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## Web sites, pranks cloak campaign jabs in humor

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Associated Press

**COLUMBUS, Ohio** - Two politicians walk into a forum. And nothing much funny happens.

Campaign staff and anonymous supporters are letting off steam in otherwise tense races by trying to be humorous in Web postings and mailings. An attorney general candidate has put a "Simpsons" parody and a political puppet show for toddlers on his Web site; a prankster made a "position changer" hand-held fan to make fun of gubernatorial candidate Jim Petro.

Whether such gimmicks actually influence the outcome is another matter.

"They do get messages out, but they do get mixed results," said Brian Rothenberg, spokesman for the Ohio Democratic Party.

Republican consultant Mark Weaver, who works for attorney general candidate Betty Montgomery's campaign, dismissed most gimmicks, even though he was once behind one. "It's mostly for the amusement of political insiders," he said.

But Subodh Chandra, a Democrat running for attorney general, said he noticed a spike in out-of-state campaign contributions in the days after the puppet show and cartoon were posted on his campaign Web site and on a politics blog.

"Humor is sometimes the most effective method to cut through all the shouting and grandstanding that goes on in campaigns," Chandra said.

The gimmicks seem to be on the rise because campaigns and voters are more Internet-savvy, said Brian Usher, a Columbus communications consultant and coeditor of the upcoming book "Ohio Politics." Official campaign sites are straightforward, but voters and candidates are paying more attention to bloggers, who tend to be irreverent.

Hijinks are as old as politics. In the 1970s, Usher said, someone blanketed Capitol Square with leaflets showing Gov. James Rhodes' head imposed on a naked man's body with strategically placed copy of "Life" magazine. The magazine had done an expose of Rhodes' campaign finance practices.

That prompted an Elections Commission investigation, which never found the pamphleteer. The latest gimmicks provoke milder reactions, ranging from guffaws to groans.

Statehouse reporters twice received anonymous deliveries last year of foil-wrapped chocolate coins as a symbol of criticism against GOP fundraiser Tom Noe, accused of spending on himself some of the \$50 million in state money entrusted to him to invest in rare coins for the state insurance fund for injured workers.

The pranks don't directly reach voters, but get a message through to lobbyists and lawmakers - and sometimes gets the news media to take the jokes public.

General swipes at the Republican Party, linking several officeholders to Noe's coin dealings, have transformed into sharper jabs at officeholders. Someone has mailed fans that accuse Petro of changing his mind on guns, abortion and taxes, along with a Petro "laundry ticket," looking like a dry-cleaning stub, accusing him of having "folded" the early investigation of the investment scandal at the Bureau of Workers' Compensation.

"They're sometimes childish," Petro said Wednesday of the gimmicks.

A day earlier, Petro launched a Web site poking fun at his opponent in Tuesday's primary, Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell, complete with goofy sound effects as viewers take a quiz on Blackwell's positions.

"All of that has been researched very carefully," he said.

Behind-the-scenes rib-poking contrasts with an ever bloodier slugfest on the airwaves.

Last week, Petro reported spending \$1.6 million on ads since January, and Blackwell \$1.2 million. In a last-minute barrage of ads, they are accusing each other of being hypocritical. Spending on those will be released in June.

There's little laughter there, except of the nervous kind.

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