

Research Synopsis

Negative Campaigning¹



Americans generally do not like “mean-spirited” campaigns.² There are many things to dislike about negative campaign advertising, but there is also reason to believe that campaigns will continue to use negative advertising unless greater incentives for avoiding it – and avoiding incivility – emerge.

QUESTIONS How does negative campaign advertising relate to incivility in political discourse? Who is most likely to engage in negative campaigning and when? What are the effects of negative campaigns on voters? And do such campaigns actually help candidates to win votes?

Positive and negative appeals

According to Steven Finkel and John Geer:

- “[P]ositive appeals are ones that candidates offer to promote themselves on some issue or trait.”
- “Negative appeals are attacks [or criticism] leveled at the opposition.”²³

SEEKING ANSWERS Negative campaign advertising has increased since the 1960s,³ with the possible exception of print media. But not all negative campaign messages are uncivil (see box at lower right), and there are multiple types of messages. Negative messages include attacks focused on issues, attacks focused on persons and their traits, and relevant versus irrelevant attacks.⁴ And Kathleen Hall Jamieson has suggested that attack advertisements, focusing solely on the failures of an opponent, be distinguished from contrast advertisements that offer “explicit comparisons between the candidates’ qualities, records or proposals.”⁵

Research suggests that **candidates trailing in the polls are more likely to use negative advertising.**⁶ When political competition narrows between two candidates, negative campaigning also may be used by frontrunners to maintain difference as the candidates close in on one another.⁷ The gender of the focal candidate and the opponent, as well as the party affiliation of the candidate, and disparities in campaign funding between the candidate and the opponent, also influence who uses negative advertising and when.⁸ (For example, women are less likely to use negative attacks regardless of the competing candidate’s gender or the competitiveness of the race.⁹)

It seems that any detrimental impacts on voters are small, but that the use of negative campaigning may be riskier for incumbents:

- **Effects on voters.** Negative campaigning in general appears not to diminish **voter turnout**. Indeed, some types of negative campaign advertising *increase* turnout.¹⁰ With respect to U.S. citizens’ **trust in government** and their sense of **political efficacy**, the results are mixed, but even studies finding lowered trust or efficacy show these results are very small.¹¹
- **Effectiveness for candidates.** Some studies find that, as intended, negative messages lessen voter evaluations of the candidates that are targeted.¹² But other researchers caution that negative campaigning often is ineffective, and that sometimes—and especially for incumbents—leads to backlash, lowering voters’ evaluations of the *negative campaigner*.¹³ Irrelevant,

Not all negative messages are uncivil

One study defined incivility in negative messages as “attacks that go beyond facts and differences, and move instead towards name-calling, contempt, and derision of the opposition.”²⁴ They may include “claims that are inflammatory and superfluous” and “strong, pointed” language (‘dishonest,’ ‘unprincipled,’ ‘heartless,’ ‘cowardly,’ etc.).

negative messages by any candidate are ineffective, and can lead to more *positive* impressions of the *targeted candidate*.¹⁴

- The most effective forms of negative advertising are **issue-based** or focused on **relevant** candidate characteristics or traits.¹⁵ Research also shows that **pure attack advertising** is generally more effective than “contrast” advertising.¹⁶ Research from Kim Fridkin Kahn and Patrick Kenney suggests that:

[P]eople distinguish between legitimate and tempered criticisms, on the one hand, and acrimonious and unjust criticisms on the other. Voters seem to find substantive and reasoned criticism useful, and apparently these provide them with reasons to go to the polls. In contrast, excessive mudslinging by the candidates that is covered extensively in the news media alienates voters. People become disenchanted with the candidates and the media coverage and abstain from the electoral process.¹⁷

IMPLICATIONS The evidence we have to date suggests that, **at least so long as negative campaigning is issue-based or focused on relevant characteristics or traits of candidates and so long as it is civil, negative campaigning is not harmful and may well be productive for American democracy.** After reviewing 40 years of content of presidential campaign ads aired on television, John Geer found that most negative advertisements were *not* distracting, but instead reflected issues of concern to voters.¹⁸

To be most informative however, such issue-focused negative advertisements should *avoid* arguments that make their conclusions *without* providing empirical evidence *or* the steps in a reasoning process by which the putative negative effects of particular issue positions will occur.¹⁹ **Given the existing research, political candidates and their consultants actually have strong incentives to avoid *irrelevant* negative messaging.**²⁰ **But there appears to be no such incentive for candidates and their campaign managers to avoid incivility, as long as the incivility is coupled with *relevant* negative messaging.**²¹ While Americans dislike uncivil negative campaign advertisements even when they find that these are relevant, they nonetheless attend to *uncivil* but *relevant* advertisements, whether these are issue-based or trait-based, in ways that lower their evaluations of the targeted candidate.²²

¹ This synopsis is based on the National Institute for Civil Discourse Issue Brief No. 7: Negative Campaigning, by Robin Stryker, Department of Sociology, Carli Brosseau, School of Government and Public Policy, and Zachary Schrank, Department of Sociology, all of The University of Arizona, dated September 12, 2011.

