

## Case Study

# THE IMPACT OF NEGATIVE POLITICAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS ON VOTERS IN US ELECTIONS

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### Abstract

Political communicators recognize that negative political media campaigning has consequences on voters' perception of candidate and the part he or she belongs to. Many observers also fear that negative campaigning has unintended but detrimental effects on the political system itself. Different meta-analytic assessment of the relevant literature found mixed reliable evidence for these claims. This research reveals that the negative media campaigning is an effective means of winning votes, even though it tends to be more memorable and stimulate knowledge about the campaign. It is also found that there is reliable evidence that negative campaigning depresses voter turnout, lower feelings of political efficacy, trust in government, and possibly overall public mood.

**Keywords:** Co-branding, Franchising, Retailing

### Introduction

Political communication literature recognizes that politicians have used various methods, such as negative political ad in media, whistle-stop speeches, political and political rallies in order to win votes (Chang et al., 1998.). " Voters seem to be increasingly turned off by negative campaign ads and mudslinging, but that hasn't deterred political candidates from using these tactics. From this perspective, I ask three research questions to analyze the impact of negative political campaigning: (1) do negative campaigns work? (2) do negative campaigns harm the political system? (3) is there any evidence of voter backlash against negative campaigning?

Setting aside the question of whether or not things have gotten worse, there remain to be addressed important questions about the effects of negative campaigning. However, clear answers to these questions are not readily forthcoming because research on negative campaigning and negative campaign advertising has yielded conflicting results (Craig and Kane 2000). Some studies suggest that negative campaign ads are more easily remembered and, therefore, have a greater influence on voters' attitudes and vote decisions (Chang et al., 1998). Other research, however, provides evidence that the opposite is true. Moreover, while some research suggests that candidates who run negative ads are more likely to win, other research suggests that running negative ads makes a candidate more likely (or

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at least equally likely) to lose. There are also conflicting conclusions about the effect of negative advertising on voter turnout--some research concludes that negative campaigning depresses turnout while other findings suggest that intense competition (often characterized by negative campaigning) enhances voter turnout.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Politics in the United States has always had a rough and tumble quality. In 1840, supporters of William Henry Harrison dubbed his opponent President Martin Van "Little Van." In 1884, Republicans, referring to Grover Cleveland's illegitimate child, taunted him with cries of "Ma, ma, where's your pa?" while Democratic supporters replied "gone to the White House, ha, ha, ha!" In the 1930's, Republicans savagely attacked Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" sometimes changing his middle name from Delano to "Damnation." Nevertheless, the heavy reliance on negative advertising in many recent televised campaigns has raised the issue of the role of negative political advertising in the democratic process.

Researchers have assessed the costs and benefits of "going negative." On the benefits side, negative ads are more likely to be remembered than more positive ads and can be very effective, particularly if they are sponsored by a source other than the candidate (Bratcher, 2001; Brooks, 2000, 2006, 2007; Capella and Taylor, 1992). On the costs side, negative ads can produce a backlash against the originator of the ad, particularly if they are countered quickly by the candidate attacked in the negative ad. Negative ads are also seen as a sign of desperation, especially when they are used by candidates who are far behind in the polls. Thus, proponents of negative advertising can point to numerous instances of success, but critics of the ads can find plenty of examples of failure as well.

Some critics have attacked the preponderance of negative ads in U.S. politics. Negative ads focus on limitations of one candidate, but do not necessarily show what the attacking candidate has to offer (Crigler, et al., 2002). They focus the campaign on the issues and activities that can be easily attacked, ignoring far more important topics that deserve full debate. For example, attack ads often concentrate on personal indiscretions that may have little bearing on how effectively an individual will govern. Finally, negative advertising fans the flames of political cynicism, leading to the voter apathy expressed in declining voter turnout. Voters as a percentage of the voting age population declined over 22% from a peak of 63% in the 1960 presidential election to a low of 49 in 1996. Voting in off-year elections declined 37% from a peak of 45.4% in 1962 to 33.1% in 1990.

