At least a third of all spot commercials in recent campaigns have been negative, and in a minority of campaigns half or more of the spots are negative in tone or substance. (Chang, Park, and Shim)

Though Sabato is referring to television commercials, which have long since defeated print ads in popularity, the trend can also be seen in modern print advertisements. It is more than evident in the ad I will be looking at: a 2004 NRA advertisement which slanders John Kerry as “anti-sportsman,” despite Kerry’s claim that he supports sportsmen’s rights.

This ad was not paid for by the Bush campaign, but it is still a relevant political ad. The legal disclaimer at the bottom of the ad reads, “Paid for by NRA Political Victory Fund...Not Authorized by any Candidate or Candidate’s Committee.” Though not in direct support of the Bush campaign, the National Rifle Association’s intentions are clear within the ad and we know who the “Political Victory” is intended for. We also know that the ad is, beyond the shadow of a doubt, anti-Kerry, with the intention of persuading voters against Kerry.



**That dog don't hunt.**

John Kerry says he supports sportsmen's rights. But his record says something else.

-  **John Kerry voted for Ted Kennedy's amendment to outlaw most ammunition used by deer hunters.\***
-  **John Kerry supports higher taxes on firearms and ammunition.\***
-  **John Kerry voted in favor of banning semi-automatic firearms, including many firearms favored by sportsmen.\***
-  **John Kerry voted to allow big city politicians to sue the American firearms industry and hold legitimate firearms manufacturers and dealers responsible for the acts of criminals.\***
-  **John Kerry voted to close off hundreds of thousands of acres to hunters.\***
-  **John Kerry voted to commend Rosie O'Donnell's Million Mom March, an organization calling for gun owner licensing, gun registration, and other radical restrictions on law-abiding gun owners.\***
-  **With a 20-year record of voting against sportsmen's rights, it's no wonder John Kerry has been called a "hero" by the Humane Society of the United States, an extremist group that wants to outlaw hunting in America.\***

**If John Kerry wins, you lose.**

**NRA-POLITICAL VICTORY FUND**  
1120 Lakeside Blvd., Suite 400, Westborough, MA 01581

**VOTE FREEDOM FIRST**

\*Voted for Kennedy Amendment to S. 1805 (2/20/04). If the "S" is "S" John Kerry said "I think you ought to see all ammunition more generally. I think you ought to see guns." If you disagree, please let your congressmen know. \*Voted for Kennedy's amendment to S. 1805 to include the Humane Society of the United States' gun ban. See www.2004usa.com. \*Voted to amend S. 1805 to include gun ban legislation, effectively ending lawful rifle and shotgun. \*Voted against Murphy Amendment to S. 21 (02/15/04). \*Voted for Clinton Amendment to S. 21 (02/15/04). \*Voted for the Humane Society of the United States, which wants to see all sport hunting in America, except Kerry's "help" for the anti-hunting. \*Voted for the Humane Society.

**PAID FOR BY NRA POLITICAL VICTORY FUND WWW.NRAPVF.ORG AND NOT AUTHORIZED BY ANY CANDIDATE OR CANDIDATE'S COMMITTEE.**

Figure 1  
<<http://www.nrapvf.org/media/pdf/doghunt.htm>>

At first glance, there are obvious negative-images used to attack John Kerry, though the ad uses both image and linguistic

persuasion. The most prevalent image is the white poodle dog brandishing a blue “Kerry” garment around its midsection, taking up nearly half the page, located directly above the largest, boldest words on the whole page: “That dog don’t hunt.” This sentence is the ad’s main caption. The idea here is clearly to liken Mr. Kerry to a non-sportsmen’s dog, a dog whose purpose is more for show, a dog who wouldn’t know how to hunt an animal if you brought it into the woods and made it. The dog is clearly ready for show, brandishing a pink bow on its forehead, and displaying freshly groomed front and hind legs and backside, and a groomed tail. The hair that remains looks freshly washed and puffed out, and, taking all of this imagery into account, one might speculate that the dog is female, i.e. not a hunting dog, not a “man’s” dog. This is the ad’s primary image, encompassing the main idea expressed therein, which is also written as a sub-caption in smaller text beneath “That dog don’t hunt”: “John Kerry says he supports Sportsmen’s Rights. But his record says something else.”

The other images which negatively represent John Kerry are the seven “thumbs down” symbols which bullet the seven points negatively characterizing the presidential candidate. The simple, effective symbol of a thumbs down lets the voter know that these are seven negative points about John Kerry: seven instances of supposed hypocrisy, weak-will, and anti-firearm politics.

