

Office of the Governor

PO BOX 004
TRENTON, NJ 08625

NEWS RELEASE

CONTACT: Jayne O'Connor
Julie Plocinik
609-777-2600

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Governor Discusses Trend in Political Advertisements and Tenor of Campaigns During Address at University of Pennsylvania

Gov. Christie Whitman today discussed the tenor of political campaigns and trends in television advertising in New Jersey during an address to the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

The Governor's address was a continuation of the dialogue she initiated last February at a forum sponsored by Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics. In November of 1996, following the conclusion of the New Jersey Senate race, Gov. Whitman called for a review of rules and procedures for governing political campaign discourse. The Eagleton forum was held as part of the review process.

In her remarks, the Governor discussed the pledge that she issued prior to her 1997 re-election campaign to clean up campaigning and run an issues-oriented campaign. She also discussed the Issues Index, a non-partisan evaluation of the content of campaign ads that grew out of the Governor's clean campaign challenge.

A copy of the Governor's remarks follow.

Remarks of Governor Christine Todd Whitman at the Annenberg School for Communication University of Pennsylvania Philadelphia

March 16, 1998

Thank you, President (Judith) Roden. It's good to be with you this afternoon.

I want to thank Dean Jamieson and David Eisenhower for inviting me to the Annenberg School. Just coincidentally, the last time I saw the Eisenhowers was in California at a Nixon Library dinner honoring Ambassador Annenberg. I'm glad that this time none of us had to travel quite so far.

I'd like to approach my presentation to you today as if I were serving as a guest lecturer in Comm. 175, Argumentation and Public Advocacy.

Now I recognize that my idea of how to teach a course and yours may differ. But it's been a long time since I sat on your side of the desk in a college class -- and even then, I wasn't always paying the closest attention. So please, bear with me.

I've looked over the syllabus for Comm. 175. I noticed one of the topics in that course is political commercials. And that's what I want to focus on today -- political

commercials in the State of New Jersey.

I'm going to speak to this issue from my perspective as a politician -- as someone who's watched other candidates' commercials, who's aired some of her own, and who's been the subject of some others.

I grew up with politics. Both of my parents were very active in the New Jersey Republican Party. My father helped run Dwight Eisenhower's campaigns in New Jersey in 1952 and 1956. I attended my first national convention in San Francisco in 1956.

While there, I managed to get my picture in the paper by standing behind my mother and California Senator George Murphy while wearing a silly hat. And since I've been in politics, I've seen time and again -- wearing a silly hat will almost always get you in the paper.

So I've been around politics a long time -- both as an up-close observer and as a participant. That means I've studied this subject, not from an academic standpoint, but as a practitioner.

Nevertheless, we probably share many of the same concerns about the tone political television advertising has taken -- and probably for many of the same reasons.

Now, I'm not naive. There probably never was a time when candidates debated the issues, all the issues, and nothing but the issues. And negative campaigning isn't anything new, either.

For example, in 1864, Harper's published a list of terms used by Lincoln's opponents to describe him in that election year. "Filthy Story-Teller, Despot, Liar, Thief, Braggart, Buffoon, Usurper, Monster, Ignoramus Abe, Old Scoundrel, Perjurer, Robber, Swindler, Tyrant, Fiend, Butcher."

So maybe times have changed. I have never called any of my campaign opponents "Ignoramus Abe" -- or anything like it. But New Jersey does have its own interesting lexicon. I remember a Senate campaign a few years back when one candidate called the other a "swampdog."

I do think it's fair to say that politics has long been a rough sport. And I'm not complaining about that on a personal level. I can take the heat.

But I believe that political campaigns should not be about destroying your opponent through personal attacks. They should, primarily, be about building up your own candidacy.

In an ideal world, political campaigns would serve several purposes.

First, they would give voters a sense of who the candidate is, and would provide them with information about the candidate's qualifications.

Next, they would help the voters evaluate a candidate's past public record, if any.

Third, they would allow the candidates to present their views on the important issues of the day, as well as let them see how the candidates compare in the views.

Finally, they would give the voters a chance to learn what the candidates plan to do in the office they seek -- what their vision is for the future.

I firmly believe anyone running for office owes this to the voters. But far too often, it's not what they get. Instead, in the comfort of their living rooms, voters are asked to sit through the sort of name-calling they wouldn't tolerate from their own children. And then we wonder why people tune out on politics.

So I'd like to take a look at several recent New Jersey campaigns that garnered national attention for their nastiness level. The first is New Jersey's 1989 gubernatorial race.

In preparing for today, I recently reviewed a clip of a story that aired on PBS after the 1989 elections. The story pointed to the New Jersey race as an example of a growing trend in American political life -- really negative campaigns.

