More Than a Dime’s Worth of Difference:
Policy-Based Campaign Ads in an Age of Party Polarization

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Abstract: Although academic research has yielded mixed results, candidates and consultants are rational people whose experience persuades them that going negative can be an effective campaign strategy under the right circumstances. And they are almost certainly right, even if their evidence is more anecdotal than systematic. This paper examines the effectiveness of policy-based attacks dealing with four issues on which the major parties have taken sharply divergent positions: the environment, immigration, national defense, and inequality. Given the high degree of partisan polarization present in the electorate today, and the apparent tendency for most voters to view any campaign communication through the lens of their partisan identity (as perhaps reinforced by their ideological identity and issue preferences), do these kinds of attacks have the power to play a meaningful role in shaping election outcomes? Participants in our study are a national sample of over 600 registered voters who participated in an Internet survey conducted in June 2015. Results suggest that while policy-based attacks do have the potential to move (at least temporarily) some types of voters, their overall impact is quite modest. Perhaps counterintuitively, the potential for change seems to be greatest among the attacked candidate’s own fellow partisans.

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“There’s not a dime’s worth of difference” between the Democratic and Republican Parties.¹
George C. Wallace

Things have changed since Alabama governor and third-party presidential candidate George Wallace challenged the political establishment with these words in the 1960s. Although there may still be some who subscribe to a “tweedledee-tweedledum” model of partisan politics in the United States,² Republican and Democratic leaders today are more likely to be criticized for offering a predominantly centrist/nonideological electorate (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2011; Ellis and Stimson 2012; Pew Research Center 2014) too much of a choice on key issues – and for the policy stalemate that often results after the election is decided and the two sides are unable to find common ground. Among candidates, officeholders, and activists, the past several decades have witnessed a polarization along liberal-conservative lines that emphatically puts to rest the notion that our two major parties are cut from the same ideological cloth (Mann and Ornstein 2012; Layman et al. 2013; Noel 2013; DeSilver 2014; Shor 2015; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016).

Some citizens remain unaware of this change (Sides 2013; but see Smidt 2015), while others recognize that sharp differences exist but reject the particular choice they are faced with in most elections. There also are those who say that polarization has not progressed far enough, i.e., they believe there is an untapped well of support for candidates who are even more conservative (Ted Cruz) or more liberal (Bernie Sanders) than what has become the norm. Once a nomination contest is settled, however, partisans on both sides of the aisle can usually be counted on to stress (sometimes with questionable accuracy) the stark policy differences that exist between themselves and their opponents and point to the dire consequences that will inevitably follow if the latter emerge victorious on Election Day.

Such rhetoric constitutes a form of negative campaigning,³ the dynamics of which are the
topic of this paper. While negative campaigns are hardly unique to the current era, a majority of Americans have described almost every election since 1992 (including those occurring in the off-year) as involving more negativity and “mudslinging” than in the past (Mattes and Redlawsk 2014, 27) – and they may be right (Geer 2012; West 2014), though the data simply don’t exist to provide a definitive answer one way or the other. What we do know is that negative campaigning is more likely to be covered by the media (Geer 2012) and thus to be noticed by voters, thereby contributing to an impression of growing negativity. Is this a bad thing? At first glance, a near-majority of the electorate appears to believe that it is. Among the national sample of registered voters whose attitudes are the focus of our analysis in this paper (details provided below), 42.9 percent indicated that “political candidates should avoid criticizing their opponents because campaigns have become too negative,” and 38.9 percent were on the fence – compared with just 18.2 percent who said that those who run for office “need to criticize their opponents because it is important for voters to know the strengths and weaknesses of all candidates” (see Lipsitz et al. 2005).

