

When it comes to campaign ads, Klein, Shaw play rough

By Anthony Man
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Anyone hoping to unwind with *Oprah*, *Law & Order* or even the 11 o'clock news can't escape the most noxious images on South Florida television: two veteran politicians clawing at each other.

With the election only six days away, television ads for U.S. Rep. Clay Shaw and his Democratic challenger, state Sen. Ron Klein, are ubiquitous, and overwhelmingly negative.

Since the first one aired 14 weeks ago, about 35 different commercials have cycled on and off broadcast and cable channels in Broward and Palm Beach counties.

There's the one with the little girl drinking the big glass of water as an announcer suggests Shaw -- himself a cancer survivor -- would allow her to be poisoned with cancer-causing chemicals. It concludes with the warning that the Fort Lauderdale Republican's "insider deals are just plain toxic."

There's another suggesting Klein, a Boca Raton Democrat, traded his vote in Tallahassee for cash to stuff in his campaign coffers, leaving viewers with the question, "Who does he work for?"

By Election Day, spending on those and other television ads could hit \$10 million. It's creating an onslaught "you can't avoid," said Kevin Hill, of Weston, an associate professor of political science at Florida International University.

South Florida isn't unique.

"This year in general there are a lot of negative ads," said John Geer, a Vanderbilt University political science professor and author of *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns*. "The reasons for so many attacks this year are, the stakes are so high [and] neither party has a lot to run on."

Though most good-government advocates decry negative ads, campaigns know they work.

"The goal is to reach people emotionally," said Marty Rogol, a principal in Marketing Concepts Inc. in Jupiter. "Arguments that go to the intellect don't do nearly as well as things that go to the emotion. And the negative is emotional appeal."

The negative advertising hasn't seemed to please many voters.

"They're badgering each other. They're always telling you how bad the other guy is. I don't like that," said Robert Giorgini, an independent voter from Coconut Creek. "It's dirty politics."

Margaret Wolter, president of the Broward County chapter of the League of Women Voters, said she thinks about reaching for the "mute" button when the Shaw and Klein ads appear. "My husband and I kind of roll our eyes and say, 'Oh God, another one,'" she said.

Brian Lawlor, general manager of WPTV-Ch. 5, the top-rated station in the West Palm Beach market, said, "We have been getting a lot of feedback from our viewers frustrated with the number of ads and the negative tone." WPTV is a *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* news partner.

The tone isn't any more positive in the direct mail efforts. Like the television campaigns, the mailers make bold statements slamming the target and feature photographs making the opponent look menacing.

Some are comical, such as the Republican one showing Klein as the shroud-wearing Grim Reaper who allegedly wants to tax dead people. The Democratic mailer places a robe-clad Shaw by a pool with a plate of seafood and a

fancy cocktail, supposedly after voting to help drug companies.

The point of the ads is to prevent undecided voters from thinking it's acceptable to go out and vote for the other guy.

"There's no ad that I know of that gets partisans of the other side to jump ship," said Shanto Iyengar, a professor of political science and communications at Stanford University. "What negative ads can do, and this is the next best thing, is to get prospective supporters of your opponent to have second thoughts and decide to stay home."

That's especially important in Florida's 22nd District, which takes in beachside and suburban communities from mid-Broward County to the northern end of Palm Beach County. An unusually high 25 percent of the registered voters are independents.

Negative ads turn off independents more than others and motivate each party's base voters against the opposition, Iyengar said.

Klein's campaign manager, Brian Smoot, said attempts by Shaw and the Republicans to label his candidate as an unethical lawyer-lobbyist -- untrue, Klein argues -- have had an effect.

Smoot takes comfort in what he said is the Klein camp's success in labeling Shaw as an unthinking toady of President Bush, a characterization the 26-year incumbent vigorously disputes.

The candidates started their advertising campaigns with positive spots, and each side said the other is to blame for the negative turn.

"Unfortunately, you also have to be able to compete on TV, and if your opponent is going negative in TV, you have to be critical of their record," Smoot said.

Shaw's press secretary, Gail Gitcho, countered: "We're not going to sit back and let Ron Klein take nasty and knowingly false attacks at Congressman Shaw."

The attacks by both sides have been bolstered by even harsher advertising from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and the National Republican Congressional Committee.

Don't expect relief before Election Day.

"It's one of the more competitive races in the country," said Ed Petru, deputy communications director for the National Republican Congressional Committee. "It's going to be a hard-fought campaign all the way through to the end."

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