Conventional wisdom among political consultants, candidates, and consultants during the 1980s and 1990s held that election campaigns had become increasingly mean-spirited and that the pervasive negativism of campaigns was exacting a heavy toll on American democracy, undermining citizens' positive feelings about elections in particular and government in general and thereby demobilizing potential voters. Negative campaigning had come to dominate American politics, it was believed, because it works; that is, candidates who go on the attack usually see their ratings rise and reap greater support on Election Day than they would have gotten had they stayed positive. The 1988 presidential campaign, when George H.W. Bush came from 10 points behind in the polls to a

comfortable victory after the (in)famous Willie Horton, Boston Harbor, and Dukakis-in-a-tank ads began airing, has been offered as the poster child of effective attack politics (Geer, 2006).

Lau et al.'s (1999) meta-analysis of social science research on the effects of negative campaigning found little hard evidence for these claims. Even though Lau et al.'s findings were widely publicized, it would be naive to expect results reported in a scholarly journal to have an immediate or substantial impact on what political strategists recommend, what political candidates do, and what political commentators believe.

Still, one might have hoped for a gradual but growing awareness of these new findings among those whose business is running campaigns or covering them, a glimmer of skepticism toward previously unchallenged beliefs, or a revamping of standard operating procedures. Insofar as we can determine, though, little of this has happened. Despite changes in campaign finance laws designed to reduce the negativism of campaigns, the most recent federal elections are being called the most negative—by far—on record (May, 2006, Tucker 2006). For example, it has been reported that whereas only 1% and 46%, respectively, of the ads sponsored by the Democratic and Republican Congressional Campaign Committees in 2004 were negative, in 2006 those figures skyrocketed to 83% and 89% (CQ Weekly, October 16, 2006).

Far and away the commonest explanation for this widespread and apparently growing negativism of campaigns is the presumed effectiveness of attack politics, even as it is simultaneously decried as a corrosive influence on the American system of government. For one thing, negative ads are believed to draw attention:

“Voters don’t pay much attention to campaign ads,” claims Bob Stern from the Center for Government Studies in California, “but when they’re negative they do. . . . That’s why negative ads are busting out all over—they can cut through the flotsam of an election-year blitz; they tend to stick with us when less provocative ads fade away; and they often provide voters with usable information about candidates they know next to nothing about.” (Tucker, 2006)

For another, negative campaigning is believed to be advantageous to the attacker: Ugly, combative, negative advertising targeting a political opponent works. You can see your opponent’s favorable polling numbers degrade while the negative ad runs. (Richard Romero, former Democratic president pro tem of the New Mexico State Senate; quoted by Quigley (2006).

If positive advertisements moved things to the extent that negative ads move things, there would be more of them (Rep. Thomas Reynolds, chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee; quoted by Nagourney 2006).

Warnings that these negative political advertisements are undermining American democracy persist, too. Brooks (2006) conducted a systematic study of 186 newspaper and magazine articles linking negative advertising and turnout from 2000 through 2005, and reports

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that 65% of the articles concluded that negative campaigning depresses turnout, while only 6% concluded that it might increase turnout. For example, a recent Washington Post columnist characterizes the research literature as “showing that negative ads can reduce turnout; Democrats hope a constant drumbeat of scandal, Iraq and ‘stay the course’ will persuade conservatives to stay home of Nov. 7. . . . Republicans . . . are equally eager to depress Democratic turnout and fire up their conservative base” (Grunwald, 2006). Similarly, political scientist Thomas Patterson claims that “numerous studies show that misleading negative ads corrode trust in democracy” (quoted by Christopher Shea in *The Boston Globe*, May 21, 2006).

None of these conclusions was supported in our earlier meta-analysis of research on the effects of negative campaigning (Lau et al. 1999). Why the disconnect between the evidence in the social science literature and the actual beliefs and practices of candidates, consultants, pundits, and even many political scientists? After all, the politicians who approve of negative ads and the consultants who recommend and produce them have too much at stake and are paid too much to be mistaken.

Moreover, the research literature itself has changed in two important ways. In less than eight years it more than doubled in size, mushrooming from 52 studies containing 123 pertinent findings in late 1998 to 111 studies containing 294 pertinent findings by mid-2006. Less obviously but no less importantly, this rapid growth was accompanied by an equally marked increase in methodological rigor, particularly in analyses of the effects of actual political campaigns. Now my research question is: Is the persisting conventional wisdom about negative campaigning correct after all? Fortunately, the tremendous growth and enhanced quality of research on negative campaigning now enable us to launch a more comprehensive and reliable assessment of the conventional wisdom than was feasible at the time of earlier studies on this topic.