Yet even as they profess not to like negative campaigning, and to regard its proliferation as something that is “undermining and damaging our democracy” (Sides, Lipsitz, and Grossman 2010, 524), many citizens concede that negative information can be useful to voters (Geer 2006; Mattes and Redlawsk 2014) and consider some attacks to be less objectionable than others (Freedman, Wood, and Lawton 1989; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1989; Lipsitz et al. 2005; Brooks and Geer 2007; Sides, Lipsitz, and Grossman 2010; Stevens et al. 2008, 2015). In fact, their misgivings about “negative campaigning” notwithstanding, just one in five participants in our survey felt that the specific policy-based attack to which they were exposed was “too negative and should not be made publicly” (compared with 54.5 percent who said the attack was “negative but acceptable within the context of a competitive political campaign,” and 25.5 percent who thought the ad was “not really
negative at all”). And while prior research has shown that issue-based criticism is considered to be fairer, less negative, and more informative than personal or character-based attacks (Mattes and Redlawsk 2014), we obtained similar results in an earlier survey experiment that examined the effects of a hard-hitting ad questioning the integrity of an incumbent legislator: Despite the use of some fairly incendiary language (accusing the target of being “corrupt,” “immoral,” and “deserv[ing] to be in jail more than in Congress”), 65.4 percent believed that the ad was negative but acceptable – and another 8.0 percent didn’t think it was negative at all (Craig, Rippere, and Grayson 2014). From these results, we surmise that most Americans are fairly tolerant of negative campaigning so long as the attack(s) in question are reasonably truthful (or at least not blatantly and demonstrably false, e.g., Johnson 2007; Mattes and Redlawsk 2014) and viewed as relevant to the target’s past or likely future performance in office (Fridkin and Kenney 2008, 2011b; Craig, Rippere, and Grayson 2014).

Against this backdrop, the present study examines four policy-based attacks dealing with issues on which voters today are usually offered far more than a “dime’s worth of difference” by the major parties. Despite an accumulation of evidence suggesting that partisan biases may restrict the effectiveness of campaign ads to an increasingly narrow slice of the electorate (Smidt 2015), each cycle yields hundreds of new ads in which Republicans and Democrats try to persuade voters that the policies favored by their opponents would be (or have been) unworkable, dangerous, or inconsistent with mainstream American values. Our research takes a fresh look at some of the factors that might help to further limit the impact of these ads on voter decision making in an era of heightened partisan polarization.

**Attack and Response in Political Campaigns**

The communications strategy of many modern campaigns focuses more on disparaging one’s opponent than on emphasizing one’s own strengths as a candidate. The reason is simple: Political
professionals almost uniformly believe that negative campaigning is effective (Thurber and Nelson 2000; Mattes and Redlawsk 2014), if not all of the time then at least under certain circumstances. There is no shortage of anecdotal evidence to suggest that they are correct (Diamond and Bates 1992; Westen 2007; Trent, Friedenberg, and Denton 2016), though academic studies have yielded mixed results regarding the persuasive effects of campaign ads generally (Ridout and Franz 2011; Gerber et al. 2011; Hill, Vavreck, and Zaller 2013; Sides and Vavreck 2013; Bartels 2014) and of negative ads, or other forms of negative campaigning, in particular (Sigelman and Kugler 2003; Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Lau and Rovner 2009; Arceneaux and Dickerson 2010; Brooks and Murov 2012; Weber, Dunaway, and Johnson 2012; Fernandes 2013; Blackwell 2013; Craig, Rippere, and Grayson 2014; Dowling and Wichowsky 2015; Malloy and Pearson-Merkowitz 2016). Further, the public’s supposedly greater tolerance for issue-based criticism relative to personal or character-based attacks aside, there is scant evidence (e.g., Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Lau and Pomper 2004) that, ceteris paribus, voters are more likely to be moved by the former than by the latter.

