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A Field Experiment on the Effects of Negative Campaign Mail on Voter Turnout in a Municipal Election

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This field experiment is used to expose a random sample of voters in a 2003 mayoral race to various pieces of negative direct mail advertising. Exposure to the negative advertising stimulus improved turnout overall about 6 percent over that of the control group. Results show that different topics and amounts of negative advertising had different effects on turnout. The results suggest that alarm bells sounded by some previous research and by public officials may be overheated, because the effects of campaign negativity may not be monolithic, and it would appear political negativity can have a positive effect on turnout.

Is voter turnout subject to the effects of negative advertising? Political science research answers alternatively yes, no, or maybe. This study uses a field experiment in which voters in a mayoral contest were randomly exposed to negative campaign mail to assess the effects of negativity and move toward a better understanding of what has become a thoroughly confusing line of scholarship.

Indeed two of the most prominent studies on campaign advertising offer quite differing views on the effects of negativity. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) conclude that negative ads directly result in lower voter turnout. Far from qualifying their results, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995:12) assert the evidence is definitive that negative campaign messages “pose a serious threat to democracy” and are “the single biggest cause” of public disdain for politics (2). By contrast, Green and Gerber (2004: 59) describe the effect of campaign advertising negativity as “slight.” Depending on the circumstances, Green and Gerber find negativity modestly nudging turnout upwards or downwards. Far from labeling their results conclusive, however, Green and Gerber suggest much more work needs to be done to better understand negativity’s effect.

While this study addresses Green and Gerber’s call for continuing research on this question, studying the effects of campaign negativity is of value beyond simply satisfying an academic curiosity. Understanding the effects of negativity obviously has implications for how candidates, parties, and interest groups conduct campaigns. Moreover, various government bodies have expressed interest in some form of negative ad regulation. Legislative proposals have been introduced at the local, state, and national level to limit negative campaigning with measures such as forcing candidates to appear in their ads or subjecting political advertising copy to some form of official scrutiny. Indeed, “I would ban negative ads,” says Senator John McCain (R-Arizona) of the legislation he would create if he could find a constitutional procedure to accomplish the task.¹ Thus, to understand

negativity and its effects better is to become better armed to participate in a debate which pits the First Amendment against the very popular notion of cleaning up campaigns.

NEGATIVITY AND ITS EFFECTS

While there is no consensus definition of negative advertising, most researchers start with the notion that negativity involves the invoking of an opponent by a candidate (for example, Djupe and Peterson 2002). That is, a negative ad suggests the opponent should not be elected rather than that the sponsoring candidate should be elected. West (2001) defines a negative campaign ad as advertising that focuses at least 50 percent of its attention on the opponent rather than the sponsor of the ad. Such negativity may be focused on any aspect of the opponent’s record, statements, campaign, or background.

Precise estimates vary, but there is no doubt that negativity occupies a significant place in the modern campaign advertising arsenal. In the 2000 presidential election, for example, content analyses of television commercials from the two parties’ nominees found between half and 70 percent were negative (Benoit et al. 2003; West 2001). Other forms of communication, such as radio ads, were even more negatively oriented (Benoit et al. 2003). Looked at from another tack, researchers have found as few as 20 percent of ads directed purely toward extolling the virtues of the sponsoring candidate (Freedman and Lawton 2004).

Employing a variety of methods, researchers have produced intriguing results in studies of negativity effects. However, those results variously demonstrate the negative, positive, or lack of effect of negative advertising on voter turnout.

Negative Ads Alienate Citizens

Dating back at least to the Watergate era, political scientists have documented the capacity of the American public to become categorically dismissive of political leaders. That is, the untrustworthy behavior of one political figure can transcend the individual and come to represent the political class as a whole (Arterton 1974; Craig 1993; Miller 1974).

¹ Quoted in Jennifer Holland, “McCain vows to keep campaign clean no matter what,” Associated Press Wire Service, December 22, 1999.

Consistent with that notion, researchers have found evidence that negative political advertising negatively affects recipients' feelings not only toward the target of the attack but also toward its sponsor (Basil, Schooler, and Reeves 1991; Lemert, Wanta, and Lee 1999; Garramone 1984; Merritt 1984; Roese and Sande 1993) and even toward politics more generally (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, and Valentino 1994; Houston and Roskos-Ewoldsen 1998; Houston, Doan, and Roskos-Ewoldsen 1999).