By mid-2006, the research literature contained 21 findings on the memorability of negative ads or campaigns indicating that the literature contains at least some significant evidence. More tellingly, the unadjusted effect size across the 21 findings averaged .28, in the moderate range but not reliably greater than zero. Adjusting for sampling error left the estimated mean effect untouched but greatly reduced the standard error. Because both the largest positive and the largest negative effects are from small-sample (predominantly experimental) studies, this adjustment greatly reduced their influence on the estimated sample variance and lifted the 95% confidence interval above zero. Adjusting for measurement unreliability left the effect size in place but raised its standard error back up to its unadjusted level. The overall message of the research literature concerning memorability, then, is that negative ads and campaigns are somewhat easier to remember than comparable positive ads and campaigns, but because the statistical significance of the effects varies according to various adjustments we made, these differences are neither strong nor consistent.

Ten studies have examined the effects of negative campaigning on campaign interest. Two of these (both conducted by Pinkleton, 1992, 1997, 1998) reported moderately large

increases in campaign interest, but four of the ten found effects in the opposite direction. The effects of negative campaigning on campaign-related knowledge are more consistent. Eleven of the fifteen pertinent studies reported positive effects—that is, negative campaigns *increased* campaign knowledge.

### **Do Negative Campaigns Work?**

Because the mechanisms through which negative campaigning is supposed to work are operative, albeit to a modest extent, the next question is whether going negative itself works. Negative campaigns are designed, first and foremost, to diminish positive affect for their target, the opposing candidate (Brader, 2005, 2006).

According to a bipartisan survey “Project on Campaign Conduct” commissioned by the Institute of Global Ethics (1999) overwhelmingly disliked negative political campaigning. The survey results revealed the following vital information regarding the negative campaigning (of those surveyed):

- 59% believe that all or most candidates deliberately twist the truth.
- 39% believe that all or most candidates deliberately lie to voters.
- 43% believe that most or all candidates deliberately make unfair attacks on their opponents. Another 45% believe that some candidates do.
- 67% say they can trust the government in Washington only some of the time or never.
- 87% are concerned about the level of personal attacks in today's political campaigns.

The survey also indicated that interestingly voters are also capable of distinguishing between what they feel are fair and unfair "attacks" in a political campaign. At least 57% of those surveyed believe negative information provided by one candidate about his or her opponent is relevant and useful when it relates to the following:

- Talking one way and voting another
- Not paying taxes
- Accepting campaign contributions from special interests
- Current drug or alcohol abuse
- His or her voting record as an elected official

It was also revealed that at least 63% of those surveyed indicated the following kinds of information should be considered out of bounds:

- Lack of military service
- Past personal financial problems
- Actions of a candidate's family members
- Past drug or alcohol abuse

Although proponents of negative campaigning recognize that it may simultaneously produce lower affect for the attacker--so-called “backlash” effect. According to Roesse and Sande (1993), the net effect should work to the attacker's advantage. For candidate affect to matter, it must translate into the choice between candidates, and here again attacking is

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believed to favor the attacker. Lau et al. (1999) uncovered empirical support for the ideas that negative campaigning does drive affect for the target of attacks down but also lessens affect for the attacker.

According to Drs. Weaver and Tinkham (1999), the impact of negative political campaign can be an effective tool for delivering messages and they found that the impact of negative campaign ads persists and even increases over time, instead of decreasing.

The researchers studied under the title “The Sleeper Effect,” the reactions of registered voters to a fictitious political ad campaign. More than 300 volunteers were shown a 30-second political attack ad for an imaginary politician running for government office in Kentucky. The participants were split into three groups which were shown different possible responses to the attack ad. The first group was shown no response. The second group was shown a defensive response ad before seeing the attack ad. The third group was shown a defensive response after seeing the attack ad.

Immediately following the viewing, the researchers asked the participants two questions to gauge the effectiveness of the attack ads. The first question was For whom would you vote if the election were held today? And How certain are you of this decision? To gauge delayed response to the ads, two-thirds of the participants were called later and asked the same questions. It was then that the researchers found that the negative ads had a lasting impact.

