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Negative Political Advertising. Parliamentary Election 2007 Campaign TV Spots

Key words: election campaign, political advertising, election advertising, TV spot, negative advertising

Abstract: This article presents the results of empirical research on TV political advertising in Polish parliamentary elections in 2007. The research was carried out in order to verify a hypothesis regarding the new trend of negative political advertising and a general brutalisation of election campaigns. The author discusses a variety of practical issues surrounding the functioning of the election advertising apparatus. She attempts to answer the question whether it is presently possible not to get involved in black PR and still have a chance to win in the elections. The author also debates whether the phenomenon of negative advertising is spontaneous or deliberately thought out activity based on long term strategy of action and alliances between different politicians. The analysis attempts to delineate the characteristics common to negative advertising

This article will present the results of empirical research on TV political advertising in Polish parliamentary elections in 2007. The research was carried out in order to verify a hypothesis regarding the new trend of growing importance of negative political advertising and connected with it brutalization of political activity. The article will address a variety of practical issues surrounding the functioning of the election apparatus in parliamentary elections of 2007. Analysed in the article will be financial issues (different parties TV advertising expenditures) as well as formal and legal issues (advertising limitations). The analysis of campaign spots broadcasted via TV was carried out in order to answer several questions. Firstly, the research was supposed to shed light on whether negative political advertising was performed on such a scale that it could be called a new trend. Secondly, if we are, in fact, dealing with a new trend, then which subjects on the political scene have played a deciding role, was it the large or the marginal party groups? Interesting from our point of view is also which party was the predominant subject under attack. The author also attempts to answer the question whether in modern day it is possible to avoid 'dirty' politics and still have a chance in the elections. She debates whether the phenomenon of negative advertising is spontaneous or deliberately thought out activity based on long term strategy of action and alliances between different politicians. The analysis attempts to delineate the characteristics common to negative advertising. Although the collected empirical materials allow for only a partial verification of the hypothesis that election campaign are becoming tougher, and taking into account the fact that many communication experts consider advertising, next to TV and surveys, a fundamental tool in political and campaign communication¹, it is worth to take some time to analyse the processes that take place there

1. TV political advertising

In literature on the subject there are many definitions of political advertising. For the purposes of this article, the following definition was used, one with a characteristic of its key elements:

¹ In election communication R. Cayrol uses the term „New Holy Trinity” for television, commercials, pre-election surveys and Americanization as processes taking place outside the US. See: Cayrol, R., (1986), *La Nouvelle Communication Politique*, Paris: Larousse, p. 51.

Political advertisement

is a short, informative and persuasive broadcast with a goal to reach the electorate and provide them a political option/offer which includes political parties, candidates and programmes. The goal of the broadcast is not only to popularize the given political offer but mainly to make the electorate vote for the sponsor of the advertisement. The form and content of the message that reaches the audience via the media is under the total control of the political actor, the media (TV, radio, press, the Internet) are, in this case, solely a transmission channel.

Based on the above definition, we can proceed on to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of such broadcasts. One advantage and reason why these advertisements are appreciated by politicians is the fact that they can entirely control the content of the broadcasted message that reaches the electorate. It enables them to selectively choose the information they transmit and create an image of themselves according to their own wishes. However, what the politicians see as an advantage, the viewing public sees as a disadvantage. People are aware of the fact that the information transmitted can be manipulated and, hence, such advertising has a limited influence on their voting decisions. Advertisements that are not created or paid for by politicians they consider more credible, ie. information communicated by journalists in the evening news. Despite the fact that paid advertising has a limited effect on the electorate, it can influence those voters who are “drifting” or undecided². Among all modern day media, TV plays a dominant role. Television political advertising is one of the most popular techniques of marketing communication, which has undergone significant changes as far as professionalism of broadcast and, therefore, effectiveness. We can see that commercials have become more professional as they have become shorter; longwinded and unnecessary argumentation was replaced by catchy and easy to remember slogans. Generally, there has been a shift from promoting candidates’ programmes to promoting their images. Additionally, commercials increasingly play on people’s emotions instead of being targeted at their intellect. Due to more professionalism and, therefore, increased effectiveness, TV political advertising has become a leading tool in election policy.

