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## **Facts about Tone of Presidential Advertising Campaign from the Wisconsin Advertising Project**

MADISON, WI – *In the presidential candidate debate last night, both candidates made empirical claims about the tone of the other’s advertising campaign. Barack Obama argued that all of John McCain’s advertising has been negative and Senator McCain countered that Senator Obama has aired more negative ads than anyone in history – and that he can “prove it.” The University of Wisconsin Advertising Project, using data from the Campaign Media Analysis Group, has tracked and analyzed the targeting and tone of presidential advertising in the last four presidential campaigns. So, what does the evidence say? Was Obama correct? Did McCain prove it?*

*Prof. Ken Goldstein, director of the Wisconsin Advertising Project, issued the following statement:*

“Analysis from the Wisconsin Advertising Project of Sen. John McCain’s advertising for the week of September 28 to October 4 shows, in fact, that all McCain campaign advertising did have significant negative content – either spots that were comprised completely of attacks on the Democratic nominee or ones that combined attacks on Sen. Barack Obama with some talk about Sen. McCain’s own plans. We reported this finding in a press release last week that was widely publicized and this was clearly the number that Obama was citing in last night’s debate. That said, McCain’s advertising has not been completely negative over the course of the entire campaign. Looking at the tone of all of McCain’s advertising from June 4 to October 4, we found that 47 percent of the McCain spots were negative (completely focused on Obama), 26 percent were positive (completely focusing on his own personal story or on his issues or proposals) and 27 percent were contrast ads (a mix of positive and negative messages).

But what about Obama? Our analysis reveals that 39 percent of all general election Obama ads have been positive (solely about his record, positions or personal story), 35 percent have been negative (solely focused on McCain) and 25 percent have been contrast ads – mixing a bit of both. So, on a proportional basis, the McCain campaign is and has been more negative than Obama.

But, Obama has aired over 50,000 more ads than McCain. So, hasn’t he simply aired more of everything – including negative ads – than McCain has this year, or than anyone in history, as McCain may have alleged?

If one just looks at pure airings of negative ads, McCain has aired more than Obama. If one allocates contrast ads as half positive and half negative or considers contrast ads as negative – as the Advertising Project does – the tone of the McCain and Obama campaigns has been absolutely identical.

According to some press reports, the McCain campaign is backing up its claim with an analysis of ad spending from September 12 to October 11 that shows that Obama spent more on negative ads than McCain during this time period. Does that analysis mean that the Obama campaign has aired the most negative ad campaign in history? Well, since, there was no television for most of history and we only have systematic data since 1996, we'll have to restrict our analysis to the last four contests.

And it was in 1996 that former Sen. Bob Dole aired the greatest proportion of negative ads in recent presidential elections. Seventy percent of his ads in his contest against then-President Bill Clinton were pure negative spots and 12 percent were contrast. In 2004, 60 percent of President Bush's ads were negative and 12 percent were contrast. Multiplying the proportions by ad expenditures in 2004 reveals that the Bush campaign aired the greatest number of negative ads in recent history and spent the most money doing so. While there are still three weeks left in this contest, President Bush in 2004 has the record for the most number of negative spots aired in a race.

Negative advertising does not always work. Witness the apparent lack of effectiveness of the recent McCain barrage of negative spots trying to tie Senator Obama to former Weather Underground member Bill Ayers. Furthermore, even with all the attacks on political advertising in general, and negative advertising in particular, there is strong empirical evidence that voters can learn from advertising. What they don't learn much from is whining about negative advertising.”

*Using data obtained from the TNS Media Intelligence Campaign Media Analysis Group (TNSMI/CMAG), the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project codes and analyzes nearly all of the political advertising that is aired in 2008 federal and gubernatorial races across the country. The Ad Project, considered the single most important and credible source of information on campaign TV advertising, is funded in 2008 by a grant from the Joyce Foundation.*

*The Wisconsin Advertising Project codes political television advertising for sponsors, issues, tone, and numerous other characteristics – all in real time. While most of the attention will be focused on the presidential race in 2008, it also tracks candidate, party, and interest group advertisements in congressional, gubernatorial and other down ballot races nationwide, with a particular focus on the Midwest and the five states that comprise the Midwest Democracy Network (Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin.) Findings will be released in a series of real time reports over the course of the campaign.*

*Ken Goldstein, professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the co-author of Campaign Advertising in American Democracy (Temple University Press), directs the Advertising Project. Goldstein has overall responsibility for the project and is available to work with media and policymakers during the entire course of the 2008 election year.*

*The Wisconsin Advertising Project coded virtually every significant political advertisement broadcast in the top 75 markets in 2000 and in the top 100 media markets from 2001 to 2004. In this process, using videos and storyboards of ads captured by TNSMI/CMAG, project staff first*

*research the entity responsible for airing each separate political spot aired. In relation to campaign finance regulations as well as noting the names of sponsors, the project categorizes sponsors between those paid for by candidates, parties, hard money interest groups and soft money interest groups. Each spot is then further researched to attribute it to a specific candidate that the ad sponsors hope to elect. Once this is done, project staff codes the content of each ad, using a battery of questions. This extensive coding allows for the compilation of a massive database of the content of commercials that can be used in a variety of ways by scholars, the media and policymakers.*

*The University of Wisconsin Advertising Project is affiliated with the university's Political Science Department. This department is one of the nation's oldest and most respected programs. It is highly ranked in national surveys and its award-winning faculty is known for innovative research on the discipline's most current and important questions.*

*With a reputation for unbiased and non-partisan analysis, Goldstein is a favorite source for both politicians and the news media. He has appeared numerous times on The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, Nightline, ABC World News Tonight, NBC Nightly News, CBS Evening News, FOX News Channel, MSNBC, CNBC and CNN, and is a frequent contributor on National Public Radio. He is also quoted extensively in the country's top newspapers, including The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal.*

*Based in Chicago, with assets of \$935 million, the Joyce Foundation funds groups working to strengthen public policies and improve the quality of life in the Great Lakes region. Its Money and Politics program supports efforts to promote a well-functioning representative democracy with open and accountable government, informed citizen participation, competition of ideas and candidates, fair and equal application of the laws, a high level of public trust and protection of fundamental rights. Other funding areas are education, workforce development, environment, gun violence prevention and culture.*

*TNS Media Intelligence/CMAG is the leading provider of advertising tracking and analysis of political public affairs and issue-advocacy advertising. TNSMI/CMAG provides customized media analysis services to national trade associations, foundations, Fortune 100 companies, national media organizations, academia and hundreds of national, statewide and local political campaigns. Clients rely on TNSMI/CMAG's experienced political researchers to assemble the most reliable, comprehensive research and reporting. TNSMI/CMAG's customized reporting methods help its clients better manage their media strategy, media buys, public relations and communications efforts.*

*For more information on the report or the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project, please contact Rachael Tepper or Steve Rabinowitz at 202-265-3000 or rachael@rabinowitz-dorf.com or go to <http://wiscadproject.wisc.edu>. To learn more about the book Campaign Advertising in American Democracy, go to [http://www.temple.edu/tempres/titles/1922\\_reg.html](http://www.temple.edu/tempres/titles/1922_reg.html).*

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