Using various real world races, including senate, gubernatorial, and mayoral campaigns, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) exposed subjects in a laboratory setting to campaign television ads of various tone. Participants in Ansolabehere and Iyengar's experiments who were shown a negative television ad were almost 5 percent less likely to report they planned on voting in the upcoming election than participants who were shown a positive ad. Those who saw negative ads were also less likely to express confidence in the political system, and less likely to express political efficacy. Ansolabehere and Iyengar conclude that negativity in politics is causing declining voter interest and participation.

According to other experimental studies, the capacity for negative ads to produce diffuse political negativity varies with the precise details of the ads. For example, Budesheim, Houston, and DePaola (1996) found that unsubstantiated negative attacks reduced respondents' ratings of both the attacker and the target. See also Shapiro and Rieger (1992). Other scholars have suggested that issue related attacks are more apt to be seen as fair game than attacks focused on personal characteristics (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1989; Roddy and Garramone 1988).

Nevertheless, there is a significant limitation in experimental laboratory work on this subject that is inherent to the method. For example, Ansolabehere and colleagues show subjects' campaign ads then inquire about their *intention* to vote. Various other experimental studies inquire about intentions to vote, or candidate preferences, but none is equipped to measure actual resulting behavior. Of course, there is no shortage of psychological research demonstrating the gaping chasm between knowing someone's intentions or preferences and knowing their actual resulting behavior; for example, Kaiser and Gutscher (2003). Moreover, political scientists have regularly documented the propensity of Americans to mislead researchers when they are asked about their voting habits; for example, Bernstein, Chadha, and Montjoy (2001). Thus, regardless of the rigor of the researchers or the ingenious nature of their design, the laboratory remains a difficult setting in which to demonstrate the effect of negative advertising on the real world behavior of turning out to vote.

Negative Ads Do Not Alienate Citizens

Meanwhile, other researchers posit that the effects of negativity might not be negative at all. Finkel and Geer (1998), for example, argue that negative ads stimulate turnout because they provide highly relevant information.

Indeed, researchers have attributed positive or stimulating effects to feelings of negativity as an explanation for some notable political phenomena. For example, some scholars conclude that one source of the typical midterm loss, in which the president's party generally loses House seats in elections without the presidency on the ballot, is that voters who are critical of the president have a higher motivation to participate than voters who are positively inclined toward the president (Kernell 1977).²

Contemporary evidence also suggests that reception of negative advertising may contribute to effective citizenry. Brians and Wattenberg (1996), using survey data, show that citizens who recalled seeing negative political advertising during the 1992 presidential election were more accurate in assessing candidates' overall issue positions in that election.³ In fact, recalling ads was more closely associated with holding accurate assessments of the candidates than was regularly watching television news or reading a newspaper. West (2001), studying the content of the ad rather than the effects on recipients, similarly supports the notion of the value of negative advertising. West (2001: 69) finds "the most substantive appeals actually came in negative spots."

Consistent with this line of thinking, several studies have found links between campaign negativity and increased voter turnout (Lau and Pomper 2001; Djupe and Peterson 2002; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Finkel and Geer 1998; Wattenberg and Brians 1999). Based on survey results or aggregate trends, these studies are better able than laboratory experiments to demonstrate actual voter turnout, but are far weaker in demonstrating individual reception of negative ads and thus are less firmly able to demonstrate a causal link between receiving ads and deciding to vote.⁴

Given the limitations of both laboratory experiments and non-experimental approaches, a strong argument can be made for the need for field experiments to address negativity effects. Field experiments offer internal validity (with random assignment and controlled exposure to the stimulus)

² A variety of psychological studies suggest the potential for superficially "negative" messages to have a "positive" effect on behavior. The implications of several lines of research considering the effects of showing people the negatives of such behaviors as cigarette smoking (Grandpre et. al. 2003) and motorcycle riding (Bellaby and Lawrenson 2001) find that simply demonstrating negatives is not an effective strategy in preventing participation. Indeed, the negative messages may draw attention and interest, and ultimately augment willingness to participate.