The uncertain and probably modest impact of negative ads is explained in part by the effects of “motivated partisan reasoning” (Redlawsk 2002; Druckman, Peterson, Slothuus 2013; Bartels 2014), which often leads citizens to react less favorably to attacks coming from the other side than they do to criticisms made by candidates of their own party (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Geer 2006; Stevens et al. 2008, 2015). Scholars have long recognized that most Americans identify with one of the major parties, and that this attachment provides a powerful cue influencing their attitudes and vote choice (Campbell et al. 1960); accordingly, it comes as little surprise to learn that voters usually “do not react to campaign messages as dispassionate observers, but as biased partisans” (Iyengar, Jackman, and Hahn 2008, 1). What has changed since the 1950s is the heightened negative affect and even anger that both Republicans and Democrats (on average) now direct at
those whose allegiance runs in the other direction (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Pew Research Center 2014, 2016; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2015). Although we do not have the longitudinal data needed to test our argument, it seems likely that this intensification of mutual ill-feelings has been accompanied by an increase in the frequency with which voters engage in motivated reasoning, thereby reducing further the already limited ability of an opposing-party attack on any topic to provoke attitudinal or behavioral change among the target candidate’s fellow partisans.

What accounts for the growing hostility that each side feels toward the other? It appears to be driven more by group identity than by issue differences between Republicans and Democrats. According to Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012, 407; also see Mason 2015), “the mere act of identifying with a political party is sufficient to trigger negative evaluations of the opposition, and exposure to prolonged media-based campaigns only reinforces these predispositions.” Still, we should be cautious about assuming that issues play no role in eliciting partisan bias. In addition (and perhaps contributing) to the rise of affective polarization, the electorate has become much better “sorted” into relatively homogenous camps as voters are more likely than in the past to identify with the ideologically “correct” party (hence, fewer conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans; see Levendusky 2009; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2011; Pew Research Center 2014). Based on an analysis of American National Election Study data covering more than thirty years, Mason (2015, 141-142) concluded that even in the absence of issue-based or ideological polarization (the so-called “disappearing center”; see Abramowitz 2010), it is possible for the electorate as a whole to regard outgroup partisans with increasing prejudice, to be driven to take action against the outgroup party, and to feel anger in response to electoral challenges from the outgroup party. This can happen simply by
bringing average citizens’ partisan and ideological identities into more consistent alignment, a phenomenon that has repeatedly been shown to be occurring in the American electorate.

Setting ideological identity (which has little meaning for many people and is misunderstood by others; see RePass 2008; Ellis and Stimson 2012) aside, the sorting process also has produced a closer alignment between voters’ preferences on specific issues and their partisan attachments. For example, in the four policy areas that provide the basis for campaign attacks in our own study (national security, the environment, immigration, and inequality; see below), self-identified Republicans and Democrats tend to take very different positions. Indeed, the largest differences in each instance are between those who identify strongly with their party.

Following Mason, one might assume that the alignment of issue preferences and partisan identity in recent years has (a) made motivated reasoning even more prevalent than in the past; (b) contributed to a decline in the proportion of “floating” or “swing” voters in the electorate (Smidt 2015); and, as a result of these changes, (c) rendered policy-based attacks a minimally effective tool for shaping voters’ attitudes. The analysis presented below focuses on the accuracy of this last assumption. As noted earlier, both real-world experience and scholarly research suggest that going negative can be a successful strategy for influencing the behavior of some citizens under some circumstances. Even so, in a political context where the policy choices offered by candidates are much clearer than they used to be but many people do not reflect upon those choices with an open mind, what is the true value of policy-based campaign attacks?

It should be understood that we are looking for evidence of attitude change rather than reinforcement, though the latter is an important element of most campaigns. Our concern is with whether issue criticisms produce significant movement and, if so, among what types of voters.
Prior research on motivated reasoning and partisan bias leads us to doubt that many identifiers will be moved by an attack of *any* sort against their party’s candidate. The catch here is that very few of the attacker’s fellow partisans plan to vote for, or feel favorably toward, the target in the first place – which means that there is a ceiling (or floor) effect that leaves little room for an attack to do much damage among this group. Therefore, based on numbers alone, we might anticipate that policy-based attacks will be more effective among (a) the target’s fellow partisans; and (b) voters whose ideological self-identification and (c) views on the issue in question are consistent with the party of the target candidate (liberal for Democratic targets, conservative for Republicans). Yet not all Republicans and Democrats, or liberals and conservatives, are cut from the same cloth, and therein lies the potential for persuasion in any political campaign.