Several commentators featured in that story, including David Broder, decried the tone of campaigns that year. Nevertheless, several political consultants appeared on the program to defend their tactics. They maintained that negative attack ads work. And you know what? Many political people would agree.

Let me show you the most notorious set of ads from that campaign. The first was run by then-Congressman Jim Florio, the Democrats' candidate for governor that year. The second was aired in response to the first by his Republican opponent, Congressman Jim Courter.

[Show Florio's "Pinnochio" ad and Courter's response]

Clearly, neither one of those ads did anything to elevate the political discourse in that election. Neither did they do much to enhance the reputation of either candidate. But in that campaign Florio hit early and often with negative attacks on Courter. And the conventional wisdom is that those ads helped Florio win. But at what price?

In every political contest, someone always wins. But in campaigns like this, both candidates are tarnished, as is the entire process. That makes it harder for the winner to earn respect and serve effectively.

Now, let's move ahead four years to New Jersey's next gubernatorial campaign. I was the Republican candidate running against the incumbent, Jim Florio. I was determined to run a positive campaign. That was the kind of politics I learned, quite literally, from my parents. But I have to admit, it wasn't always easy.

My opponent used much the same strategy he used four years earlier -- unleashing a torrent of distorted personal attacks. At one point I said to some journalists, "If all you knew of me is what you got from his ads, I drive drunk at night with my Uzi hanging out the window shooting women who have their cars stolen."

He was trying to define me in a negative way, so I would have to shift away from my positive efforts to win support. It was clear that his ads were doing real damage. So we decided to respond.

In one ad, we referred to my opponent as "perhaps the worst governor New Jersey's ever had." And that ad worked -- his negatives went up and my positives got a boost.

That's a bit unusual. As you probably know, attack ads usually succeed only in driving up your opponent's negatives -- they usually don't help your own positives. Some thought that my gender may account for that anomaly -- but no one has really studied it, as far as I know.

In any event, that attack ad was the exception in the overall tone of our response.

In the closing days of the campaign, we executed a massive media buy -- and ran many positive ads. One showed my children and me on the beach. In another, I responded directly to some of the attacks my opponent had leveled. And in a radio ad, my teenage daughter spoke about why she thought I was the best candidate. These ads also gave my campaign a measurable bounce. In addition, the record tax increase Governor Florio had enacted three years earlier was still a hot issue with voters. I opposed that tax hike, and instead proposed a 30 percent tax cut.

So the tax issue created a sharp contrast -- and a legitimate comparison -- between my opponent and me. People saw where we stood on this issue and could vote accordingly. And they did.

Now, let's fast forward to 1996 and the Senate race between two New Jersey members of Congress: Bob Torricelli, the Democrat, and Dick Zimmer, the Republican. Even at a time when negative campaigning had become the norm, this campaign seemed to hit a new low. New Jersey had again captured the national spotlight for nastiness.

Let me show you two ads from 1996. You'll see why the Philadelphia Inquirer characterized that campaign as "bitter [and] pernicious."

[Show Torricelli and Zimmer ads]

Again, these ads did nothing to elevate the debate that should have taken place in this Senate race. During the campaign, I called on both candidates to raise the tenor of the campaign. But once the toothpaste was out of the tube, it was very difficult to put it back in.

The way these candidates portrayed each other reminded me of a well-known phrase from an early mayoral race here in Philadelphia: "This was a race in which the voters were asked to choose between the evil of two lessors."

Nobody comes away from a campaign like this looking like a winner. In fact, a recent poll showed that only one in three New Jerseyans can name either U.S. Senator. It's almost as if people want to forget.

Coming off 1996, I was determined that the next statewide campaign in New Jersey would be different. As governor, I was concerned that New Jersey not remain a national model for nastiness. As a candidate for re-election, I had no desire to enter into a mud-slinging contest with my opponent, whoever he or she might be.

So, on the day after the Senate election, I issued a pledge to clean up campaigning in New Jersey. I said I would run an issues-oriented campaign in 1997, and challenged anyone else who ran to commit to the same thing.

I asked the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers to host a forum to explore how we could accomplish that goal. I said I would abide by whatever guidelines were recommended. But I also had a few ideas of my own.

I suggested that candidates should be accountable for their campaigns by appearing in their ads. It's much more difficult to level a personal attack when you're the one doing the talking. It turns voters off and it often backfires. So I felt if we could put an end to those disembodied voices that made it sound like the world was coming to an end, we could improve campaigns.

I also was mindful of the fact that gubernatorial campaigns in New Jersey are publicly funded. I believe that when the public is financing a campaign, they have the right to expect that campaign to be informative and civil.