³ Some have argued that the implied causality is backwards. That is, remembering ads does not encourage clear thoughts on issues, but having clear thoughts on issues does encourage remembering ads. See, for example, Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Simon (1999).

⁴ There is a further concern in aggregate studies. If candidates use negativity strategically, as we have every reason to believe they do (Theilmann and Wilhite 1998), then an accurate measure of campaign negativity may be, in effect, a proxy for some other variable affecting turnout. For example, Djupe and Peterson's (2002) data suggest that the amount of negativity in the U.S. Senate primaries they studied rose with the number of quality candidates. They attribute the resulting higher turnout to the campaign negativity, but surely an equally strong case could be made that the presence of more quality candidates was the true source of the turnout increase.

and external validity (with diverse participants and a measurement of the actual resulting behavior).

Relatively few field experiments on negative advertising have been reported. Pfau and Kenski (1990), did use field experiments to assess the strategic value of negative campaign messages by exposing randomly chosen voters to independently created direct mail and push poll messages. More recently, Green and Gerber (2004) have employed field experiments to study a vast array of potential campaign influences on voter turnout. Among their studies have been two which included negative political advertising sent by mail.

Green and Gerber (2004) sent negative campaign mail to a sample of voters in a Connecticut mayoral election. Here both reception of the ad and actual voter turnout can be established, and the subjects include a random sample of potential voters. Green and Gerber found the effects of negative ads on turnout in the mayoral race were negative but quite small. In another contest, using the same basic design but different mailings, they found the effect of negative ads on turnout was small but positive. Green and Gerber (2004: 59) tentatively conclude that the effect of negative campaign mail on turnout is best understood as "slight."

Why do Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) find negativity an inherent threat to voter turnout while Green and Gerber (2004) find negativity has little relevance to turnout? Differences in methodology could explain the disparate conclusions. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) used television to convey negative messages while Green and Gerber (2004) used mail. However, nothing in Ansolabehere and Iyengar's (1995) theoretical approach suggests the effects of negativity require television as the medium of communication. Ansolabehere and Iyengar used a diverse but not random group of participants, while Green and Gerber (2004) used participants randomly drawn from several towns. However, nothing in Ansolabehere and Iyengar's (1995) protocol suggests they assembled a group of participants particularly attuned to the effects of negative messages. Probably the two most significant differences between the studies are that Ansolabehere and Iyengar's participants received their campaign communication in a laboratory, rather than in their homes (as was the case for Green and Gerber), and were asked about their intention to vote, rather than observed actually voting (as was the case for Green and Gerber). Both those factors might have contributed to an exaggeration of the negativity effect in Ansolabehere and Iyengar's study.⁵ Beyond methodological differences, though, another compelling explanation exists. It is possible that both teams of researchers were measuring a realistic effect. That is, there may not be a monolithic negativity effect, and depending on the content of the ad and the circumstances of the race, negativity may in fact have quite varying effects on turnout.

⁵ Ansolabehere and colleagues dispute the notion that their techniques exaggerated the effect of negativity. Indeed, they label their estimate of negativity's effect as "conservative" (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, and Valentino 1994: 835).

Indeed, the confusing state of research in this area is well captured in Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, and Babbitt's (1999) meta-analysis of studies on negative ads. After building a weighty dossier of studies, both published and unpublished, they found that previous research findings suggesting negative ads increase turnout are available in similar quantity to findings suggesting negative ads decrease turnout. This leaves the authors to conclude that the cumulative estimated effect of all these studies of negativity on turnout approaches zero. It is, in short, an area which demands replication with the best methodological approach: a randomized field experiment.

METHODS: A FIELD EXPERIMENT

In brief, a random sample of voters was chosen for either the treatment (negative ads) or the control group (no ads) in a mayoral election. Subjects in the treatment received negative campaign ads (from an independent expenditure group) in the mail in the days immediately preceding the election. The resulting decision to vote was then measured by consulting official election records. A follow-up survey of a subsample of subjects confirmed widespread reception of the advertisements, and a widespread perception of their negativity.