The results indicated that not only are attack ads initially effective, the impact of the ads increases over time. If there is a quick defensive response by the attackers opponent, the attack ad will eventually still be effective. Even if the attacker is viewed negatively by the audience, over time the attack ads still have an impact on viewer preference. Positive response ads are not effective in countering attack ads, Weaver and Tinkham found. While these ads may bolster the evaluation of the attacked candidate, they are less powerful than the attack ad, study found.

Citing 31 findings concerning impact of negative political ad attacks Lau, et.al.(2007) revealed that the overall impact is mixed, with the bulk of the evidence pointing to a modest tendency for negative campaigns to undermine positive affect for the candidates they target. The other side of the coin is backlash against the attacker, the subject of 40 reported findings. Contrary to what attackers would prefer, 33 of these 40 findings are negative, indicating a decrease in affect for attackers.

Evidence bearing directly on the question of whether attacks undermine affect for their targets more than for the attackers themselves is in surprisingly short supply, having been reported in only 10 studies (Abbe et al., 2000). The findings reported in the research literature do not bear out the proposition that attacking is an effective way to bolster one’s own image relative to that of one’s opponent. Although the evidence points in the direction of a net backfire against attackers, it does not do so decisively enough to support the conclusion that attacks exact a significantly greater toll on attackers than on their targets.

Rather, the research literature provides no determinative resolution one way or the other insofar as affect for the competing candidates is concerned.

Ultimately, how much the voters like the candidates matters to the candidates only to the extent that it helps or hurts their chances of being elected. Literature uncovered 43 relevant findings, 27 involving intended vote choices and 16 involving reported vote choices or official vote totals. The broader message, though, is that the research literature does not bear out the proposition that negative political campaigns “work” in shifting votes toward those who wage them (Lau, et al., 2007).

Overall, social science research provides some evidence that the mechanisms through which negative campaigning is supposed to work do in fact operate, but there is an overriding lack of evidence that negative campaigning itself works as it is supposed to (Fridkin and Kenney, 2004). Intriguingly, the conclusion that negative campaigning is no more effective than positive campaigning holds even though negative campaigns appear to be somewhat more memorable and to generate somewhat greater campaign-relevant knowledge (Arceneaux and Nickerson, 2005).

### **Do Negative Campaigns Harm the Political System?**

Aside from any immediate impact that it may or may not have on the candidates and electoral outcomes, negative campaigning could have consequences—according to the conventional wisdom, dire ones—for the political system itself. By far the best known example of this possibility is the demobilization hypothesis, which holds that negative campaigning alienates many potential voters from politics in general and from electoral politics in particular.

Ansolahehere et al.'s (1994, 1999) estimate of a 5% drop-off in turnout due to negative campaigning generated widespread concern and sparked an explosion of follow-up research. There are 57 identified studies reveal that negative campaigning depresses voter turnout. If anything, negative campaigning more frequently appears to have a slight mobilizing effect.

However, decreasing turnout is only one way that negative campaigning could adversely affect the political system. It could also undermine system-supporting attitudes, darken the public's general mood (Rahn and Hirshorn, 1995, 1999), or even diminish satisfaction with the government itself. Overall findings show that negative campaigning has the potential to do damage to the political system itself, as it tends to reduce feelings of political efficacy, trust in government, and perhaps even satisfaction with government itself.

### **Is there any evidence of voter backlash against negative campaigning?**

The idea that negative political campaigns work is generally taken as both a truism and a source of regret (Geer, 2006). The campaign ads that live on in memory—ranging from the Willie Horton ads of 1988 through the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth ads of 2004—

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are widely seen as having achieved their intended result of making the opposing candidate seem duplicitous or even dangerous. These and other dramatic cases are routinely cited as proof positive of the power of negative campaigning. As a reporter recently summarized the prevailing view among political professionals and commentators:

“The people who produce these ads and the consultants who hire them know that negative campaigning works. These people are paid way too much to be mistaken about whether poison is effective” (Mansnerus 2005).

