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When Politicians Attack

It looks like a trailer for the latest slasher flick, a dissonant drone slowly builds to a crescendo, and just when you expect to stumble across a dismembered corpse or get attacked by a knife-wielding maniac... you see State Treasurer Judy Barr Topinka! Ahh!

So goes the script for today's negative political ads, which have launched an alarming assault on the American tradition of informed and inclusive democracy.

In earlier times, politicians issued detailed descriptions of their platform and either won elections by rallying their base of supporters or by capturing swing voters. Nowadays campaign managers craft ads that are completely devoid of policy statements and designed to discourage people from going to the polls.

Many of these ads are directed towards an opponent's followers or the undecided, and try to weaken their ballot box resolve by tarnishing a rival's image. Politicians use a variety of propaganda techniques to smear their competition, but most resort to emotional appeals, rather than rational argument. This creates the twin problem of an uninformed and uninvolved electorate.

Consider the heinous and ludicrous accusation "Hillary Clinton kicks puppies." Now imagine the visuals that could go with it: Hillary's high heels morph into jackboot cleats, just before they punt a hapless pup over a goalpost.

Aside from saying nothing about the sponsoring candidate's policy, these types of ads pander to people's basic instincts and divert attention away from real issues. They also lead the public to choose candidates based on poor criteria, like "Hillary hates dogs, and I love dogs, hence I won't vote for her, even though I agree with her on healthcare." Weak partisans may even abandon the electoral process entirely, thinking, "Why should I vote for a bunch of puppy kickers?"

Those who doubt such claims are taken seriously need only look at the recent spate of "Barack Obama isn't really black" comments. For in the zeal to investigate these charges and determine their accuracy, the media unwittingly lend the allegations credence by repeating them. The body politic is none the wiser, and in the end truth becomes another casualty of negative political ads.

Campaigns that rely on ignorance and intimidation threaten the very existence of American democracy, and if politicians really want to uphold our country's values, they should start by running for office in a responsible way.