PSCI4120 Public Opinion and Participation
Participation II

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Negative Advertisements Have Harmful Impacts on Democracy?

- “The ads people are seeing are relentlessly negative: loaded words and nasty implications about the opposition candidates; often never hint as to why a voter should support the person paying for the TV spot” (David Broder, Oct. 7, 2002, *Washington Post*).
- “Ordinary citizens’ perception of the electoral process is marked by cynicism and dissatisfaction with the nature and tone of the contemporary campaign discourse” (Bartels 2000, 1).
- “Negative politics appears to wear some people down to the point where simply want less of politics” (Patterson 2002, 51).
Overview

- Research on the effect of negative ads on voter turnout
- Conclusions: the conventional wisdom may be wrong!
Campaign Advertising

- Campaign advertisements introduce candidates to voters and set the agenda.
- Campaign advertising has impacts on whether people vote and how they vote.
- Bush spent $345 million and Kerry spent $310 million in the 2004 Presidential election!
- How did they spend the money?
- Positive and negative advertisements
- Negativity in campaigns has increased in recent years.
What are Negative Ads?

Definition: “Any ad that implicitly or explicitly criticizes the opponent or puts that opponent in an inferior position” (Jasperson 2005, 281)

Types
- Direct attack ads criticize for opponents for perceived weakness.
- Direct contrast ads show voters which candidate is a better option.
“Tank Ride” (George Bush, 1988)

Michael Dukakis has opposed virtually every defense system we developed. He opposed new aircraft carriers. He opposed antisatellite weapons. He opposed four missile systems, including the Pershing 2 missile development. Dukakis opposed the stealth bomber, a ground emergency warning system against nuclear testing. He even criticized our rescue mission to Grenada and our strike on Libya. And now he wants to be our commander in chief. America can’t afford that risk. (Geer 2006, 127)
Example of Direct Attack Ads

Source: The Digital Journalist (http://digitaljournalist.org)
“Second” (Bill Clinton, 1992)

George Bush gave people the second biggest tax increase in the American history despite the fact that he said “Read my lips. No new taxes.” Bill Clinton is a different kind of Democrat. Clinton, as governor of Arkansas, achieved the second lowest tax burden in the country. You don’t have to read his lips. Read his record.
Example of Direct Contrast Ads

Source: www.CNN.com
Negativity in Campaigns Has Increased in Recent Years


Source: John Geer. 2006. "In Defense of Negativity"
“Midterm Meaness: Negative Ads Rule the 2006 Elections” (Marie Horrigan, Oct 16, CQ Weekly)

Examples of negative ads in the 2006 congressional election between Chet Edwards (D) and Van Taylor (R) in the 17th congressional district of Texas

- Van Taylor attacks Chet Edwards
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PI630wh_EsY
- Chet Edwards attacks Van Taylor
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZoZl5dzZtQ
Voter turnout is one of the most important indicators of the health of democratic political systems.

Politicians should encourage people to vote.

If negative ads decrease voter turnout, we can conclude that they have a harmful impact on democracy!
Decline in Voter Turnout

Presidential Turnout Rates, 1952–2004

Source: Michael McDonald. 2006. "The United States Elections Project"
Factors that could have increased voter turnout
  - Improvement of socioeconomic status
  - Liberalization of registration laws

Factors that could have decreased voter turnout
  - Generation change
  - Elite mobilization strategies
  - Campaign ads?

→ More negative advertisements discourage people from voting?
It seems that voter turnout has decreased as negative ads have increased!
How Does Campaign Advertising Affect Citizens’ Decision to Vote?

Three Hypothesized Effects of Attack Ads on Voter Turnout

1. Campaign advertising educates citizens and stimulates their interest in elections and therefore increases turnout → **Mobilization effect**

2. Little effects because of the public’s ability to screen out messages conflicting with their existing views → **No effect**

3. Negative (especially TV) advertising has harmful effects because negative campaign ads increase cynicism about politics → **Demobilization effect**
Controlled Experiment (Ansolabehere et al. 1994)

- Groups of participants were exposed to one of the 3 advertisement treatments: positive political advertisements; no political advertisements; negative political advertisements.
Controlled Experiment (Ansolabehere et al. 1994)

After taking into account other factors likely to affect a person’s intention to vote, exposure to negative advertisements depressed intention to vote by 5%. → Demobilization effect
Observe a relationship between reported exposure to negative ads and voter turnout.

After taking into account other factors likely to affect voter turnout, self-reported exposure to negative advertisements increases voter turnout in the 1992 presidential election but has no impact on turnout in the 1996 election. → No effect
Observe a relationship between exposure to negative ads and voter turnout in various places

After taking into account other factors likely to affect voter turnout, areas with more negative advertisements on TV increase voter turnout in the 1996 presidential election. → Mobilization effect
Many studies found no demobilizing effect!

“It remains an open question as to whether negativity increases turnout or, instead, has no effect” (Brooks 2006, 694)

Negative Ads DON’T Disengage People from Politics
Geer’s (2006) Findings

- Geer (2006) maintains that negative campaigns may promote democracy.
  - More issues
  - More evidence
  - Clearer difference between candidates
  - More relevant information

- Geer found that:
  - Negative ads are more issue-oriented than positive ads.
  - Negative ads are more likely to be supported by evidence than positive ads.
  - Negative ads include important policy issues than positive ads.

→ Negative ads are more informative than positive ads.
→ Attacks enrich the information environment of the public.
Conclusions

- Systematic empirical research demonstrates that negative ads do not demobilize people from voting, in contrast to the conventional wisdom.
- Negative advertisements are not the cause of the turnout decline.
- Negative ads may give voters more valuable information on candidates and policies.