In fact, we expect to see limited change at best from pre- to post-attack among those who share the partisan identity, ideological identity, or policy views of either the target candidate (due to the effects of motivated reasoning) or his attacker (the great majority of whom are already on board). While that doesn’t leave much room for campaign ads or anything else (Sides and Vavreck 2013) to have an impact, there are factors that might make certain voters more persuadable than others. Specifically, we hypothesize that the effectiveness of policy-based attacks will vary according to:

H1: the strength of one’s attachment to a political party (with Independents being the most susceptible to persuasion, followed by leaning, weak, and strong identifiers);  
H2: the extremity of one’s ideological identity (with those who profess no such identity or who place themselves nearer the center of the liberal-conservative continuum being more persuadable);  
H2a: the degree to which one’s partisan and ideological identities are aligned (with less
alignment being associated with greater movement); H3: the extremity of one’s views on the specific issue addressed in the attack (with those nearer the center or not having an opinion at all being more persuadable); and H3a: the degree to which one’s partisanship and views on the specific issue addressed in the attack are aligned (with less alignment being associated with greater movement).

As important as they may be, we do not believe that partisanship, ideology, and issue views are the only factors that determine how voters will respond to policy-based campaign attacks. Taking our cue from several strands of prior research, we hypothesize that the effectiveness of these attacks will also vary according to:

H4: the salience of the issue addressed in the attack (with those for whom it is most salient being most susceptible to persuasion);\(^\text{13}\)

H5: one’s attitudes about negative campaigning (with those who believe that campaign criticism serves to inform voters being the most persuadable);

H6: one’s feelings toward the two parties (with less polarized affect being associated with greater movement); and

H7: issue ownership (with greater movement anticipated on immigration, which is the only issue in our survey that is not “owned” by either party).\(^\text{14}\)

**Research Design**

Our analysis is based on a within-subjects controlled experiment involving a sample of 660 individuals who participated in an Internet survey conducted between July 9-14, 2015. Data were provided by qSample (see www.qSample.com), a market research firm that has recruited over five million people to participate in research projects related to video gaming, home building/contracting, home ownership, issues of particular interest to college students and Baby Boomers, as well as
politics. Respondents for our survey were drawn from a national panel of registered voters, geographically balanced by region, whose members engage in online polling, ad testing, focus groups, and in-depth interviewing on a range of politically relevant topics. Although the sample is quite diverse (see our online appendix15), we make no claim that it is representative of all registered voters nationwide.

The structure of our experiment was as follows: Respondents were randomly assigned to one of sixteen treatment groups16 and asked to complete a background questionnaire that measured basic demographics, party and ideological identification, issue positions, and a number of other political orientations. They were then told to imagine that it was the fall of 2016, and one of the races on their ballot involved a congressional matchup between an incumbent seeking a third term and an experienced challenger who had served in both local office and the state legislature. After reading short biographies,17 participants were asked to indicate a preference (“Based on the information you currently have, which candidate would you vote for if the election were held today?”) and to rate both contenders on a 7-point scale ranging from “very unfavorable” (1) to “very favorable” (7); answers to these three questions serve as the dependent variables for our analysis. Participants next read what was described as a direct-mail attack18 by the challenger and again registered their vote choice and candidate assessments. In a final stage of the experiment not reported here, each person was shown one of two responses (positive/counterimaging vs. negative/counterattack; see Craig, Rippere, and Grayson 2014) by the target candidate and answered the vote and favorability questions a third time. In summary:

\[
4 \text{ (number of issues)} \times 2 \text{ (number of party attacks/responses on each issue, Republican or Democrat)} \times 2 \text{ (response type, positive or negative)} = a \text{ total of 16 treatment groups}
\]

Because we will not be examining differences by response type, however, the effective number of
groups for present purposes is reduced from 16 to 8.