Of course, I did not believe then, and don't believe now, that a political campaign can ever be a bloodless exercise. Big issues are at stake. Passions are raised. And very real differences of philosophy and vision exist.

Churchill said that politics is like war, with the difference being in war you can only be killed once, but in politics many times. I know from experience he was right.

I wasn't looking to take the passion out of the campaign but to take the poison out of its discourse.

Well, early in 1997, Eagleton convened a day-long forum. As a result of the discussion that day, guidelines and structures did emerge. Probably the most significant was the formation of something called the "Issues Index" by the respected organization Leadership New Jersey.

They identified the five issues of greatest concern to New Jersey voters, and then evaluated all campaign advertisements against that list. Every other week during the campaign, the "Issues Index" would publish a report. It would evaluate the extent to which our ads stuck to the issues, provided verifiable claims, and would judge whether the messages were advocacy, comparative, or attack.

The "Issues Index" added a new measure of accountability to the campaign season. And its enormous credibility came, in large part, because the analysis was conducted at the Annenberg School under the direction of Dr. Jamieson.

Both major party candidates -- my eventual opponent, State Senator Jim McGreevey, and I -- agreed to participate in this process. We each submitted our campaign ads to the "Issues Index" for evaluation.

To help ensure that their work would be widely understood, Dr. Jamieson and the "Issues Index" briefed reporters covering the campaign on what the evaluations would include. She explained what distinguishes advocacy from comparative from attack. For those not well-versed in the science of campaign ad evaluation, that session proved very useful.

I believe that all three types of ads are legitimate campaign tools. Even attack ads serve a useful purpose in a campaign. They help define differences and can convey information the voters need to make a decision. But, in my view, attack ads should focus on an opponent's record or positions. They should not be personal.

So let me show you three of my campaign's ads from last year -- the first was characterized as an advocacy ad, the second a comparative, and the third, an attack.

[Show three WFG ads] I think you'll agree that each of those ads focused on issues. And, to his credit, my opponent's ads did the same thing. We both stayed on the issues and avoided personal attacks.

Polls have shown that the people of New Jersey noticed the difference in tone between the 1996 and 1997 campaigns.

Three weeks before the 1997 election, the Eagleton Poll showed that 54 percent of the voters felt the campaign had been positive. That's compared to just 17 percent the year before. And in a poll taken after last year's election, Eagleton found that fully 70 percent of voters felt the tone of the 1997 campaign was more positive than in 1996.

Now, all that being said, there seems to be a very practical -- and very real -- barrier to seeing a widespread movement toward more positive campaigns. It's this apparent reality: positive campaigns seem to put voters to sleep.

For example, voter turn-out last year was down significantly from four years earlier. In 1993, 65 percent of registered voters went to the polls. In 1997, just 55 percent voted.

In addition, my campaign's internal polling revealed that the positive ads run by my campaign had little impact on the voters. Instead, we found that voters want comparative information to help them make up their mind. They responded best to ads that "mix it up" a little bit.

But they didn't get too much of that last year. Here's what the "Issues Index" found: 37.5 percent of my ads were advocacy ads, 37.5 percent were comparative, and just 25 percent were attack. That means fully 75 percent of my ads relied, at least in part, on promoting my candidacy in a positive fashion.

Many political consultants have said our reluctance to go "hard negative" hurt us. They point out that my desire to appear in our attack ads blunted the net effectiveness of those ads. With every attack ad in which I appeared, my opponent's negatives went up three points and mine went up one.

My opponent's ads broke down as follows: 71 percent comparative, 29 percent attack. That means all of his ads challenged my record in one way or another. But even a majority of his ads included positive information about himself.

As one observer put it, New Jersey's 1997 gubernatorial campaign was probably the most civil statewide campaign run in America in a generation. So we have to ask if an issues-based campaign is too boring.

After all, we live in an era when Jerry Springer's tape, "Too Hot for TV," sells half-a-million copies at \$19.95 apiece. Do voters tune out, and thus fail to turn out?

So politicians seem to be faced with a paradox. Voters say they want more positive campaigns. But an argument can be made that voters don't seem to become engaged by them. And that makes it tougher to convince candidates that positive is the best way to go.

I think our experience in New Jersey in 1997 proved that you can get candidates to keep things on a more positive plane. But it also at least suggests that going positive may not yield positive results at the polls on election day. And there's the rub.

I am interested in your views on this. I think it's something that bears further study. To persuade candidates to elevate the discourse, we need to address the concern that positive campaigns don't necessarily produce positive results at the polls.

So with that challenge to you, I'd like to thank you again for inviting me to be with you.

Now, I'd like to open up the floor for your questions.

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