Participants

The election under study here was the March 11, 2003, contest for mayor of West Palm Beach, Florida, a city of 82,103 residents (47,998 registered voters). The non-partisan contest pitted the incumbent mayor, Joel Daves, against a long-time state legislator, Lois Frankel, who had been forced out of office due to term limits. A third candidate drew little attention and campaigned only sporadically. The mayoral race was by far the more prominent contest on a ballot shared only with a city commission race. Focusing on this type of race is consistent with the work of both Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) and Green and Gerber (2004) who have examined mayoral and top of the ballot races.

The researcher was contacted by a local group interested in opposing the reelection of the mayor and asked to help gauge the effectiveness of their efforts. As part of that arrangement, a random sample of 1400 eligible city voters was selected for study by the researcher in advance of the mailings.⁶

Overall, the sample had median age of 43, was 59 percent female, 82 percent white, 14 percent African American, and 3 percent Latino, and had turned out to vote in approximately 25 percent of all elections on the ballot in the previous two years.

⁶ Absentee voters were excluded from the sample because they had already received their ballot before the experiment was conducted. The mailings described here were also sent to thousands of voters outside of the control and treatment groups, but those recipients were not included in the analysis here because they were not chosen randomly.

Procedure

Voters in the sample were randomly assigned to either the control group (700 voters who would not receive any mailings) or to one of seven experimental groups (which varied in the number of negative mailings each would receive). There were no statistically significant differences between the control and treatment groups on available demographic variables.

Subjects receiving the treatment were randomly assigned to one of seven groups which received either one, two, or three negative ads. (The ads were timed to arrive one per day. Those receiving one ad were slated to receive it the day before the election, those receiving two ads were slated to receive them over the two days before the election, and those receiving three ads were slated to receive them over the three days before the election). After the ads were distributed and the election had occurred, official voting records were consulted to determine who cast a ballot in the election.

Materials

Three negative mailings were constructed. Each was designed to offer an eye catching cover, then unfold to present a central argument featuring text, graphics, and photos. In compliance with state independent expenditure laws, the mail pieces provided information but did not specifically ask the recipient to vote for or against a candidate. The mailings were identified as coming from "People for Responsible City Government."

The three mailings ("Like Sitting in Traffic? Thank Joel," "Joel's Palace," and "Where's Joel?") varied in topic and in their focus on issues versus personal matters.

Ad A: "Like Sitting in Traffic? Thank Joel" was a largely issue based ad. The cover featured a picture of grid-locked city streets, with construction cones and barricades prominent. The inside featured more photos of city traffic and closed streets, and highlighted a finding from a local newspaper analysis showing that area drivers would each spend an extra day (24 hours) in their car per year due to traffic congestion. The ad featured other newspaper quotes faulting the mayor for starting too many projects at the same time, and hurting not only drivers but the local economy.

Ad B: "Joel's Palace" featured a mock-up of a palatial building surrounded by huge stacks of money. The ad, a mixture of personal and issue in orientation, highlighted the mayor's commitment to building a nearly \$50 million city hall instead of remodeling the existing building at a far lower cost. Inside the ad were featured quotes from a local newspaper (calling the new city hall "ill conceived" and "a bust" and noting that "under Daves' erratic direction, the city has jumped from one grandiose idea to another with progress on none") and from a popular former mayor ("I'm personally scared to death of the financial security of this

city with Joel Daves as mayor for another four years. And you should be scared to death too").

Ad C: A largely personal ad, "Where's Joel?" featured on the cover a picture of the mayor's empty chair on the city hall dais. Inside was a map highlighting the route from Florida to Kentucky and a picture of a red truck. The ad emphasized a recent incident in which the mayor had a sudden unscheduled disappearance from the city for a number of days. His staff admitted they did not know his whereabouts, he missed several city meetings, and later explained his absence as being due to a last minute road trip he took in his pickup truck to drop his handyman off in Louisville. In enlarged headlines the ad carried comments from local newspapers noting the mayor had missed 32 city commission meetings, took four hour lunches, and was, in one paper's words, "bizarre," "lethargic," and "erratic."

Design

The mailings serve as the independent variable, the dependent variable is casting a ballot. Turnout was determined by official voting records. Based on official voting records, various other demographic variables, including race, sex, and previous voting history, are also available as independent variables.