Attacks and responses were crafted in each of the four policy areas noted earlier: national security, the environment, immigration, and inequality. Unlike criticism based on alleged personal or performance shortcomings (Craig, Rippere, and Grayson 2014), the content of issue-based ads will almost always vary with the identity of the attacker, e.g., a Democratic-sponsored negative ad about immigration will criticize different policy stands, reference different symbols, and propose different solutions than a Republican-sponsored negative ad on the same topic. Our challenge, then, was to create two more-or-less equivalent (in terms of their tone, specificity, credibility, and likely effectiveness) but substantively distinct attacks for all four issues; a brief summary of the attacks (four targeting a Republican incumbent, four targeting a Democratic incumbent) to which respondents were randomly exposed is provided in Table 1 (see our online appendix for a full description). According to Fridkin and Kenney (2011b), relevant (containing information on how a politician has influenced/is likely to influence voters’ lives) and uncivil (uncertain about where to draw the line, we prefer “hard-hitting”) negative ads have the greatest impact on evaluations of a targeted candidate. The allegations made in these ads seem clearly to meet each of these standards.

Table 1 about here

We have identified several factors that may play a role in shaping voter reactions to a policy-based attack. Party identification was measured by one’s self-placement on a 7-point scale ranging from “strong Democrat” to “strong Republican,” and ideological identity by self-placement on a similar scale from “very liberal” to “very conservative.” Partisan strength and ideological extremity were measured by folding the full 7-point scales such that strong Republicans (conservatives) were combined with strong Democrats (liberals), weak Republicans (conservatives) with weak Democrats (liberals), and so on.
Policy preferences were measured by asking two questions in each of the four areas displayed in Table 1 (see note 9 and our online appendix). Responses to all policy questions were coded in the same ideological direction and calculated on a scale from 1 to 5; thus, values ranged between 2 and 10 for each additive index.21 Rather than examine simple direction of preference, however, we folded each index into a new variable that captured the *extremity* of an individual’s policy views: Respondents who expressed moderate or middle-of-the-road opinions were coded 1, while those with more extreme views in either direction were coded 5.

The alignment between partisanship and ideology (H2a) was captured using the standard three-category versions of the respective self-identification variables (see footnote 20). Specifically, we subtracted a respondent’s score for ideological placement from their score for party identification, and then calculated the absolute value of the difference. This yielded a three-category variable (scores ranging from 0 to 2), which was subsequently recoded such that 3 represents a close alignment of party and ideological identification and 1 represents a high degree of mis-alignment between the two orientations. Alignment between partisanship and issue preferences (H3a) was measured in a similar fashion. After collapsing each issue index into a three-category variable,22 with liberal positions coded 1 and conservative positions coded 3, we subtracted a respondent’s score on this measure from his/her party identification score and once again calculated the absolute value of the difference. Alignment was then recoded such that higher scores reflect a closer alignment of partisan attachment and position on the issue dealt with in the attack ad to which that individual was exposed.

Other variables hypothesized to moderate the effectiveness of our campaign attacks are the salience of the issue addressed in the attack (respondents’ assessment of how important the issue would be in determining their vote for president and Congress in 2016), attitudes about negative campaigning (as discussed earlier, this was measured by a forced-choice question asking whether
candidates should avoid criticizing their opponents or whether criticism was important for helping voters to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate), polarized party affect (the balance of positive and negative feelings toward each party), and issue ownership (dummy variables for environment, national security, and inequality in our multivariate model, with immigration used as the reference category; as noted earlier, immigration is the only issue on which neither party holds a “competence” advantage among our respondents).

Results

In our first pass through the data, we used t-tests to examine the effect of each policy-based attack on vote choice (Table 2) and incumbent/target favorability rating (Table 3). These preliminary results are presented for all respondents (row 1), incumbent co-partisans (row 2), challenger co-partisans (row 3), and Independents (row 4) at the baseline (T1) and following exposure to the attack (T2). As expected, the attacks did little damage to the incumbent’s electoral support among challenger co-partisans, very few of whom planned to vote for him in the first place: 15.7 percent at T1 vs. 10.6 percent at T2, p < .05 for all attacks cumulatively (with a similar magnitude of change observed for each individual attack, though p > .10 across the board due in part to small cell size). On the other hand, we can see in Table 3 that each attack did significantly reduce incumbent favorability (in two cases more than a full point) among challenger co-partisans. Since candidate evaluations are thought to be the most proximal determinants of vote choice (Kelley and Mirer 1974), this could point to the potential for additional change in the future.

