

Wacky U.S. election ads hit new low in personal smears, analysts say

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WASHINGTON (CP) - Talk about a blood sport.

If you believe the television ads in an unusually nasty U.S. election campaign, there are candidates who pay for sex, support sex between adults and children, like the idea of giving abortion pills to school kids and favour jolting them with Taser weapons.

No one's expecting a lull in vicious personal attacks as Republicans scramble to thwart the momentum of Democrats who appear poised to regain control of the House of Representatives and perhaps the Senate in next week's midterm elections.

For many, it was a new low when Republicans slammed black Democrat Senate candidate Harold Ford Jr. in Tennessee for once attending a Playboy-sponsored Super Bowl party.

The TV ad was widely denounced last week as pandering to racist sentiments in the state where the Klu Klux Klan was born by featuring a bare-shouldered white woman who winks at the camera and invites Ford to call her.

Amid all the furor, it was replaced by an ad that says Ford "wants to give the abortion pill to our schoolchildren," something the candidate vehemently denies.

But there's no end of negative ads in almost every important race, where candidates are accused of being perverts, liars, hypocrites, greedy, corrupt and just plain incompetent.

Wisconsin Representative Ron Kind, a Democrat, has been accused of paying for sex because he opposed a move to stop government funding for research on the subject at the National Institutes of Health.

That money could have been spent on body armour for U.S. troops, says the ad, which concludes: "Ron Kind pays for sex, not soldiers."

New York Democrat Michael Acuri's rival says he's been billing taxpayers for phone sex. It turns out someone in his hotel room misdialed and hung up in seconds. The call cost US\$1.25.

And Ohio Democratic challenger John Cranley was accused of voting to allow children as young as seven to be tased with 50,000 volts of electricity.

Meanwhile, Cranley voted on Cincinnati's city council against raising the police regulation's minimum age for the non-lethal weapons to 10 after opponents worried using other methods like batons or pepper spray could do more harm.

"I think it's worse than usual," said John Greer, a politics professor at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee who studies advertising.

"The parties are polarized, the stakes are high and neither party has a lot to run on. The Republicans certainly find themselves in a mess and the Democrats haven't articulated a message on Iraq," said Greer, whose book "In Defense of Negativity" points out that negative ads work and there's a place in politics for revealing some harsh truths.

One stark Republican ad that features al-Qaida leaders and some of their most threatening statements against the sound of a ticking bomb is scary but generates discussion about an important topic, he said.

"Sometimes you have to inject emotion to get people to pay attention," said Greer.

"You have a lot of races and you can find some outlandish ads just because of the numbers" in the midterms that occur every two years.

There's a lot on the line. Pollsters say Democrats seem well positioned to capture more than the 15 districts they need to control the 435-seat House for the first time since 1994, largely because of a backlash against Republicans over the Iraq war. The Senate, where they have to get six more seats, will be trickier.

So this year, it's definitely dirtier, agrees political analyst Larry Sabato at the University of Virginia.

"It's dirty every two years. But there's just so much more of it. They don't do positives anymore except for bios or endorsement spots."

A recent study of TV ads in the country's top 101 markets from the non-partisan FactCheck.org at the Annenberg Public Policy Center found both parties are grinding out smears.

Democrats do it too. One ad, for instance, accused Florida Republican Clay Shaw of profiting from a "drug deal" by trading in a pharmaceutical company's stock based on little or no evidence.

But Republicans stand out "for the sheer volume of the assault on the personal character of Democratic House challengers," said the group, while Democrat ads tend to focus on policies of their rivals or their performance in office.

"What stood out in the (Republican) ads was a pronounced tendency to be petty and personal and sometimes careless with the facts."

In one case, a particularly bitter attack that's been widely condemned didn't come from an ad and some say it may hurt the party in power.

Conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh accused Canadian-born actor Michael J. Fox, who is appearing in ads for Democrats who favour stem-cell research, of exaggerating his Parkinson's disease symptoms.

"The nerve of this guy," said Sabato, noting Limbaugh was investigated over his addiction to painkillers.

"He's been abusing drugs for years. It's sickening. That tells you what it's all about. I guess Rush is back on his medication."

Shanto Iyengar, a politics expert at Stanford University, said it's no wonder the attacks ads are so voracious because the incentives are too enticing to ignore.

"The more controversy you generate, the more likely you'll end up on the front page of the New York Times."

Besides, said Iyengar, negative ads energize traditional Democrats and Republicans but reduce voter turnout among independents and weak partisans.

In this race, that benefits Republicans because surveys suggest most uncommitted voters are leaning toward voting for Democrats.