While most of the ad’s text is written in black over a white background, each bulleted point contains a word or phrase written in red text, using the color red for its traditional purpose of expressing “danger” or “warning.” Of the seven words or phrases, five of them are words that most commonly have a negative connotation: “outlaw,” “higher taxes,” “banning,” “close,” and “voting against.” The other two red-letter phrases are “allow” and “commend Rosie O’Donnell’s,” and when read in the context of the entire bulleted point, they too, obviously, are used to reflect negatively on John Kerry. Therefore, without having seen or read more than the words displayed in red, the poodle image, the main caption and sub caption, and the thumb’s down bullets, the viewer (i.e. potential voter) knows that the ad is meant to damage Mr. Kerry’s character for his apparently hypocritical stance on gun control. It should also be noted that the ad does not cite an instance when John Kerry claimed to be in support of sportsmen’s rights, it merely claims that he once did.

If the viewer examines the bulleted points they will see what linguistic tactics the ad uses to dissuade them from supporting Kerry. Most drastically, the ad uses language to suggest that gun control and pro-gun control organizations are of “radical” and “extreme” nature. In bulleted point six, the ad reads, “John Kerry voted to commend Rosie O’Donnell’s Million Mom March, an organization calling for gun owner licensing, gun registration, and other radical restrictions on law-abiding gun owners.” *The Oxford English Dictionary* has many meanings for the word

“radical,” the most relevant to this usage being, “Characterized by independence of, or departure from, what is usual or traditional; progressive, unorthodox, or revolutionary (in outlook, conception, design, etc.)” In other words, the ad-sponsor (the NRA) considers gun owner licensing and gun registration to be abnormal, unorthodox.

Similarly, in the seventh and final bulleted point, the ad states, “With a 20-year record of voting against sportsmen’s rights, it’s no wonder John Kerry has been called a ‘hero’ by the Humane Society of the United States, an extremist group that wants to outlaw hunting in America.” *The Oxford English Dictionary* only lists one definition for “extremist”: “One who is disposed to go to the extreme, or who holds extreme opinions; a member of a party advocating extreme measures.” In other words, the Humane Society, which believes in protecting animals, is in no way a “moderate” group, in fact they represent extreme opinions.

Beneath the seven bulleted points the ad’s message is summarized by the words in bold: “If John Kerry wins, you lose.” Here we find the return of the color red, as the words “you lose” are underlined in red. The ad isn’t addressing any old sportsmen per se; it is speaking to you, the reader, and it is taking the liberty of assuming that you are in favor of gun ownership. The ad’s establishment of a personal connection with the potential voter is one final method of persuasion.

So why do these methods work to persuade people? Aren’t people able to interpret information for themselves, without needing to be fed a package of persuasive language and imagery? An article by John Harms and Douglas Kellner explains that advertising isn’t based just on information, but more on cultural and social identity:

Advertising is significant because, in consumer capitalism, individuals depend on it for meanings -- a source of social information embedded in commodities that mediate interpersonal relations and personal identity. Advertising should therefore be conceived as an important institution in the consumer society because it produces ‘patterned systems of meaning’ which play a key role in individual socialization and social reproduction. (Harms and Kellner)

This explains, then, why the NRA would present an image of a poodle to compare to John Kerry’s character. The effeminate image is used to remind gun owners of their own identity. Since the ad is targeted towards gun owners and many gun owners are male, the image suggests that supporting Kerry aligns the voter with the feminine, “Million Mom Marching” group represented by the show-dog. According to the ad’s argument, however indirect or subliminal, voting against Kerry is a chance for the voters to reaffirm their maleness.

Furthermore, Torben Vestergaard and Kim Schroder discuss the importance/purpose of advertisers to reach their audience on a personal level:

For unashamedly commercial media like advertising, it is absolutely essential to be in contact with the readers’ consciousness, first in order to catch their attention, and secondly to dispose them favourably towards the product advertised. Advertisers therefore have to please the readers, never disturb or offend them; and because adverts [sic] are under this obligation to reflect the attitudes, hopes and dreams of their readers as closely as possible, we can gain an insight into the readers’ consciousness, their ways of thinking, their ideology, by analyzing the structures of meaning found in advertisements. (Vestergaard and Schroder 121)

In the NRA’s case, the poodle image is an obvious attention-getter, but while it reflects the attitudes of the audience, it simultaneously demands them to “pick a side.” A gun owner concerned with sportsmen’s rights is more likely to relate to a hunting dog or a firearm image and disassociate heavily from a poodle dog image. Norman Fairclough also suggests that imagery is responsible for connecting the audience to the ad’s message. From his book *Language and Power*:

Visual images underline the reliance of the image-building process upon the audience: where visual images are juxtaposed the interpreter has to make the connection, whereas in language connections can be made for the interpreter. (208)

In this case, the poodle image is juxtaposed with the caption “That dog don’t hunt,” which establishes a connection to the social identity of the interpreters. Again, the poodle represents Kerry, which in turn connects the interpreters with their own roles as gun owners, i.e. anti-poodle.

