

# Fighting Words!

## *A Brief History of Contentious American Presidential Campaigns*

*"Negative ads increase dramatically during 2012 presidential election," a Los Angeles Times headline declared recently. "Negative Ads Dominate 2012 Election, Study Shows," another headline announced. Rancor and acrimony in presidential campaigns are nothing new. In fact, since the early 19th century those running for top office have engaged in negative campaign tactics. This is the first of a two-part series on some of the most vitriolic presidential elections in history.*



**- Rachel March**

The image is striking. A mother wakes up, as if from a nightmare, her face strained with worry. "Sometimes it's hard to sleep," her voice is heard saying. "I'm worried I guess, about our jobs, our home, how everything costs more, even mom's health care. How will we ever retire? Lately I worry a lot about my kids. What's their future going to be like?"

Then comes the punch line: "I supported President Obama because he spoke so

beautifully. But since then, things have gone from bad to much worse.

The ad, paid for by a Republican advocacy group, concludes: "Our country's got this huge debt, and Obama says raise taxes and keep spending more? Doesn't Washington know we can't afford more taxes and debt? There's got to be a way to take away President Obama's blank check."

Democrats too are firing shots across the bow. One recent ad, using Mitt Romney's

formal first name, says: "Willard Romney, President for the 1%." Another says: "Willard Romney, Vulture Capitalist."

The attacks are not limited to ads. A prominent Democratic political strategist, who appears on one of the major news networks as a paid contributor, says about stay-at-home-mom Ann Romney, "Guess what? His wife has actually never worked a day in her life."

Welcome to the 2012 campaign for President of the United States, which is already proving to be the most vitriolic in history. According to a Wesleyan University study a whopping 70% of the ads have been negative ads – compared to 9% at this point in the 2008 presidential race!

And this is before either side has taken off the gloves, so to speak.

In the wake of these numbers, political analysts and commentators are rankling that never before has basic civility received such a battering in the course of an election campaign. But is that really the case? Is the scathing warfare of the American political scene today indeed worse than in the past?

Absolutely not!

First, the above study's definition of a negative ad includes simply the mention of the opponent. Furthermore, there is an entirely new factor in this year's upcoming elections: recent federal court decisions – including the Supreme Court's ruling in the Citizens United case—opened the door to wealthy individuals and companies being allowed to legally donate unlimited sums of money to "super PACS." In essence, these are outside groups sponsored by non-candidates. Their newfound legal right to weigh in publicly on the campaign is what is causing the negative campaign ads numbers to skyrocket.

Allegations that the current campaign is the most contentious in history have been heard during nearly every presidential campaign. The reality is, however, that political campaigns of today are probably no more and no less volatile and vitriolic than any preceding them. Democracy was never meant for the faint-hearted. President

Harry Truman probably put it best when he remarked, "If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen."

Which party virtually stole the presidential vote in a narrow race in Florida? The Republicans in 1876, during the Hayes versus Tilden election. Which president planted a bugging device in his opponent's headquarters? We all know the answer: Richard Nixon! But did you know that Nixon learned this tactic from former Democratic President Lyndon Johnson, whose campaign in 1964 against Barry Goldwater was one of the most contentious in history?

It can be said that the only "clean," scandal-free campaign ever was the first presidential race in the history of the United States, in 1789, when George Washington ran for the top office with no opponents. Washington, as is well known, was strongly opposed to the concept of political parties and fervently hoped that America would remain a country where there would be no political factions. However, that was not to be. Already during the following elections in 1792, the first political parties began taking shape, and these parties' platforms were largely based on the differing political opinions that pitted our Founders against each other during the development of the Constitution.

Only eight years later, the United States experienced its first negative presidential election campaign, which went down in history as one of the most hostile campaigns ever. Although it was only the fourth time that elections were held in the fledgling country, Americans got a taste of the ignominy that election campaigns could generate. And sadly, the contentious nature of presidential campaigns has not abated over the years.

Initially, the American Constitution did not call for voters to have a direct say in the process of choosing a president. Instead, the president was elected by special "electors" who were chosen by the state legislatures. Every elector would cast two votes and the candidate with the most votes won the presidency, while the candidate who came in second became vice president. Hence, the



A campaign button from the Lincoln campaign of 1860.

president and his vice president could very well end up being from two different parties. Indeed, in 1796, this occurred when John Adams was forced to accept his opponent, Thomas Jefferson, as vice president.

In 1824, however, the voting rules were changed and the voters began electing the "electors" and thus, indirectly, the president. During the century that followed, the American presidential elections evolved into the most closely followed race, not only in the US but all over the world. And the elections were invariably belligerent – sometimes more so, sometimes less so.

During the first century of America's existence, presidential candidates would feign to be ever so reluctant for the post, acting almost as if the presidential candidacy was forced upon them. Candidates did not engage in overt campaigning and refrained from publicly doing or saying anything that would indicate any interest on their part in achieving the presidency. Nevertheless, the campaigns were just as sordid, perhaps even more so, since candidates did not have to take responsibility if a particular attack got too vindictive or personal. They were not officially involved in the campaign anyway. Therefore, the political parties each felt that they could engage in all kinds of mudslinging

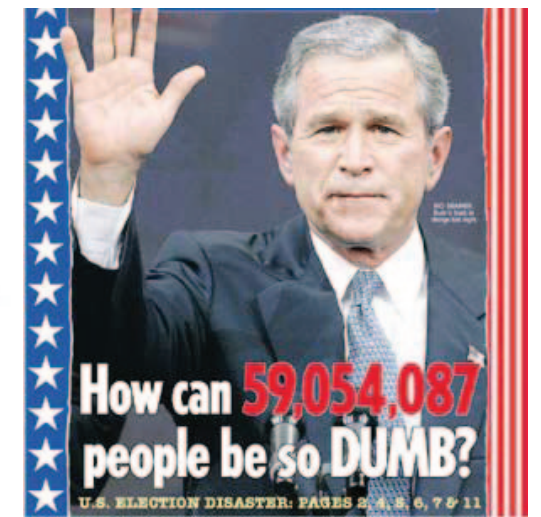
without fear of any backlash.

Even back then, large rallies were often held in support of the presidential candidates, and newspapers, many of them unabashedly affiliated with one party or another – a practice that came to an end during the last century – would spread fictitious news reports to bolster one candidate's position and undermine his opponent's.

Despite it all, however, Americans displayed a far greater interest in politics in those years than they do today. The typical expected voter turnout in those times hovered around the 70% or 80% range. (Today, it ranges between 49% and 55%, with the numbers dwindling almost every year.)

It is not unusual to hear about political party analysts and commentators accusing members of the opposing party of engaging in distasteful behavior in order to win the vote, but history has shown that both parties are equally at fault, and if one party was particularly vindictive or antagonistic during one campaign, the opposing party was likely to be equally or more so during another political campaign.

A cursory analysis of political history indicates that two factors always played a key role in how low a party would stoop in order to destroy an opponent.



The Democrats ridiculed incumbent President George W. Bush, alleging that he was woefully lacking in intelligence.