Attack and Response in Political Campaigns: An Experimental Study in Two Parts

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Most Americans seem to believe that the degree of negativity (and specifically, the amount of negative advertising) in political campaigns today is extremely high – and perhaps unprecedented.

What could account for such a development?
Because it works!

Except when it doesn’t.
The consultant view: Of course, it works (anecdotal).

The academic view: Well, maybe it works . . . sometimes . . . under certain conditions . . . it really kind of depends (empirical).
Better: Like all campaign communications, negative campaigning/advertising can work (to shape people’s perceptions of candidates and vote choice) when

- it deals with things that people care about;
- the message is well-crafted and credible;
- the “facts” are more or less correct; and
- (maybe) the tone is hard-hitting, uncivil, and/or mean-spirited.
Although this isn’t what the paper is mainly about, our research proceeds from the assumption (and our results confirm) that “going negative” does work under certain circumstances.

What we want to know, however, is how candidates who are targeted by negative ads can most effectively blunt the effect of an attack – a question that obviously presumes the existence an effect that needs to be blunted in the first place.

If there is, our goal is to determine whether certain types of responses are more effective than others.
There was a time when some consultants advised their clients to deal with an attack by ignoring it. That has clearly changed, in part due to such high-profile cases as... Example #1:
The RNC spent $4.5 million for network ad buys (including some that asked voters why they would want to go back to the way things were under Jimmy Carter) during July and August 1988, at a time when no other national ads were competing with them.

Although internal Republican polls showed movement within two days, Dukakis did nothing until the week of the GOP convention – by which time, a 17-point Democratic lead had vanished.
“The only explanation for that kind of movement was [the] ad series went unanswered.” [Douglas Bailey, president of Presidential Hotline]

“[T]here's one thing the American people dislike more than someone who fights dirty. And that's someone who climbs into the ring and won't fight.” [Ed McCabe, Dukakis media consultant]
Example #2: In 2004, the first (of several) Swift Boat Veterans for Truth ads ran for only a few days in a few markets due to limited money – but received considerable free coverage in the media and . . .
The ads’ apparent impact was heightened because the Kerry campaign preferred to stay positive, wanted to conserve its (FECA) money, and was reluctant to give the charges the added coverage that an answer would provoke – and so it did not respond quickly. In fact, Move-On aired a Swift Boat response ad before Kerry did.

This changed as the campaign moved along (Kerry ran nine response ads, including some over the Internet) – but the damage may already have been done.
Example #3 . . . NOT!


“You have to respond forcefully, quickly and truthfully to attacks.” Obama, *Rolling Stone*
Doonesbury (2008)
fightthesmears.com
Some rationales for strategic silence:

- Attacks typically occur in areas where the target is vulnerable; a response may draw the candidate off message to deal with a matter on which the other side has an advantage.

- One cannot defend against an attack without first identifying it, and a response risks reminding or informing voters of a potential weakness they have forgotten or never heard.
Here’s the problem (beyond the fact that politicians who don’t fight back are often thought to be weak): By remaining silent in the face of an attack, candidates turn over the definition of the situation (and often of themselves) to others. And candidates who allow this to happen usually don’t win.

One frequently used alternative: Don’t answer the attack directly – instead, counterattack (thereby creating a contest of frames between yourself and your opponent). More on this shortly. . . .
Bogus, frivolous, or mean-spirited attacks are often seen as such by voters, and have been known to backfire on the sponsor. But when they are credible and salient to voters’ concerns, negative ads can do great damage.

Bringing me to our project, which asks: How should someone respond to a well-designed, hard-hitting campaign attack that is both credible and deals with matters that voters care about?
Q1: What kinds of attacks demand a response?
Q2: What kinds of responses to those attacks are most effective?

Getting answers to Q2 (our main concern) depended upon first getting a fix on Q1. We attempted to do this not only by consulting the scholarly literature, but also by conducting two focus groups with a total of 21 likely voters in Gainesville during June ‘10.

Among the themes that emerged from these open-ended conversations:
If you go negative, don’t make it personal; attacks should be relevant to your opponent’s past or likely future performance in office, that is, how s/he has affected, or would affect, the lives of voters if elected or re-elected.

If you go negative, charges should be both specific and accurate.

In response to attacks, concessions/apologies (at least in cases where the attack raises relevant concerns) are not usually effective.
In response to attacks, counterattacks can work if they are done the right way (be accurate, relevant, and specific).