One disadvantage of such commercial broadcasts is the financial cost which means that only those who have the money can use them. Regardless, every year there is more money spent on these commercials. According to TNS OBOP data from 2005, during the six month long parliamentary and presidential election campaigns, the money spent on such TV spots amounted to 37 million zloty³. In comparison, in 2007, during the one month long parliamentary election campaign, 24.9 mln zł was spent⁴. The cost analysis encompasses only the delineated legal period for advertising (between September 7th and October 18th) although, in reality, promotion of available political offers began much earlier. Without doubt, every year there is more money spent on party sponsored TV commercials. Table 1 lists the expenditures of the different parties on TV commercials between 7 IX. and 18.X. 2007.

Table 1. Party expenditures on TV advertising in 2007.

² Mazur, M., (2005), *Negatywna telewizyjna reklama polityczna. Doświadczenia amerykańskie i polskie*, [in:] Dobek-Ostrowska, B., (ed.), *Kampania wyborcza: marketingowe aspekty komunikowania politycznego*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, p.77.

³ “Brief”, nr 1/2006, p.16, [after] Dobek- Ostrowska, B., (2006), *Komunikowanie polityczne i publiczne. Podręcznik akademicki*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, p. 264.

⁴ PiS spent the most on election spots, <http://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/article/275668>, (13.VII.2008)

Political party	Expenditures (in mln zł)	Number of spots
Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	7.6	444
Platforma Obywatelska	6.35	438
Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe	5.15	388
Lewica i Demokraci	4.13	1086
Liga Polskich Rodzin	1.54	96
Samoobrona	0.12	18

Source: AGB Nielsen Media Research [from:] <http://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/article/275668>, (13.VII.2008)

Besides the above mentioned political advertising trends such as increasing professionalism and increased spending, political communication experts point to one more trend, that of the increasing influence of negative political advertising.

2. Negative advertising

What is negative advertising? According to B. Dobek-Ostrowska it is, “about the commercial sponsor’s political opponent, with a goal to incite negative emotions in the viewers regarding this opponent, to belittle the competition, to show their bad intentions, negative characteristics and lack of competence. Its general goal is to weaken the opponent’s image in the eyes of the viewers”⁵. Negative advertising, in contrast to positive with a goal to strengthen the image of the sponsor, is carried out not in order to build a positive image but to deprecate and destroy the political rival’s image.

The phenomenon of negative advertising has its roots in American election campaigns. One of the first of this kind was a commercial prepared by Johnson’s campaign team during the presidential election campaign. It was created by T. Shwartz and was entitled “Peace little girl” but it is better remembered as “Daisy”. The commercial’s goal was to convince the electorate that Johnson’s opponent, the democrat Barry Goldwater, is a dangerous radical in favour of atomic weapons. In the film, the little girl holds a daisy and counts its petals. There is a close up shot of her while in the background we can hear a count down. Then we can see an atomic bomb explosion and we hear Johnson’s voice, “These are the stakes - to make a world in which all of God’s children can live or go into the darkness. We must either love each other or die.” Then we hear a narrator’s voice, “On November 3rd vote for Johnson. The stakes are too high for you to stay at home.” Although the film was shown once only, on September 7, 1965, on CBS, it began a whole new phenomenon.

Photo.1 A frame from the “Daisy” commercial



Source: www.youtube.com

⁵ Dobek-Ostrowska, B., (2006), *op.cit.*, p. 399.

According to Dobek-Ostrowska, “Since those elections, negative advertising has become the norm in American election campaigns, with time also becoming common in other countries”.⁶ What is more, negative advertising has become so popular that during the US presidential elections in 1988, 60-70% of all campaign spots were negative⁷.

In Poland, negative advertising was first used during the presidential campaign in 2000. According to M. Ratajczak, “(...) it was as a result of journalist provoked discussion that we found out what this new phenomenon is”⁸. The first of its kind was the “Kalisz commercial” and it initiated public debate on negative political advertising. The film was prepared by M. Krzaklewski’s campaign team and it presented the so called ‘Kalisz events’ when at the airport minister M. Siwiec made the sign of the cross and then, encouraged by A. Kwasniewski, he kissed the ground. The commercial interpreted the event as derogatory of the Pope, John Paul II, and his actions. It was the narrator who indicated how the event should be interpreted. The commercial was only partly successful as Kwasniewski did lose some supporters but Krzaklewski did not gain any due to the fact that the electorate shifted over to Olechowski instead of Krzaklewski.

A significant change on the Polish political scene occurred during the parliamentary elections in 2007. It was then when the phrase negative advertising became popular among publicists and journalists. What is more, the politicians themselves started using it. The question is, are we dealing with a new trend then or is it a temporary, fleeting phenomenon? An analysis of 2007 parliamentary election materials broadcasted on television should shed more light on this matter.