In an attempt to verify that the subjects received the experimental messages and that any effects found could be linked to those messages, a follow-up survey was conducted in the week after the election. Four hundred subjects (300 from the treatment groups and 100 from the control group) were phoned up to four times in the week following the election. Participants were selected in a stratified random sample (over-sampling the treatment group) from among those subjects with listed telephone numbers. Of those contacted 42 percent ($n = 168$) participated in the brief survey which asked them about the mayoral election. (Question wording is available in the appendix.)

RESULTS

A basic comparison between the control group and the treatment groups (Table 1) reveals that the negative ad treatment was associated with higher turnout. Those who received the negative ad treatment were almost 6 percent more likely to vote than members of the control group, a difference that is statistically significant (Chi-Square, $p < .01$).

The number of ads received also had an effect. Those who received a single ad voted at a 30 percent rate, those who received two ads voted at 33.7 percent, and those who received all three ads voted at 36 percent.

The results also suggest the various ads had varying rather than monolithic effects. Ad A ("Like Sitting in Traffic? Thank Joel") was associated with the lowest turnout rate in the single ad treatment, and was in the lower two pairs of ads in the two ad treatments. It would appear the ad may

≡ TABLE 1
VOTER TURNOUT IN MAYORAL ELECTION BY
EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

	Negative Ads Sent	Turnout %
Control Group (n = 700)	None	26.6
Treatment Group (n = 700)	A, B, and/or C	32.4
1 (n = 100)	A	28
2 (n = 100)	B	31
3 (n = 100)	C	31
4 (n = 100)	A and B	33
5 (n = 100)	B and C	35
6 (n = 100)	A and C	33
7 (n = 100)	A, B, and C	36

Note: Difference between control group and treatment group statistically significant ($p < .01$) using Chi-Square.

have failed to trigger the depth of response of the other two, which were more dramatic in orientation.

While the random assignment of voters to the treatment groups offers support to the notion that these effects are genuine, confidence in the observed effects would be enhanced if the results maintain their significance in a multivariate model. Available demographic variables from the official voting records include race, sex, age, and most importantly, the subject's previous voting history. Previous voting turnout in the subject's precinct is also included in the model. While previous research suggests an important role for such matters as education and group consciousness, those variables are, of course, not available in official voting records. Nevertheless, the influence of such factors is presumably captured within the previous voting history variable, which should be thought of as an indicator of not only the effects of the voting habit but the primary influences which contribute to the voting habit. Precinct turnout also serves as a proxy measure for some of the contextual influences on turnout such as neighborhood demographics.

Three logistic regression models were constructed to assess factors influencing the decision to vote in the mayoral election. The first distinguishes broadly between those in the control group and those in the various treatment groups, the second breaks the treatment group into subgroups based on the number of ads received, and the third breaks the treatment group into subgroups based on which ads were received.

The first column of Table 2 provides the results using the broad control versus treatment group variable. In a model which correctly assesses turnout for almost 82 percent of subjects, and achieves a Nagelkerke r^2 of .42, the effect of the negative ad treatment is found to be statistically significant ($p < .01$). Applying the odds ratio (not shown), the model suggests those who received the negative ad treatment were 1.44 times more likely to cast a ballot than those

who did not receive the treatment, raising the likelihood of casting a ballot from about .25 to about .36.

While the effect is notable, it pales in comparison to the effect of previous voting history. Those who voted consistently in the past were 10.26 times more likely to cast a ballot in the mayoral election than those who had not voted in the previous two years, raising the likelihood of casting a ballot from about .07 to about .72. None of the other variables obtained or approached statistical significance.

The second column of Table 2 provides results with the treatment group broken into three categories reflecting whether the subject received one, two, or three negative mailings. Again the results are strong, with 82 percent of subjects correctly classified, and with a Nagelkerke r^2 of .424.

Here, the results suggest the strength of multiple negative ads and the weakness of a single ad. A single negative ad did not have a significant effect on turnout. Two and three ads, however, did have effects. The reception of two ads was associated with a 1.8 times higher likelihood of voting compared to those who did not receive any ads. The reception of three ads was associated with a 1.6 times higher likelihood of voting compared to those who did not receive any ads. Again, putting those numbers into perspective, a person who did not receive any ads was likely to vote at a rate of .25, while those who received two ads voted at .45 and those who received three ads at a rate of .39.