In response to attacks, you may be able to maintain support by staying (aggressively) positive – not the same thing as staying silent and ignoring the charges.
Next stage of research: lab/survey experiments

Attack stimulus:

- written attacks/responses (simulating direct mail, which in real life is often harsher than tv or radio)

- the target was described as a member of Congress seeking re-election, the sponsor as having served in local and/or state government (legislature)
attacks were based not on policy (these are likely to be viewed through a partisan lens) or personal traits/character flaws (not seen as relevant by many voters), but rather on **performance**; for example . . . assertions that “the incumbent has lost touch with the people back home, doesn’t work hard, doesn’t stand on principle and changes his mind to please different people, has used the office for personal gain, will say just about anything to get reelected, and, as the sum of all these charges, the incumbent doesn’t deserve to be reelected” (Dennis Johnson)
two attacks were used, each designed to be hard-hitting (close to “uncivil”) but focusing on aspects of performance; both were pre-tested (undergraduate subjects) to ensure that they had the intended effect of lowering evaluations/vote preferences for the target – which they did

attack #1 (taking advantage) charged the incumbent with “helping himself to other people’s money” – voting for pay raises, using party money to finance a family vacation, renting office space from his brother at inflated prices, over-billing clients for professional services, channeling no-bid government contracts to campaign donors
attack #2 (*out of touch*) charged the incumbent with being arrogant and “out of touch with the people who elected him” – voting to restrict public access to legislative business (“sunshine law”), doing special favors for campaign supporters, buying a plush Washington townhouse and renting a one-bedroom apartment for brief visits home, taking money from Wall Street CEO’s to finance re-election campaigns, accepting gifts from lobbyists
So: How might the incumbent (target) respond to these attacks? Three different types of responses were not examined in our study:

- **concessions** (unlikely to work in most instances, though history provides an occasional exception);

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mncXLjAxI4&feature=endscreen&NR=1
- **excuses**: acknowledging the behavior in question, but denying responsibility (e.g., claiming to have been misinformed, as with a Democratic member of Congress who defends his support for the invasion of Iraq based on misinformation about WMD); these are rarely used in political campaigns, and research on politicians accounting for unpopular legislative votes suggests they wouldn’t be effective anyway.

- **inoculation**: an attempt to limit potential damage by anticipating and responding to an attack before it is initiated; this is an interesting idea, but one that was impractical for us to test with our research design.
Here are the four types of responses that we tested, in descending order of their anticipated effectiveness:

- **Denials**: likely to work best when the facts are more or less on your side and there is little wiggle room for (partisan) interpretation – in short, not very often if you’re being attacked for past votes or policy stands.

- **Counterattacks**: subject to the same standards as attacks in general, i.e., they should be accurate (or at least hard to disprove), specific, and address matters that voters care about; we also expect them to be more effective if they are hard-hitting and, as with all political ads, if the message is well-crafted.
“It’s hard for your opponent to say bad things about you when your fist is in his mouth” (Democratic consultants James Carville and Paul Begala) – an observation that obviously applies to both attacks and counterattacks.

Note: A counterattack can take various forms, e.g., emotional counterpunch, humor, the juxtaposition of words or images, and probably others.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFuWjZpnjk4
counterimaging, or being “aggressively” positive: meeting the attack head on by providing voters with an alternative frame that calls into question the charges being made (and the credibility of the person making them) – but only by implication, not by criticizing the attacker directly.

differs from excuses (above) and justifications (below) in that it (a) is positive in tone; (b) neither acknowledges that the alleged behavior occurred, nor addresses the question of who should be held responsible if it did; and (c) may speak to candidate traits or character rather than actual behavior.
note: the counterimaging responses in our study were patterned after the Obama ad, though they clearly lacked the latter’s powerful visual imagery.
justifications: acknowledging the behavior in question and accepting responsibility, but attempting to minimize its negative consequences; these are not used often in campaigns, maybe because they can come off sounding like weak or qualified denials (“you’re painting a distorted picture of what I did; once voters have all the facts, they will not be upset by my actions”)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=outsctZlIR4
A fifth option was tested only indirectly:

- **silence** (expected to be too risky except when either the sponsor or the attack itself is not credible)

Ultimately, successful responses **reframe** – they invite voters to see the attack differently than was intended, to question its legitimacy and by implication the person who has sunk so low as to make it.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Dirty Politics* (1992)
The original experimental design:

- UF polisci undergrads (N = 278)
- 2 hypothetical races for U.S. House, one in Orlando and the other in Fort Myers (both candidates male)
- within-subjects design, 16 different treatment groups; participants read one attack and one response from each of the two races
- party affiliations of sponsor and target varied randomly across treatment groups, though incumbent was always the target
- dependent variables: candidate evaluations (on a scale of 1 to 7, very unfavorable to very favorable) and vote preference, each of which was measured three times: following the brief candidate bios, following the attack, and following the response
Results

- Attack 1: Almost 49% of our subjects supported the incumbent after reading the bios; following the attack, just 34% maintained that support.