On the other hand, many counter examples—instances in which going negative did not prevent, or even contributed to, the loss of a campaign—could also be told, though they rarely are. For example, the same consultants who had produced the “successful” Swift Boat Veterans ads also produced, in the 2005 New Jersey gubernatorial election, an ad in which the Democratic candidate was criticized by his ex-wife—an attack that backfired on the Republican candidate and helped turn a close election into a runaway victory for his Democratic opponent (Whelan and Margolin 2005).

It is true that there is no consistent evidence in the research literature that negative political campaigning “works” in achieving the electoral results that attackers desire. Although attacks probably do undermine evaluations of the candidates they target, they usually bring evaluations of the attackers down even more, and the net effect on vote choice is nil. Nor the findings have uncovered evidence that negative campaigning tends to demobilize the electorate. A few studies have reported significant demobilizing effects, a few have reported significant mobilizing effects, and the great majority have reported almost no effect one way or the other; the overall mean effect is approximately zero.

Negative campaigning does, however, have some negative systemic consequences, including lower trust in government, a lessened sense of political efficacy, and possibly a darker public mood. Although the latter effects are not large, and may be due more to coverage of negative ads in the media rather than the ads themselves (Geer 2006), in the long run they could prove worrisome. It is hoped that that more researchers will explore the effects of negative campaigns on these system-supporting attitudes, because the existing evidence seems fairly promising and the long-run implications seem fairly alarming.

Skeptics might worry that the negative ads and campaigns that have been considered in the research literature, the contexts in which they have been studied, and the effects that have been documented may be too unusual, artificial, weak, or poorly instrumented to have enabled the researchers to detect consequences that under more auspicious circumstances might be much easier to detect.

In earlier citation it was mentioned that the CQWeekly analysis of how negative the 2006 congressional campaigns were. But that analysis pertained only to ads sponsored by the political parties. Those ads were largely negative. In recent campaign years, candidates have sponsored about two-thirds of all the ads during a campaign, and if those ads were overwhelmingly positive, the overall 2006 cam campaign would, like all of its predecessors,



have been predominately positive (Geer, 2006; Goldstein and Strach, 2004; Lau and Pomper, 2004). Attack ads are more memorable than the typical positive ad, and this bias inevitably distorts perceptions of the prevalence of negative campaigning.

Why do consultants continue to urge candidates to attack when there is little evidence that this strategy actually works, and when an attack almost inevitably provokes a counter attack (Lau and Pomper, 2004)? It is estimated in different studies that the 30% to 40% of instances consultants do not advocate attacking. Sometimes, though, they find it more feasible to craft high-visibility negative messages than equally high-visibility positive ones.

Most candidates play up one or two general positive themes but try many different attacks on the opponent in smaller, targetable subsets of the electorate. It is probably easier to fine-tune attacks than positive messages, and therefore a focus on what is more controllable and new—the negative messages of a campaign—requires consultants to spend most of their time crafting the negative messages of a campaign (even though most campaign dollars buy positive ads) and makes it more likely that they will give those messages undue credit for favorable outcomes.

The behavior of journalists and political pundits vis-à-vis social science research on negative campaigning seems easier to explain. Undoubtedly many of them are simply unfamiliar with this research. Beyond that, just as local news programs typically lead with stories of murder and mayhem, political commentators seem to relish writing about awful, false, misleading, unfair, and mean-spirited political attack ads.

Academic research sometimes provides a “hook” for their analyses of the causes and consequences of negative campaigning. That there is little sound evidence for most of the conventional wisdom about negative ads is not a story that most journalists are predisposed to tell or that most lay readers are predisposed to hear—especially because they are likely to remember a few especially vivid attack ads that seemed to work (Djupe and Peterson, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

In sum, this analysis of the greatly expanded research literature reinforces that most of the conventional wisdom about negative campaigning is not on sound empirical footing. What remains is to try to understand why negative campaigning is so pervasive and why the old saws about its effectiveness for its practitioners and its destructiveness to the political system continue to be repeated.

We might suggest a new hook for journalists to try in the next election cycle: why do candidates continue to attack when there is so little evidence that attacking works? It seems inevitable that the conventional wisdom will continue to be espoused by political commentators and acted upon by political professionals and the candidates they advise, but we hope that at some point even pundits and practitioners will begin to view more skeptically prevailing beliefs about the purported potency of negative campaigning.

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