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argued that Whelan, an Atlantic City swimming instructor and lawmaker, lined his pockets at taxpayer expense.

In another mailer festooned with handcuffs, Republicans suggested Whelan was a failure as the resort's mayor.

At the same time, Democrats have taken a juvenilely comical low road, Photoshopping Polistina's pleasantly smiling face onto an array of \$1 million bills and the bodies of vampires and game show hosts.

At one point in an ad, produced by the Democrat-aligned Washington, D.C., media firm Kennedy Communications, the otherwise respectable Polistina is characterized as "The Original Boardwalk Hustler" because his engineering firm does significant public work and because he voted against the \$29.4 billion state budget proposed by Democrats that returned money to education, healthcare and nursing homes after Christie's proposed budget cut funding.

Another ad accusing Polistina of "milking" taxpayers features the assemblyman with a line of miniature \$100 bills across his upper lip where a milk moustache would be.

In a Halloween-themed ad, a bat clutching two bundles of \$100 bills flies in front of the full moon. The production quality is high enough that the bat, and its airborne cash, is clearly reflected in the dappled waters beneath.

By the Oct. 11 deadline for the first campaign finance reports, state parties had already spent \$29,240 on just the cost of postage needed to stuff 2nd District residents' mailboxes with the material.

However, the overall \$1.3 million spent by both parties as of Oct. 11 doesn't count the money spent by outside groups. A national Republican organization announced last month it was targeting Whelan as it sought to promote more Republicans in office.

The overall effect is corrosive.

A landmark study by a pair of Stanford political scientists who looked at the 1992 races for the U.S. Senate showed that the closer the race, the meaner the campaign. And the meaner the campaign, Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar found in their 1996 book "Going Negative: How Political Advertising Alienates and Polarizes the American Electorate," the fewer people who participate in the election.

Elections that they perceived as "positive" had 57 percent turnout, while "mixed" campaigns saw a 52

percent turnout and "negative" campaigns were won with about 50 percent of the electorate.

The pair also saw that when people voted, they were more inclined to ignore negative races.

About 3 percent of those who voted cast ballots for president but for Senate candidates that year. In "negative" campaigns, the number of people who avoided the Senate race jumped to 6 percent.

Ansolabehere and Iyengar theorized that negative campaigning kept people from voting for several reasons.

First, they said, the ads could demoralize partisan supporters, keeping them home. Otherwise, the ads could disenchant the general public with both candidates.

Finally, they said, this choice could make voters bitter toward candidates and the process by which we choose leaders. Ansolabehere and Iyengar wrote, "Negative campaigning may diminish the power of civic duty and may undermine the legitimacy of the entire electoral process."

Throughout the early part of the campaign, both Polistina and Whelan seemed to spend time trying to say the other was more like Nucky Johnson, the corrupt Roaring '20s-era Atlantic County political boss, said Daniel J. Douglas, the director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. And voters are

probably bored the voters by now," Douglas said. "It was so focused, so relentless, that the voters are probably turned off by now and the candidates have to turn to real issues."

Brigid Harrison is a political science and law professor with Montclair State University who lives in Galloway Township. She said outside of the region the race for the 2nd District will be seen as a referendum on Gov. Christie, even though it has turned on small, parochial issues such as government contracts and political jobs.

While both Whelan and Polistina have demonstrated they can hold office, they have avoided making the election a mandate on Christie, or about the casino industry, or even about the relatively high regional unemployment.

She was unsurprised, though.

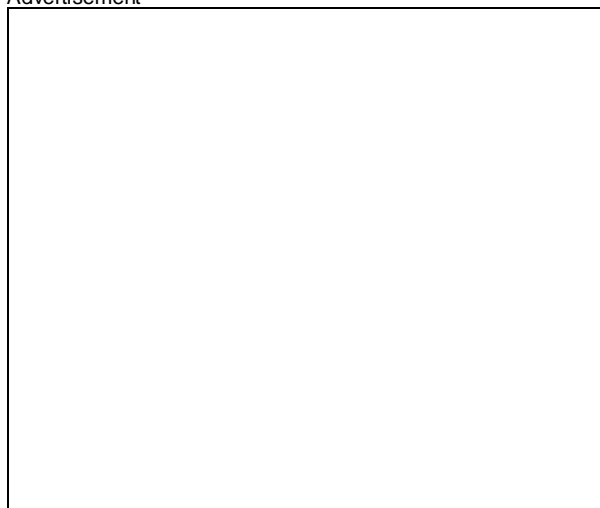
In this day and age, she said, "you would be hard-pressed to find a television ad or a mailer that serves the voters."

"We have incredibly complex issues facing our municipalities, facing our state and facing our



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