To begin with a discussion on the legal regulation regarding campaign advertising is in order. Presently, the Polish legal system does not include any regulation on negative advertising. What is more, although there is regulation of commercial advertising, the same cannot be said for political or election commercials. This is because there is no definition of political advertising in our jurisdiction. Art. 185 and 186 of act 2 of the Sejm and Senate Statute state that, “every electoral committee, regardless of the time allotted for free of charge election programmes, can, from the beginning of election campaign, broadcast paid advertising on public and commercial radio and TV. Broadcasters may not refuse transmission of election materials and the charge for such broadcasts must be the same for all political parties. Election committee expenditures, including those in the press, may not exceed 80% of all costs allotted for the campaign, as determined per each committee”⁹. The regulation does not include any limits on the use of negative advertising. Regardless, presently we can observe a phenomenon of political campaign ‘civilisation’, that is a minimization of unethical or wrong types of behaviour. An example of this is the amended article regarding radio and television (Dz. U. Nr 29, poz. 358). In the amendment, act 3 art. 16b, the legislation states that commercials may not infringe personal dignity, discriminate people’s religious beliefs or be in favour of activity threatening to health, safety or the environment. However, in case of paid advertising breaching the above, the decision to transmit lies in the hands of the broadcaster and not PKW or KRRiT. The broadcaster cannot,

⁶ Ibidem, 407.

⁷ Kaid, L., Johnston, A., (1991), *Negative versus Positive Television Advertising in U.S. Presidential Campaigns 1960-1988*, “Journal of Communication”, vol. 41, nr 3, p.53-63.

⁸ Ratajczak, M., *Reklama negatywna w polityce*, <http://www.marketingwpolityce.zgora.pl/artykuly/mrt6.htm> (13.VII.2008 r.)

⁹ PWN information from May 9, 2005 on the way, time and place of election campaign strategy, <http://www.pkw.gov.pl/pkw2>, (13.VII.2008)

on the other hand, refuse to transmit a paid for advertisement when its content does not infringe the law.¹⁰ As can be seen based on the above, legal regulation regarding political advertising has got many loopholes which do not guarantee fair election rivalry.

3. 2007 parliamentary election TV advertising

3.1 Empirical materials and research method

The research material comprised of paid advertising by seven political parties transmitted via TV during the 2007 parliamentary election campaign. Technically, however, promotion activity began before the official starting data of the campaign. That is why analysed here are television spots between August and October 2007. The commercials examined are by the following political parties: Platforma Obywatelska, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Liga Polskich Rodzin, Lewica i Demokraci, Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, Partia Kobiet and Samoobrona RP. Altogether, the research comprises of 93 commercials.

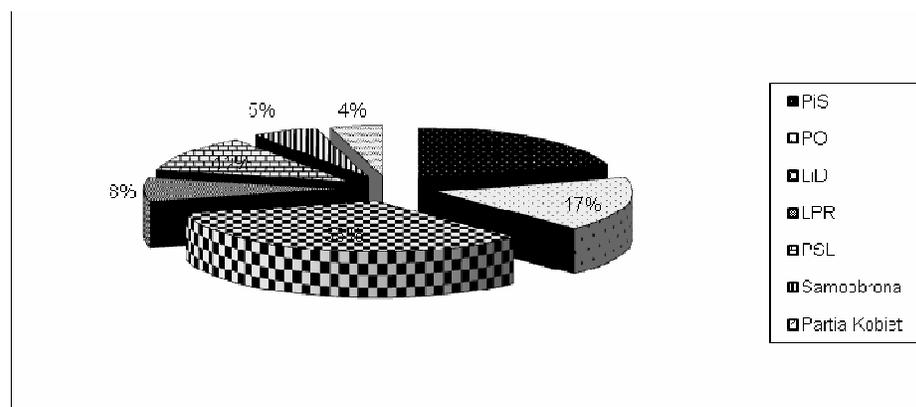
The research method used is a content analysis with a goal to determine the percentage of negative commercials broadcasted. Additionally, identified were parties using such advertising, their role in it, the parties which the commercials were targeting and the specific issues that were being attacked. Further analysed was the theme politics vs. character (content analysis was supported here by theoretical assumptions on the functional theory of political discourse). Finally, examined and illustrated was the language used in negative advertising.