Tables 2 and 3 about here

Surprisingly, none of these policy-based attacks (with the possible exception of the one on inequality) appear to have made much of an impression on Independents. Equally interesting is the fact that, the power of motivated reasoning notwithstanding, all four attacks had sizable and
statistically significant effects on the vote intentions of incumbent co-partisans: support levels declined between 11.4 (immigration) and 16.1 percentage points (inequality) from $T_1$ to $T_2$. Although the post-attack drop in favorability for this group was less dramatic and quite a bit smaller than among challenger co-partisans, it nonetheless was significant ($p < .01$) for three of the four issues.$^{24}$ Absent an appropriate response, such an erosion of favorability could portend additional problems down the road for the targeted candidate.$^{25}$

A more comprehensive test of our hypotheses is provided in Table 4. To control for party of the respondent, our analysis includes those who shared the party of the incumbent and Independents, but excludes challenger co-partisans; this allows us to control for partisan identity while also examining whether or not Independents are indeed more strongly affected by the charges leveled in the attack. The first set of coefficients in Table 4 were obtained through a logistic regression in which the dependent variable is a dummy measuring whether or not the respondent chose to vote for the incumbent after reading the attack. The second column of results are the odds ratios for the logit coefficients that were statistically significant. In column 3 we present the coefficients from an OLS regression in which the dependent variable is change in the respondent’s rating of the incumbent ($T_2$ rating – $T_1$ rating).

Table 4 about here

Overall, the results in Table 4 are consistent with motivated reasoning theory and suggest that it can be very difficult for policy-based campaign attacks to alter voters’ candidate preferences. In particular, we find that respondents who voted for the incumbent at the baseline were highly likely to maintain that support even after reading the attack ($p < .001$). In line with H1, however, this effect is moderated by the strength of one’s partisanship; specifically, those with stronger attachments to their party were more likely to express support for the incumbent following the attack (that is, less likely
than others to have been moved by the negative charges, p < .05). Likewise, respondents whose partisanship was closely aligned with their policy positions on the issue mentioned in the attack (H3a) were also significantly more likely to maintain their support for the incumbent at T2 (less likely to have been moved by the attack, p < .001).

As predicted in H5 and H6, respectively, (a) people who believed that candidates need to criticize each other in order to inform voters were more likely to be influenced by the attack (and, thus, significantly less likely to support the incumbent at T2, p < .10), whereas (b) those who expressed more sharply polarized feelings toward the parties were less inclined than others to withdraw their support for the incumbent after reading the attack (p < .10). Finally, using the immigration attack as our reference category (H7), we found that the inequality attack was the only ad that was significantly more (or less) effective than the immigration ad (p < .10). Respondents who saw the environment and national security attacks were neither more nor less likely to be swayed compared to those who saw the immigration attack. This occurred even though, according to our sample, the immigration issue is not perceived as being owned by either party. Respondents’ ideological strength (H2), party/ideology alignment (H2a), policy positions (H3), and perceived salience of the issue addressed in the attack (H4) also had no discernible effect on vote preference at T2.

As shown in the third column of Table 4, only two of our independent variables are significant predictors of the effectiveness of these policy-based attacks on incumbent/target favorability. While respondents whose partisanship and policy views were more closely aligned actually offered higher evaluations after reading the attack, post-attack incumbent favorability declined among those for whom the issue dealt with in the attack was salient (p < .10 for both coefficients). We find no other systematic patterns in our data to account for changes in the evaluation of incumbents.
Conclusion