As was the case in the first model, the only other statistically significant variable in the model was previous voting history. Here, consistently voting in the past was associated with an 11.6 times higher likelihood of voting. That represents an increase in voting likelihood from .07 among those who had not recently voted to .81 among those who had consistently voted.

The third model, which breaks down the treatment groups based on which ads were received (A, B, or C), produces quite similar results to the second model. Here, though, the data suggest ad A did not have a discernable effect on turnout, while both ad B and ad C did. The odds ratios estimate recipients of ad B voted at a 1.3 times higher rate, and recipients of ad C at a 1.5 times higher rate. That translates to an increase in the likelihood of voting from about .25 to about .33 for those who received ad B and .38 for those who received ad C. The previous voting history variable is again the only other statistically significant measure, and its results are quite similar in the second and third models. Overall, the regression results suggest that the negative ads had a positive but quite inconsistent effect on turnout.

Post Election Survey

A brief survey was conducted in the week after the election to measure the reception of negative messages and to better understand their consequences. All respondents were asked if they knew anything about the candidates, and if they cared who won the mayor's race. Respondents were also asked if they had seen any ads about the mayor's race. If they said yes, they were asked if

≡ TABLE 2
LOGISTIC REGRESSION VOTER TURNOUT IN MAYORAL ELECTION

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Sex (1 = female, 2 = male)	.03	.02	.01
African American (1 = yes, 0 = no)	.16	.15	.14
Latino (1 = yes, 0 = no)	-.26	-.34	-.31
Age (1 = 18-25, 2 = 26-35, 3 = 36-45, 4 = 46-55, 5 = 56-65, 6 = 66 and above)	-.01	-.02	-.01
Previous Voting History (1 = 0 recent votes, 2 = 1-2, 3 = 3)	1.75***	1.76***	1.76***
Precinct Voting History (1 = lowest third, 2 = middle third, 3 = highest third)	-.09	-.11	-.11
Model 1 Experimental Effect (1 = treatment, 0 = control)	.37***		
Model 2 Experimental Effect			
1 Ad (1 = 1 negative ad, 0 = other)		.11	
2 Ads (1 = 2 negative ads, 0 = other)		.59***	
3 Ads (1 = 3 negative ads, 0 = other)		.47*	
Model 3 Experimental group			
Ad A (1 = Ad A, 0 = other)			-.02
Ad B (1 = Ad B, 0 = other)			.27*
Ad C (1 = Ad C, 0 = other)			.43***
Constant	-2.48***	-2.44***	-2.46***
Chi-Square	489.48	494.73	495.67
-2 Log Likelihood	1208.91	1203.66	1202.72
Nagelkerke r ²	.420	.424	.424
Percent Correct	81.9	81.9	81.9
Improvement over Null	11.4	11.4	11.4

Note: cell entries are unstandardized coefficients

***p < .01

**p < .05

*p < .10

they had received any ads in the mail and whether they had seen any negative ads about the candidates. If they said yes, they were asked whether the ads they had seen were fair, and whether the ads they had seen made them disappointed or angry.

Consistent with the premise of the study, treatment group participants were more likely to report they had seen ads about the mayor's race (70 percent to 54 percent), much more likely to report they had received ads in the mail (64 percent to 33 percent), and much more likely to report they had seen negative ads about the candidates (59 percent to 26 percent). Among those in the treatment group who said they had seen negative ads, however, most rated the ads fair (62 percent). While there were not sufficient cases with which to make a full comparison, those who received ads B and C were more likely to report they were disappointed or angry with a candidate.

Comparing those who received the ads to those who did not, ad recipients were more likely to say they knew something about the candidates (57 percent to 43 percent), and slightly more likely to say they cared who won (38 percent to 36 percent).

In sum, the follow-up survey suggests that treatment subjects did receive the stimulus and were affected by it in ways consistent with increased political interest and activity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of one study in one Florida city election can hardly be deemed exhaustive. But, there is considerable value in the methodology used here and the diversity of the participants included. The field experiment offers access to real people, making decisions in the midst of a real campaign.