3.2 Research results presentation

3.2.1 General characteristic of election TV commercials

For the purposes of this research, 93 election commercials were analysed by seven major political parties competing for seats in parliament. The following parties had the largest amount of promotion materials: Lewica i Demokraci (34%), Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (20%), Platforma Obywatelska (17%), Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (12%), Liga Polskich Rodzin (8%), Samoobrona (5%) and Partia Kobiet (4%). The percentages are delineated in Chart 1 below:

Chart 1 Election commercials by different parties (in percentages)



Source: by author

¹⁰ Żurawski, J., *Wprowadzenie do wyboru przepisów*, http://ww2.tvp.pl/include/docs/2005/09/05/Zurawski_wprowadzenie.pdf (13.VII.2008)

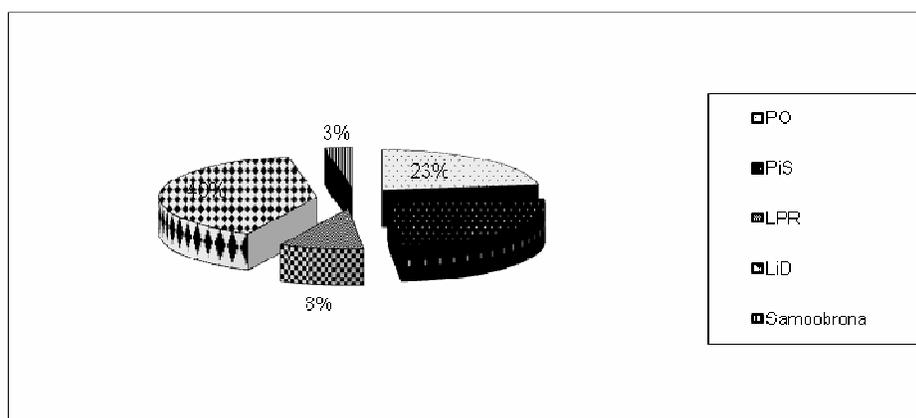
Out of 93 commercials, the majority of them was positive, 62% of total. The remaining 38% were negative. Hence, we can conclude that 1/3 of commercials broadcasted during parliamentary election campaign 2007 was negative and geared at belittling the competition.

Following will be an analysis of the negative spots only. Out of 93 commercials broadcasted 35 were negative and these will be our focus.

3.2.2 Negative advertising by party

The analysis of negative commercials broadcasted by the different parties reveals that it was Lewica i Demokraci which had the greatest percentage of black PR spots (39%). Following were Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (26%) and Platforma Obywatelska (23%). The other two parties had considerably less negative advertising, LPR- 9% and Samoobrona – 3% while the last two did not run any - PSL and Partia Kobiet.

Chart 2 Negative advertising by party (in percentages)



Source: by author

Table 2 presents the negative commercials in more detail, with titles and a short characteristic.

Table 2. Negative commercials by party

 PO	
“Cheated 1”	Based on and similar to American commercials of this type
“Cheated 2”	Targets president Lech Kaczyński’s Office and their expenditures
“Cheated 3”	Targets Jarosław Kaczyński’s Office and their expenditures
“Father Rydzyk”	PO’s first official campaign spot, in negative light father Rydzyk, in positive – Donald Tusk
“Kaczmarek”	In negative light Prime Minister Kaczyński and Janusz Kaczmarek, in positive – Julia Pitera
“Nurses Hunger Strike”	In negative light Prime Minister Kaczyński and his attitude to nurses on strike, in positive – Bronisław Komorowski

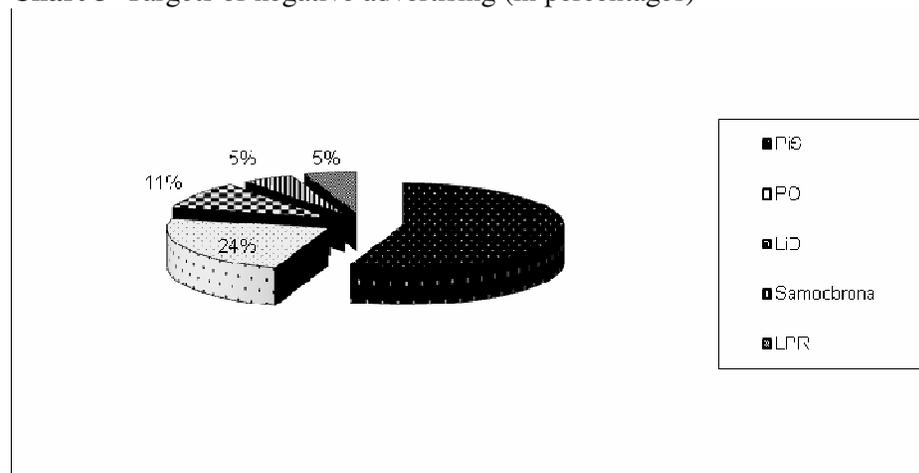
“Not long ago in Poland”	Commercial in response to PiS’ spots using the same idea and the same actors.
“Spot about life”	Negative picture of the country under PiS rule with contrasting, positive images of changes after PO coming into power. With information that during the last two years nearly 14 000 people have died on Polish roads, later changed to 11 000.
	