Imagery is crucial to influencing people’s interpretation of an advertisement, but the importance of language can not be understated. Says Ernest Partridge in his essay on political propaganda:

Heedless of the cost in social disorder, right wing propaganda deliberately and willfully distorts language to serve the purposes of the party, of the faction, of the sponsor. This is no secret. In his GOPAC memo of 1994, Newt Gingrich candidly identified language as “a key mechanism of control.” (Partidge)

The use of language as control is precisely why the NRA uses words like “radical” and “extremist” to label opposing factions that aren’t actually radical. To the advertiser, the implications of these words are far more important than whether or not the

accused are actually guilty. After all, “political advertising, unlike product advertising, must get results in a short period of time”: therefore the advertisers must use words that are the most likely to invoke their desired result (Chang, Park, and Shim).

In my opening paragraph, I expressed the similarity between product sales and political campaigning, suggesting that the “product” politicians or organizations are trying to sell is their slogan, name, or idea. Consequently, the language and imagery of the NRA ad mimics the “five-part pattern” of a product ad that Hugh Rank diagrams in his book on ad persuasion entitled *The Pitch*. Rank claims that basically every ad follows the same five steps to grab hold of the audience and persuade them into buying, or in this case, voting accordingly. They are attention-getting, confidence-building, desire-stimulating, urgency-stressing, and response-seeking.

The poodle image is what Rank calls the “emotional attention-getter” because it is an image of “strong emotional associations” (20). “Emotional appeals”, says Rank, “are very effective in getting our attention and persuading us into action” (22). Recall that the purpose of the image is to reach the gun owning voter by calling on his masculinity and reminding him that Kerry is somehow effeminate because he “don’t hunt.” While a company’s ad would attempt to “link their product with something desired by the intended audience,” a political attack ad follows a different method: “linking the product or idea with something already disliked or feared by the intended audience” (Rank 22). This method shakes the audience at their roots, essentially saying, “vote for this person and you will be supporting/becoming what you dislike or (more accurately) are afraid of.”

The text that follows the poodle image in the bulleted points appears “informed,” “competent,” and “knowledgeable,” all characteristics that Rank cites as being crucial to the “confidence-building” step (31). The purpose of this step is to establish trust in the audience, and a list of facts will do just that, even if the facts are slightly skewed or if rhetoric like “radical” and “extremist” is used inappropriately. According to Rank, “Aristotle points out that [expertise is] still very effective for the persuader even if there is only the appearance of these qualities of expertise, sincerity, and benevolence” (32).

Rank’s final three steps of desire-stimulating, urgency-stressing, and response-seeking are all found in the ever so important line, “If John Kerry wins, you lose.” The pronoun “you” establishes desire in the audience by placing the matter in their hands. In other words, “you must vote against John Kerry, or else you will suffer when sportsmen’s rights are outlawed.” The ad is presenting what Rank calls “a pain to be avoided” or “a problem to be solved” (41). A vote against Kerry helps to ensure that

you may continue to enjoy gun ownership. The outlawing of gun ownership is the potential pain or problem. At the same time, the red underlining of “you lose” stresses urgency and demands response. It is what Rank refers to as “command propaganda”, seeking immediate response from voters (134). After all, the advertiser is attempting to influence an election and therefore working on a relatively short timeframe. The ad tells the voter, respond now or suffer later.

Yet what is startling about negative political advertising in general, is that a lot of research has concluded that it is ineffective. Politics is in large part an image game and “the public, once able to judge a man on his merits, must now make its decision on the basis of which candidate presents the best image” (Burmester 42). Though the NRA ad doesn’t necessarily represent a candidate, it could project a negative image on conservatives in general due to its mean-spiritedness. The NRA’s play on gender roles and use of unfounded claims could cause any potential voter to make the fair conclusion that the ad is nothing but mean.

Why, then, do political organizations continue to release attack ads? One theory is that negative campaigns turn many viewers off (dissuade them from voting at all) and thus play into the hands of politicians, generally conservative Republican ones, who rely on the minority of conservative Republicans who do vote (in contrast to the majority of generally liberal Democrats, who don’t vote) (Berger 92).

If the NRA can release an ad attacking John Kerry that appeals to conservative voters, and at the same time dissuades liberal voters from voting at all, why not? And research has shown that it will do exactly that. A study in the mid-nineties shows that “negative campaign tactics may alienate voters and discourage them from political participation” (Pinkleton 24).

