

PM with Mark Colvin

Monday to Friday from 6:10pm on ABC Local Radio and 5:10pm on Radio National.

The rise of negativity in politics

Mark Colvin reported this story on Monday, October 10, 2011 18:30:00

MARK COLVIN: The growing negativity of modern politics like much in political campaigning worldwide has its origins in the United States.

It's impossible to say exactly how and when it started but the beginnings of today's attack campaigning were probably in the late '80s and early '90s.

American campaigning has got nastier and more personal ever since.

Shanto Iyengar is Professor of communication and political science at Stanford University and he's been following this trend in America since his 1995 book *Going Negative*. That book analysed the 1992 US presidential election.

I asked Professor Iyengar to compare then and now.

SHANTO IYENGAR: The main shift I would say has been in the subject matter of the attacks. Today the subject matter is focusing mainly on personal character related attributes of candidates. This candidate is a womaniser. This candidate is a chronic liar.

In the 1990s it was mainly at the level of policy and performance - things that people might consider substantively relevant.

MARK COLVIN: So for instance the question of Willie Horton?

SHANTO IYENGAR: Well now the Willie Horton example, it is, that was in some ways a substantive attack. But the controversy generated by the Willie Horton spot was of course the use of racial imagery. Mr Horton of course being African-American and portraying him on-screen, that was an open invitation for people to invoke racial stereotypes.

MARK COLVIN: Well then sort of half way between then and now we look at the John Kerry campaign and there was something called the Swift boat campaign which used a lot of half truths and actual lies about his service record.

SHANTO IYENGAR: Absolutely right. But what's ironic about both the Willie Horton ad and the Swift boat ad, both were completely full of distortions and half truths.

But this is the reality of campaign strategy in the United States. It pays to air messages that are controversial because the more controversial the ad the more likely journalists pay attention to it.

The Swift boat ad received more attention in August and September of 2004 than the war in Iraq.

MARK COLVIN: Journalists may pay attention to it but does it actually change campaigns?

SHANTO IYENGAR: No it doesn't change the outcome in a sense - very few people in the United States are persuaded by commercials.

But what these commercials do is strengthen their party inclinations. So you get this reinforcement effect.

So the Democrats who saw the Willie Horton ad became even more likely to vote Democratic and the Republicans who saw the Swift boat ad became even more anti Kerry in their views.

MARK COLVIN: So it's about polarisation.

SHANTO IYENGAR: Exactly.

MARK COLVIN: Am I right in thinking that the Republicans were earlier onto this and have been tougher with it?

SHANTO IYENGAR: Oh yes. In the American context the Republicans are considered the pioneers. People like Roger Ailes who was involved in the early Reagan campaigns, they're often seen as the sort of the founding fathers of the going negative strategy.

MARK COLVIN: And of course he's now the chief of Fox News...

SHANTO IYENGAR: Of course.

MARK COLVIN: Do you see a connection?

SHANTO IYENGAR: (Laughs) Well Fox News of course is a, that's a different question. But it's a very successful strategy to establish a brand name network that's associated with ideology and the ratings tells us that they've done very well.

MARK COLVIN: Should the Democrats be more ruthless?

SHANTO IYENGAR: Well the Democrats need to become more media savvy and they've shown some signs.

So we now have talk show hosts, we have a network in America, MSNBC, which has some liberal programs. They're trying to emulate, they want to be the Fox on the left. And they've been doing okay. People are watching.

MARK COLVIN: They started a left-wing talkback radio network and it failed miserably didn't it?

SHANTO IYENGAR: It did. It did. In general we are not...

MARK COLVIN: So what goes wrong for the Democrats?

SHANTO IYENGAR: Well the Democrats just don't seem to have a kind of a coherent ideology. I mean they don't have this consistent world view which you get day in and day out on Fox.

MARK COLVIN: What kind of effect do you think negative campaigning is going to have in the next election?

SHANTO IYENGAR: Well the conventional wisdom in the consulting fraternity and in certain quarters of the academic world is that negative campaigning leads to increased cynicism and therefore makes people less likely to vote.

And my guess is given the economic scenario in the United States and you don't necessarily need a negative campaign to make you more cynical and more depressed.

So my hunch is that there will probably be a reduction in the level of turnout.

MARK COLVIN: And a smaller turnout favours the Republicans?

SHANTO IYENGAR: Generally speaking yes I would say that people with higher levels of education, the more affluent, these are people who are more likely to vote. They tend to be, and that tends to be correlated with being Republican.

Campaigns on a worldwide basis are becoming more professionalised and the more you rely on consultants and

people whose job it is to win elections and to use professional public relations strategies you are indeed going to see an increase in negative campaigning for the simple reason that people the world over tend to view politicians with a slightly jaundiced eye.

MARK COLVIN: A lot of people would like to see fewer consultants in the business of politics. A lot of people would like to see fewer focus groups involved in the making of decisions and going back to a situation where politicians acted on their own principles.

Are we beyond that? Can we never get back to that?

SHANTO IYENGAR: Well it's very difficult.

Even in the case of the so-called televised debates where you, theoretically you are supposed to have spontaneous exchanges with no preparation and no choreography, in the United States it's been demonstrated time and time again that the candidates engage in dress rehearsals. They practise. The candidates are coached and even when they're asked a question they often don't answer it.

MARK COLVIN: If say president Obama decided to be much more principled, decided not to listen to the consultants and the focus groups, could he do himself good?

SHANTO IYENGAR: Well I think he could have done himself good if he had gone in there without the track record of the last few years. But given what he's done and he's bent over backwards to be conciliatory towards the Republicans, and of course they've rebuffed him each and every time, I think he would have difficulty. I don't think that the symbol change is going to resonate with the American public this time around.

MARK COLVIN: Shanto Iyengar, Professor of communication and political science at Stanford University.