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New York Newsday - March 29, 1995

Harry and Louise Kick Butt in Albany

Don't be fooled by the budget negotiations in Albany between Gov. Pataki and state legislative leaders. The real battle over the budget is not on the steps of the state capitol but in the homes of New Yorkers, where television and radio commercials are warning voters about the risks of excessive tax cuts or continued state spending. The ritualistic fight over the state budget - once an inside game controlled by the governor, the Senate majority leader and the speaker of the Assembly - has been transformed this year by the strategic maneuvers of union leaders and groups such as NYPIRG and CHANGE-NY to mobilize voters at the grassroots level so that rank-and-file legislators are forced to choose between their party leaders and their constituents' wishes (and fears).

Clones of "Harry and Louise," the couple that so effectively led the TV war against the Clinton health plan, have come to New York, but here they are working for public employee unions, not insurance companies, as they make the case against excessive budget cuts. Voters, who thought the political season ended on Election Day, are discovering that politics is no longer a seasonal business that ends in November. In fact, the current battle over the budget is simply an extension of the gubernatorial campaign, in which money to pay for television advertising played a vital role. The choice now is not between candidates but whether or not to cut the budget and taxes, and if so, by how much.

Clearly, Pataki and Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno misunderstood the election results. They thought that winning control of the Executive Mansion meant winning control of the state government and its budget. But Pataki's threat to shut down the state government if a budget were not adopted by April Fool's Day unleashed a locally based campaign that is bypassing the traditional political parties and legislative leaders and going straight to the voters.

NYPIRG, for example, has distributed millions of copies of the free "Weekly News" to subway riders, urging citizens to protest planned mass transit cutbacks by calling their state legislators, whose names and telephone numbers are listed. In Republican State Sen. Guy Vellela's Bronx district, leaflets with his photograph are being distributed by NYPIRG and Local 1199 of the health care workers' union highlighting his role in proposed transit and health cutbacks. And CHANGE-NY, along with business groups and the Republican State Committee, has sponsored TV commercials in several upstate Democratic Assembly districts, which Pataki carried in November's gubernatorial elections, in an attempt to weaken the Democratic Party's control over the state Assembly.

No matter what happens in Albany, the story of 1995 is that the budget process can no longer be

dominated by three people. The political parties are losing their grip on their own legislators. Party loyalty is no match for television and radio ads that reach every constituent's home. Radio and television advertising, widely regarded as a force that undermines democracy, is emerging as a source of political energy that will surely intensify in the years ahead.

By next year, the political season likely will be almost as long as the NBA season, stretching from Labor to Memorial Day. With cable television offering an inexpensive way to target specific communities, protest marches and demonstrations in the state capital will be superceded by political ads, tailored for distinct age, racial and ethnic groups.

Yes, there will be a state budget this year. But political advertising is transforming the old system that excluded citizens, and even most lawmakers, from directly influencing the process. When the governor and legislative leaders reach agreement this time, it will not be the traditional budget package issued from the top and passively accepted by loyal party legislators. No, this year's budget is the start of a new era in which the governor and legislators will sprinkle holy water on a budget shaped largely by the electronic media.

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