- Attack 2: Just over 48% supported the incumbent initially; following the attack, that dropped to less than 43%.

- Both attacks also lowered subjects’ evaluations of the target – attack #1 (*taking advantage*) more than attack #2 (*out of touch*), but the difference between the two was not as great as with vote preference.

- Both attacks (*out of touch* more than *taking advantage*) lowered subjects’ evaluations of the sponsor as well – though not as much as they lowered evaluations of the target.
Turning to the impact of response types:

- For attack #1 (*taking advantage*), the incumbent gained support from many people who previously (following the attack) either planned to vote for the challenger or were undecided – though the magnitude of that gain varied by type of response: 33% w/denials, 27% w/ justifications, 16% w/counterimaging, and 12% w/counterattacks.

- For attack #2 (*out of touch*, which was itself less effective than *taking advantage* insofar as moving voters away from the target candidate), responses also had less impact: 21% w/denials, 15% w/justifications, 8% w/counterimaging; and 0% w/counterattacks.

Note:
Some responses also moved a few voters away from supporting the challenger into the no preference category.
Note:
While the relative effectiveness of responses is not exactly as we predicted, denials do appear to be the preferred choice (when they are available); however . . .

What were the net effects of each attack/response combination (that is, the net change in candidate support from pre-attack to post-response)?

Answer: In 7 of 8 cases, more people said they would vote for the incumbent post-response than planned to support him initially – but in only one case (denials of the out of touch attack) did that increase come close to being statistically significant. Thus, in our experiment, responses mostly restored the status quo but did not help the target candidate to achieve a net gain in voter support.

On the other hand . . .
For both attacks, all four types of responses significantly improved subjects’ evaluations of the target.

For both attacks, some response types (all except counterimaging) also led to more negative evaluations of the sponsor.

Since candidate assessments are the most proximal determinant of vote choice, exchanges like these may affect how (and whether) people vote on election day regardless of whether they have an immediate impact on candidate preference. In a broader sense . . .

The net effect of attack + response was usually more negative evaluations for both incumbent (target) and challenger (sponsor) – that is, the exchange led many voters to view both candidates less favorably than they did before the campaign began.
So What Was the Second Part of Our Experiment?

He Said, She Said: The Impact of Candidate Gender in Negative Campaigns

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Part 2 of our study differed from Part 1 in several respects:

- internet survey of registered voters (national sample, though not perfectly representative of that group);
- candidate gender varied: all races pitted a female candidate (sometimes R, sometimes D; sometimes the incumbent, sometimes the challenger) against a male candidate;
- only one attack studied (taking advantage, which had a much stronger effect than out of touch);
- with only one attack, respondents were exposed to just one hypothetical campaign (one attack + one response);
- fifth response type added: accusing one’s attacker of mud-slinging, waging a “relentlessly negative” campaign, not talking about things voters care about (a weak form of counterattack)
Several hypotheses were tested in this study, the most important one being that attacks (and among responses, counterattacks and accusations of mudslinging) are less effective for women candidates than for men.

Why? Despite the fact that more women are getting elected to office today (perhaps in part because they’ve become increasingly adept at the art of negative campaigning), there still are those who believe that “going negative” doesn’t work as well for women due to cultural norms, i.e., because it violates the traditional gender stereotypes (expectations about what constitutes “appropriate behavior”) that continue to be held by many voters.

Prior studies on this topic have produced mixed results. Still, the impression persists . . .
“[T]raditional expectations regarding the communication behavior of men include characteristics such as strength, ambition, aggressiveness, independence, stoicism, and rationality. However . . . when women speak, they are expected to exhibit characteristics such as sensitivity to the needs of others, concern for family and relationships, compassion, emotionality, affection, and nurturing. They are not expected to employ harsh language or to be overtly assertive, either verbally or physically.

Politicians whose behavior does not conform to these expectations may risk having their message rejected by voters.

Quick Summary of Results

- The female challenger fared less well than her male counterpart across the board: Her attack produced a smaller decline in incumbent vote share and incumbent favorability, while generating greater backlash in terms of lower favorability ratings for herself . . .

- Yet none of these differences were statistically significant (£p < .05$).

- The overall pattern did not change much when we looked only at voters who identified with the opposing party (sometimes found by other scholars to be less receptive to negative messages by women candidates than are her fellow partisans and independents).

- There were no consistent differences between male and female candidates in the relative effectiveness of the five response types.
Some Unanswered Questions

- **selective/limited exposure**: unlike voters in an actual campaign, our participants were exposed to all relevant communications.