To the advertiser’s dismay, however, other research has concluded that attack campaign tactics can cause a backlash among the audience. Bruce E. Pinkleton researched this phenomenon and concluded:

Negative voter perceptions of the sponsoring candidate, based in part on campaign tactics, are likely to translate into anticandidate voting behavior. This may be especially likely when the advertising is deemed unfair or excessive, or when the advertising is image oriented rather than issue oriented. (33)

Based on this conclusion, the NRA ad likening John Kerry to a female show dog in an attempt to appeal to gun owning sportsmen could actually lose the organization more followers than it will win. Perhaps the advertiser hopes conservative voters and/or gun owners are more susceptible to image advertising and less likely to react in backlash.



But what about ads that cause potential voters to disengage from political participation in general? Many “frames” do just that. The term “frame” is used in news media to describe an advertisement or any public presentation where “stylistic or thematic organizations of text emphasize a particular story line” (Procter, Rumsey, and Schenk-Hamlin 54). The problem for advertisers is that recent research has shown that the overall package presented within these frames has led much of the public to develop a cynicism towards politics in general, regardless of which party the advertiser is affiliated with.

Politically, “candidate theme frames” are used to construct a negative image around the opposing candidate based on one theme. In this instance, imagery is organized thematically along with the text to create the image. Simple themes are aligned with the candidate to project a negative image:

The opposing candidate is attacked by attaching pejorative, and often stereotyped, political themes to his or her orientation (e.g., Sam Brownback, too extreme for Kansas), representation (e.g., Randy Rathbun is controlled by labor’s union bosses), and/or character (e.g., Vince Snowbarger is a liar and a cheat). The inference about the opposing candidate’s character is often drawn from recurring past conduct. If specific issues appear at all, they merely support the overall image of the opposing candidate (Procter, Rumsey, and Schenk-Hamlin 57).

These tactics can and have been noted in the NRA advertisement, but their potential impact on voters is remarkable. Research shows that candidate theme frames have led viewers to stop reacting to politicians as individuals, but as a class. In other words, negative ads have caused many viewers to see the big picture, i.e. politicians are all in the same boat, in competition with each other for office. And currently, the class of politicians might be the most unsafe class for a politician. For as long as they are aligned with class, “viewers will regard politicians as a whole with greater contempt and hold them responsible for the country’s political ills” (Procter, Rumsey, and Schenk-Hamlin 60).

Competition could be the simplest explanation as to why advertisers release attack ads in spite of risking the endangerment of their own organization. Politics is competitive and the nature of competition has always involved grit, ferocity, and unwillingness to admit defeat. To paraphrase an age old maxim, when the dirt gets political, the political get dirty. In other words, when one attack is launched, the other side responds similarly for fear of getting buried by attacks. Political gun drawing and mud slinging aren’t necessarily done out of mean-spirit, but more as a means of staying afloat in one of the most cut-throat games ever played. No competition has been won by letting up on the opponent, and politics is no different. The book *Going Negative* studies the phenomenon in depth and finds this:

Put bluntly, candidates attack out of fear: fear that the opposition will throw the first punch, fear that they will appear weak if they don’t respond in kind. In politics the best defense is a strong offense, and negative advertising is the most expedient way to fend off the opposition’s attacks. (Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar 115-116)

The game isn’t played just between politicians either. But politicians aren’t the only ones with vested interests in campaigns. In this study, I’ve looked at an ad released by an organization with no direct ad funding from a politician. Ansolabehere and Iyengar write, “Corporations, professional associations, unions, and other organizations have large stakes in the outcomes of elections, and they don’t remain on the sidelines long” (116). The NRA stood to suffer deeply from the election of a Democratic candidate, so naturally they played the game in classic form. “Through unrestrained independent advertising, interest groups can and do influence the tone, the issues, and even the outcome of elections”, and unrestrained the ad certainly is (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 116).

We know the ad’s purpose was obviously to persuade and can see methods in the advertisement that were used to do just that. While language is used to inform the audience about John Kerry’s anti-firearm stance, imagery is used to reach a bit deeper and connect the audience with their own social roles. Both language and imagery are used to establish a personal connection with the viewers. The advertiser hopes this technique will influence the viewer’s decision to adopt the advertiser’s view. Meanwhile, the prospect of dissuading liberal voters from voting at all only benefits the advertiser.

Though no product was sold per se, an idea was sold to the voter viewing the ad: the idea that a vote for John Kerry would endanger the rights of gun owners. It is no surprise, then, that the ad follows the same structure as a corporation’s product ad. After all, political organizations and corporate advertisers have the same goal in mind: to persuade the people.

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