“Contra”	Commercial in response to PO spots, comparison of average people’s incomes to Donald Tusk’s.
“PO grant”	Attack on PO for taking a government grant for political parties despite earlier declarations of refusal.
“System”	A thriller film showing how in the past bribery was rampant and that Kaczyński and Ziobro put an end to it.
“Warsaw spot”	PiS accuses PO of ineptitude in Warsaw management, with endless road construction and a growing traffic problem
“Living room”	A sequel to the “System” commercial. The spot includes many negative connotations to PO and others (for those more into politics - a meringue allusion to Jolanta Kwasniewska).
“Scandals”	A review of scandals from the last several years with a comment that Jarosław Kaczyński put an end to corruption.
“Headquarters”	A third PiS series. This time it shows PO headquarters without ideas for a campaign or governing.
“Cheers”	Warns against hospital privatisation. A spot with Zbigniew Religa. The material includes the slogan, “Choose better”.
“Cheers 2”	A short version of the “Cheers” spot.
	
“Campaign against hypocrisy”	LPR attacks Jarosław Kaczyński’s governing for not fulfilling promises. The First Lady shown in negative light.
“Kurski”	Jacek Kurski shown in negative light, as a liar who takes credit for other people’s achievements.
“Anti-war spot”	Anti-war spot sharply criticized by all other parties as anti-Semitic and in bad taste.
	
“Meadow”	It shows LiD as a party which can guarantee peace on the Polish political scene in contrast to presently governing PiS.
“Faces”	The commercials shows well known politicians with funny faces. The film intended to ridicule. It was accompanied by the slogan “Let’s change Poland’s face”.
“Jarosław Kaczyński’s lips, eyes”	A commercial with Jarosław Kaczyński.

“Parochial aggression”	Aleksander Kwaśniewski states that Poland needs patriotism, not parochial, full of complexes aggression.
“5 minutes”	Wojciech Olejniczak convinces that it takes five minutes to do away with PiS rule and that LiD is a friendlier party.
“9 letters to the President”	Commercials attacking PiS with these slogans: "We do not second this" "We will change it" "We are not grateful to PiS" "We are not pretending" "We will not comment" "With respect to people" "No orders from Torun" "Do not be afraid" "Shame on you Mr. Ziobro"
	
“Poland – our common good”	Andrzej Lepper declares that Poland is our common good and not owned by the brothers’ party.

3.2.3 Targets of negative advertising

The largest percentage (55%) of negative commercials were targeted at PiS. The Kaczynski brothers party was attacked by all other parties (PO, LPR, Samoobrona and LiD) in the 2007 parliamentary election campaign. The remaining percentages are as follows: 24% commercials targeted PO and 11% – LiD. Both PO and LiD were attacked solely by right wing parties (PiS and LPR). The least targeted parties were Samoobrona (5%) and LPR (5%) which were attacked by the left wing party LiD. The parties which did not use negative advertising (PSL and Paria Kobiet) were also not targeted by the other parties.

Chart 3 Targets of negative advertising (in percentages)



Source: by author

At this stage, we can formulate some conclusions. It seems that the predominant target during the 2007 parliamentary election campaign was the governing party. PiS was targeted by all parties using negative commercials. The majority of attacks came from the left wing party (LiD). Also, PO concentrated 100% of its black PR on PiS. Moreover, interesting is the fact that both PO and LiD did not attack each other but were rather indifferent to one another. Finally, the two parties which did not use negative advertising (PSL and Partia Kobiet) were not targeted by the other parties.

3.2.4 Negative advertising subject matter

The next step in the analysis was to determine the subjects of negative advertising against the two parties most targeted, PiS (55%) and PO (24%). As we can see, there is a considerable difference in the number of negative commercials used against the two parties. In order to find out what the subjects attacked were, carried out was a general as well as detailed analysis of the commercials' subject matter. To do that, first introduced will be two terms from political discourse functional theory terminology¹¹. They are policy and character. The term character describes a politician's characteristic traits including personality, leadership skills and values that he lives by. Policy is defined in the categories of governing activities and related issues. A candidate's policy will include future plans (with detailed plans of activity) and general goals. Table 3 presents the results obtained for PiS and PO regarding these two categories.