- **timing**: was Obama correct when he said that candidates must respond quickly to attacks? Most consultants probably agree that he was.

- **repetition**: research shows that attacks (and probably responses) are more likely to produce the intended effect if voters are exposed to them on multiple occasions.

- **earned media coverage**: scrutiny by the media may alter the effect of any particular ad or exchange of ads.

- **decay vs. sleeper effects**: research shows that the impact of any campaign ad tends to dissipate over time, it has been suggested that the effect of an unanswered attack may become stronger (especially with repetition?)
- **ad sponsorship**: the effectiveness of both attacks and responses may vary according to whether they are delivered by the candidate or a supporting individual/group

- **strength of message**: as with other types of political communication, the effectiveness of attacks and responses will likely vary with the “strength” of the opposing arguments

- **consistency of response**: many consultants believe that, whatever the candidate’s initial response to an attack may be, s/he should stick with it (inconsistency can generate unwelcome attention in the media)

- **gender**: are attacks or certain types of responses more (or less) effective in female vs. female races? will candidate gender matter more than it did in our study when attacks are based on policy, character, or other alleged wrongdoings?
Some Odds and Ends

- Most Americans say they don’t like negative ads, but some people (e.g., strong partisans, those who follow campaigns closely, conservatives, men, young people) are more tolerant (less likely to agree that “some negative advertisements are so nasty that I stop paying attention”) of it than others. Indeed . . .

- Those who claim to be less tolerant of negative ads are often the ones most likely to be swayed by them.

- Ads having the greatest impact on voters are those that are seen to be uncivil (without crossing the line into mudslinging) and relevant (to how the target candidate has performed/is likely to perform in office or to affect the lives of voters, cst. past bad behavior or issues few people care about).

[http://sunlightfoundation.com/blog/2012/05/15/attack-ads/](http://sunlightfoundation.com/blog/2012/05/15/attack-ads/)
Presidential Campaign Ads in 2012

Positive Vs. Negative Ads

Kantar Media CMAG finds that out of the 1,014,484 ads about the presidential campaign that have aired between April 10 and Oct. 22, a majority have had a negative tone.

Presidential Election Ad Tone

- Positive ads: 132,496 spots, estimated spending: $77,001,280
- Negative ads: 881,988 spots, estimated spending: $577,569,920

Were these ads (and others like them) effective?
According to most scholars who have studied this question, the answer is . . . yes, but with a surprisingly small number of voters (though small can sometimes be decisive, e.g., Al Gore). One political scientist in 2012 estimated that there were only about 800,000 undecided voters in battleground states, which meant that the campaigns together were spending close to $1000 per persuadable voter – much more than they could have afforded to spend back when the nominees of both parties were receiving public financing (an outgrowth of the Watergate scandal). Again, though, did it work?

It apparently helped the GOP to turn Wisconsin into a battleground state in 2012 – though Obama eventually won there, perhaps by closing the gap shown here in the closing days of the campaign.

Some election post-mortems in 2012 suggested that the Romney campaign made a fatal mistake by allowing Obama to “define” him (without adequate response) through an early advertising blitz in battleground states. According to Sides, however, there is little evidence that these early ads mattered much, at least in terms of their overall impact on candidate evaluations.

Source: YouGov polling. Graph by John Sides.
Here is some of what we know about the effects of campaign ads:

- Campaign ads matter more when the candidates are unfamiliar, e.g., state legislative or local races, many primaries, challenger vs. incumbent races (with spending by the former usually getting more bang for the buck).
- Campaign ads matter more when a candidate can outspend the opponent, e.g., last-minute battleground state ad blitz by Bush in 2000, overall advantage for Obama over McCain in 2008.
- Campaign ads can matter, but not for long (as above, though, what about the effects of repetition?).

Negative ads work, except when they don’t. (Sorry, professor, but I’ve been using this line for years.)

Most campaign ads don’t affect turnout very much – though there is evidence that negative ads (contrary to what we once believed) may actually have a slight mobilizing effect, at least so long as the negatives don’t get out of hand.

There is no secret sauce – which is to say that no one really knows whether an ad will be effective in a particular situation. If they did (just like if negative ads always worked), there would never be any losers.

Negative Media Coverage in 2012

http://www.journalism.org/2012/11/02/winning-media-campaign-2012/; data for the first table are compiled from “mainstream” media, whatever that means.
### Tone of Coverage Reverses After First Debate

**Percent of stories with tone**

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<th>Obama</th>
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<tr>
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**Date Range:** August 27 – October 21, 2012

Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism

### Mainstream News Less Harsh than Social Media

**Percent of stories/discussion with tone**

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