Negative Campaigning

According to Steven Finkel and John Geer:

“Positive appeals are ones that candidates offer to promote themselves on some issue or trait.”

“Negative appeals are attacks [or criticism] leveled at the opposition.”

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

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.\textsuperscript{14}

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

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

\textbf{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{19} Given the existing research, political candidates and their consultants actually have strong incentives to avoid irrelevant negative messaging.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{1} This synopsis is based on the National Institute for Civil Discourse Issue Brief No. 7: Negative Campaigning, by Robin Stryker, Department of Sociology, Carl Brousse, School of Government and Public Policy, and Zachary Schrank, Department of Sociology, all of The University of Arizona, dated September 12, 2011.
\textsuperscript{5} Kathleen Hall Jamieson, 2000, Everything \textit{You Think You Know about Politics... and Why You’re Wrong}, Basic Books, 2000, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{6} Lau and Rovner 2009, supra n. 4, p. 292.
\textsuperscript{7} Stergios Skaperdas and Bernard Grofman, "Modeling negative campaigning." \textit{American Political Science Review} 89(1), 1995, pp. 49–61.
\textsuperscript{9} Kahn and Kenney 2000, supra n. 8.

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Lau and Rovner 2009, supra n. 4.


Fridkin and Kenney 2004, supra n. 12.

Kahn and Kenney 1999, supra n. 10, p. 884, emphasis ours.

Geer 2006, supra n. 3, p. 11.

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.

Fridkin and Kenney 2008, supra n. 4; Fridkin and Kenney 2011, supra n. 2.

Fridkin and Kenney 2008, supra n. 4, p. 708.

Ibid.


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