This experiment randomly chose 700 city voters for exposure to negative messages in the last days before the election and compared their turnout behavior to 700 randomly chosen city voters who did not receive the negative messages. There can be no doubt about what caused the negative exposure, as the messages were independently generated and randomly applied. There also can be no doubt about an exaggerated laboratory effect in response to the ads because they were received in the context of participants' regular lives, thus competing with untold other pieces of mail and various other types of messages, political and

otherwise. Further, the dependent variable is taken from the official voting rolls. There is no room for faulty recall or socially desirable responses to cloud the results. Finally, the participants were a random sample of people from a diverse city. They ranged in age, for example, from 18 to 100.

While respondents obviously received other messages from both the campaigns and the media, Green and Gerber (2004) repeatedly find that different forms of campaign communication have independent rather than synergistic effects on turnout.

Three observations about the data stand out. First, contrary to it Ansolabehere and Iyengar's (1995) conclusions, it is clear here that the reception of negative advertisements *did not have a negative effect* on turnout. Nothing in any view of the data, whether in bivariate or multivariate form, suggests that these negative advertisements reduced the inclination to vote.

Second, contrary to Green and Gerber's (2004) findings, it would appear that negative ads *can have a positive effect* on turnout. Although positive effects are not consistently supported in all the variables examined, it is clearly the dominant thrust of the data. That is, overall, those who received negative ads were more likely to vote than those who did not.

Third, not all the specific negative ads appeared to have an effect, with ad A ("Like Sitting in Traffic? Thank Joel") revealing a modest effect in the bivariate comparison and failing to have a statistically significant effect in the logistic regression model. Similarly, receiving multiple ads seemed to have a greater effect than receiving a single ad, but the effect was not linear as the logistic regression found the biggest effect on those who received two ads rather than three ads. This suggests that much of the difficulty in quantifying a "negative campaigning effect" is that there may not be such a thing as a monolithic negativity effect.

This is consistent with the implications of Lau and Pomper's (2001) study. They found that within the campaigns they examined negativity was a positive influence on turnout. However, when they extrapolated their data they concluded the effect of negativity was not linear, and that an excess of negativity would likely result in decreased turnout. Others have documented in the laboratory the varying effects of negativity based on the precise topic of the message (Budesheim, Houston, and DePaola 1996).

Surely a significant part of the difficulty in understanding the effects of negativity can be related to these findings. That is, different topics are no doubt likely to elicit different effects, and different amounts of negativity may not only have varying effects but non-linear effects. Future research on negativity will no doubt consider varying the topics and tone of the negative message, varying the amounts of negativity, and varying the number of sources of negativity (one or more candidates, interest groups, etc.). Even beyond those pressing questions remains the difficult challenge of understanding the long term effects of negative political advertising. If its effects are more like smoking than mustard gas, then long term exposure to negative campaigning may

be affecting turnout in ways that would be undetectable within the study of a single election.

In sum, the findings here are consistent neither with Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) nor with Green and Gerber (2004), but in a sense the findings here are consistent with both of these sets of authors. That is, taken separately, the findings here neither augment Ansolabehere and Iyengar's (1995) notion of negativity hurting turnout nor Green and Gerber's (2004) notion of negativity being unrelated to turnout. But, taken together, the findings here fit what amounts to a non-pattern in which negativity has collectively been found to have inconsistent effects on turnout.

Nevertheless, in this study and in others published on the subject, it is clear from the data that even where negativity affects turnout, its effects are far from dominant. We would know much more about the likelihood that a person would vote in an upcoming election if we knew whether that person was in the habit of voting, than if we knew how much exposure that person had had to negative advertisements during a campaign.

APPENDIX

1. Some people pay a lot of attention to politics, and some people are too busy to pay a lot of attention to politics. There was an election on Tuesday to choose a Mayor in West Palm Beach—do you happen to know anything about any of the candidates who ran?
2. Did you care who won the Mayor's race?
3. Did you see any campaign ads about any of the candidates in the Mayor's race?

[If no] Interview ends.

[If yes] Did you receive any campaign ads in the mail about any of the candidates in the Mayor's race?

[If no] Interview ends.

[If yes] Did you receive any campaign ads in the mail that asked you to vote against any candidate in the Mayor's race?

[If no] Interview ends.

[If yes] Were the ads you received in the mail asking you to vote against a candidate fair?

Did any of the ads you received in the mail asking you to vote against a candidate make you feel disappointed?

Did any of the ads you received in the mail asking you to vote against a candidate make you feel angry?

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