² Kim L. Fridkin and Patrick J. Kenney, “Variability in Citizens’ Reactions to Different Types of Negative Campaigns,” *American Journal of Political Science* 55(2), 2011, pp. 307-325, 314.

³ John G. Geer, *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns*, University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. 23.

⁴ Fridkin and Kenney 2011, *supra* n.2; Kim L. Fridkin and Patrick J. Kenney, “The Dimensions of Negative Messages,” *American Politics Research* 36 (5), 2008, pp. 694-723, 694; Richard R. Lau and Ivy Brown Rovner, “Negative Campaigning,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 12, 2009, pp. 285-306.

⁵ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, 2000, *Everything You Think You Know about Politics... and Why You’re Wrong*, Basic Books, 2000, p. 99.

⁶ Lau and Rovner 2009, *supra* n. 4, p. 292.

⁷ Stergios Skaperdas and Bernard Grofman, “Modeling negative campaigning,” *American Political Science Review* 89(1), 1995, pp. 49–61.

⁸ Kim Fridkin Kahn, “Gender Differences in Campaign Messages: The Political Advertisements of Men and Women Candidates for U.S. Senate,” *Political Research Quarterly* 46(3), 1993, pp. 481–502; Kim Fridkin Kahn and Patrick J. Kenney, “How Negative Campaigning Enhances Knowledge of Senate Elections, in *Crowded Airwaves*, ed. J. A. Thurber, C. J. Nelson and D. A. Dulio, Brookings Institution, 2000, pp. 65–95; Richard R. Lau and Gerald M. Pomper, “Negative Campaigning by U.S. Senate Candidates,” *Party Politics* 7(Jan.), 2001, pp. 69–87; Richard R. Lau and Gerald M. Pomper, *Negative Campaigning: An Analysis of U.S. Senate Elections*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2004; David E. Proctor, William J. Schenck-Hamlin and Karen A. Haase, “Exploring the Role of Gender in the Development of Negative Political Advertisements,” *Women and Politics* 14(2), 1994, pp. 1–22.

⁹ Kahn and Kenney 2000, *supra* n. 8.

¹⁰ Steven E. Finkel and John G. Geer “A Spot Check: Casting Doubt on the Demobilizing Effect of Attack Advertising,” *American Journal of Political Science* 42(2), 1998, pp. 573-595, 579; John Geer and Richard R. Lau, “Filling in the Blanks: A New Method for Estimating Campaign Effects,” *British Journal of Political Science* 36(2), 2006, pp. 268-290; Lau and Rovner 2009, *supra*, n. 4, p. 299 and Figure 3; Kim Fridkin Kahn and Patrick J. Kenney, “Do Negative Campaigns Mobilize or Suppress Turnout? Clarifying the Relationship between Negativity and Participation,” *American Political Science Review* 93(4), 1999, pp. 877-889.

-
- ¹¹ Richard R. Lau, Lee Sigelman and Ivy Brown Rovner, "The Effects of Negative Political Campaigns: a Meta-Analytic Reassessment," *Journal of Politics* 69, 2007, pp. 176-209; Robert A. Jackson, Jeffery J. Mondak and Robert Huckfeldt, "Examining the Possible Corrosive Impact of Negative Advertising on Citizens' Attitudes Toward Politics," *Political Research Quarterly* 62(1), 2009, pp. 55-69.
- ¹² Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative: How Negative Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate*, The Free Press, 1997; Brian L. Roddy and Gina M. Garramone, "Appeals and Strategies of Negative Political Advertising," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 32, 1988, pp. 415-427; Kim L. Fridkin and Patrick J. Kenney, "The Impact of Negativity on Citizens' Evaluations of Candidates," *American Politics Research* 32(5), 2004, pp. 570-605, 571.
- ¹³ Lau and Rovner 2009, *supra* n. 4.
- ¹⁴ Fridkin and Kenney 2008, *supra* n. 4.
- ¹⁵ Fridkin and Kenney 2004, *supra* n. 12; Fridkin and Kenney 2008, *supra* n. 4.
- ¹⁶ Fridkin and Kenney 2004, *supra* n. 12.
- ¹⁷ Kahn and Kenney 1999, *supra* n. 10, p. 884, emphasis ours.
- ¹⁸ Geer 2006, *supra* n. 3, p. 11.
- ¹⁹ See the research on "easy" versus "hard" arguments, discussed in J. Taylor Danielson and Robin Stryker, "Political Knowledge, Persuasive Appeals and Campaign Rhetoric," *National Institute of Civil Discourse Research Brief No. 5*, University of Arizona, August 30, 2011.
- ²⁰ Fridkin and Kenney 2008, *supra* n. 4; Fridkin and Kenney 2011, *supra* n. 2.
- ²¹ Fridkin and Kenney 2008, *supra* n. 4, p. 708.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Steven E. Finkel and John G. Geer "A Spot Check: Casting Doubt on the Demobilizing Effect of Attack Advertising," *American Journal of Political Science* 42(2), 1998, pp. 573-595, 579, n.2.
- ²⁴ Deborah Jordan Books and John G. Geer, "Beyond Negativity: The Effects of Incivility on the Electorate," *American Journal of Political Science* 51(1), 2007, pp. 1-16, 1, 5.