Table 3. The commercials' subject matter (in percentages)

	PiS	PO
Policy	68%	82%
Character	32%	18%

Source: by author

In both cases, the subject matter of the majority of negative commercials was policy. In case of PiS, criticized were three issues – the promise of an 'inexpensive country', father Rydzyk's influence and the establishment of CBA. Generally, the governing party was attacked for its past actions. In case of PO, under attack were: corruption, lack of political programme and privatization of hospitals (all of these are future plans except for corruption). As we can see then, the governing party was criticized for its past actions while the party aspiring to come into power – for its future plans. Another interesting issue is the fact that there were considerably more commercials targeting PiS character, specifically the character traits of its leaders criticized for aggression, lying and lack of respect for society.

3.2.5 Negative advertising language

The analysis of negative commercials carried out allowed us to delineate several common language traits characteristic of this type of advertising.

The message that a majority of negative spots carry in order to belittle the competition is that of frustration. As many as 64% of black PR commercials used phrases with a frustration connotation, ie, "There was supposed to be a moral renaissance", "They promised

¹¹Functional theory of political discourse by W. L. Benoit is used to analyse political broadcasts created during election campaigns, See: Benoit, W.L, (2007), *Communication in Political Campaigns*, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

but meanwhile...”, “It was supposed to be...but done was...”, “It was they who did...”, “They wanted war”, “If it wasn’t for them, it would never be this way”.

Negative commercials often have a goal to trivialize the competitor’s activity. 21% of black PR spots included phrases attacking the opponent via belittling his actions ie. “Your wife forgave you after this?, She forgave (him)”, “Shame on you...”, “Would you entrust your savings to someone who...?”

In addition, negative advertising aims to mobilize the electorate. As many as 72% of black PR spots included phrases encouraging people to change the present situation., “Don’t trust those who disappointed you”, “Choose better”, “We will change it”, “We won’t allow it”, “It’s time to put an end to this”.

Moreover, negative spots often use vulgarities. This was the case regarding 9% of the analysed negative spots¹². Among these were: PO’s commercial “Not long ago in Poland” (what the fu.. is this, what has got into you?”, Lechu, take them, get them the fu.. out of here”), PiS’s “System” commercial (fu.. , I know they don’t take, we’ll have to do away with Ziobro and Kaczyński”), and LiD’s “8th letter to the President” (the oligarchy speaking, (...) why the fu... should I get for it?)

CONCLUSION

Empirical research on television advertising shows that election campaigns are becoming tougher, as can be seen based on the example of 2007 parliamentary elections, although limited research materials do give us absolute certainty. In 2007, 1/3 of all commercials broadcasted were negative in character. There were five political parties which engaged in this activity and three, PO, PiS and LiD, were most active. These parties were both the sources and the targets of negative advertising. Other parties, like LPR and Samoobrona, were much less active in this sphere or did not partake in the activity altogether (PSL, Partia Kobiet). What is worth noting is the fact that the parties which did not broadcast negative spots were also not the target of any. Negative advertising is governed by its own rules, there are attackers and those attacked, there are strategies and alliances (ie. alliance between PO and LiD). Technically, everything may be targeted and although opponents mainly focus on policy, character is of importance as well. Negative advertising also uses specific expression measures; it is a language of frustration combined with vulgarisms. It is a language of conflicting elements such as radicalism and trivialization. Radicalism is geared toward the electorate, trivialization- the opponent. There is one goal in mind – to belittle the rival who stands for stupidity and to convince the electorate that trivial problems require radical solutions. Is it possible to avoid dirty politics in modern day? Certainly, as PSL and Partia Kobiet have done. However, election results prove that those who engage in black PR obtain better election results¹³. There remains a question – is there a correlation between negative advertising and election results and is it a positive one? What is obvious is the fact the negative advertising is becoming all the more popular as a form of promotion since using it are not only peripheral or populist parties but major, parliamentary ones as well.

¹² Partia Kobiet although it did not use negative advertising, it did use vulgarisms (spot with Agnieszka Rywlik)

¹³ PiS – 41.51%, PO – 32.11%, LiD – 13.15%, PSL – 8.91%, Samoobrona 1.53%, LPR, 1.3% [from] *Ostateczne wyniki wyborów*, http://fakty.interia.pl/raport/wybory_2007 (13 VII 2008)