This study represents a first attempt at examining factors that may help to explain the varying effectiveness of policy-based attacks made against an incumbent member of Congress. What have we learned? To the extent that our findings can be generalized, they confirm what a considerable body of prior research has suggested, i.e., that partisanship is the principal factor driving voter preferences in any election pitting a Democrat against a Republican. It explains initial preferences either for or against a (fictional in this instance) member of Congress seeking re-election and, for the incumbent’s fellow partisans, it provides the motivation for them to screen out, distort, or counterargue against policy-based criticism of that candidate by his opponent. Our analysis supports this argument, albeit modestly, by demonstrating that people with a stronger attachment to their party (H1), with a partisan identity and policy positions that are more closely aligned (H3a), and with highly polarized feelings about the two major parties (H6) are more likely than their less partisan, less aligned, and less polarized counterparts to vote for the incumbent even after reading the attack made against him. On the other hand, a belief that negative campaigning is beneficial to the electoral process (H5) seems to make some voters, at least in our sample, more receptive to the policy-based attacks tested here.

More broadly, though, we return to the point with which we began: In an era of heightened partisan polarization, the ever-increasing millions of dollars that are spent every cycle by candidates, parties, and supporting groups attacking their political opponents are very likely playing to an ever-shrinking electorate whose partisan identities preclude such messages from having much of an impact. The irony is that, with voters today being given “a choice, not an echo” (Schlafly 1964) to a greater degree than perhaps ever before, most citizens appear to have made their choice before the opening bell even sounds – and nothing the other side might say during the campaign has much chance of encouraging them to reconsider.
Notes

1. Baumgartner and Francia (2016, 59). Wallace’s characterization of the American two-party system echoed the oft-cited concerns of a group of scholars whose motives were less overtly political (American Political Science Association 1950).


3. Although our research is framed primarily in terms of negative advertising, we recognize that there are numerous other channels of communication (including speeches, press releases, debates, public statements, Internet websites, and e-mail) that are used by candidates and their supporters to criticize opponents. We also acknowledge the distinction between straight attack and comparative/contrast ads (Jamieson, Waldman, and Sherr, 2000), though in practice this is more of a continuum than a dichotomy (in some ads the contrast is briefly stated and perfunctory, and even comparative ads often contain strong negative content). The ads to which participants in our study were exposed are clearly comparative in nature.

4. For example, see Weisberger (2000) and Parsons (2009) for accounts of the contentious 1800 and 1828 presidential elections, respectively.

5. Also http://mediaproject.wesleyan.edu/releases/2012-shatters-2004-and-2008-records-for-total-ads-airedy (retrieved 8/10/16). Looking at negativity from a different perspective, the Wesleyan Media Project examined the emotional appeals contained in presidential ads airing between October 1-21, 2012. It found that 86.1 percent of pro-Romney ads and 70.0 percent of pro-Obama ads sought to provoke voters’ anger, while 36.0 percent (pro-Romney) and 29.7 percent (pro-Obama) contained a fear appeal.
6. According to Mattes and Redlawsk (2014, 198), the apparent level of voter opposition to campaign negativity is inflated by survey questions that include the word “negative.” In other words, for whatever reason (social desirability bias, dissonance reduction, or simply a belief that anything labelled as negative must be bad), some people may condemn negative campaigning even when that’s not how they really feel.

7. From Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus (2013, 59): “Motivated reasoning refers to the tendency to seek out information that confirms prior beliefs (i.e., a confirmation bias), view evidence consistent with prior opinions as stronger or more effective (i.e., a prior attitude effect), and spend more time arguing and dismissing evidence inconsistent with prior opinions, regardless of objective accuracy (i.e., a disconfirmation bias). These biases influence the reception of new information and may lead individuals to ‘reason’ their way to a desired conclusion.”

8. More broadly, Iyengar and his co-authors (2012, 406) found that “partisan affect is inconsistently related to policy preferences and that the relationship between partisan affect and policy attitudes hasn’t notably strengthened over time.”

9. Specifically: (a) Republicans are much more likely to support the use of air strikes and attacks by ground troops to combat international terrorism, and to believe that the best way to ensure peace is through superior military power; (b) Democrats are much more likely to say that protecting the environment is important even if it costs some jobs or reduces our standard of living, and that climate change is a serious problem requiring government action; (c) Republicans are much more likely to feel that immigrants are a burden because too many of them take our jobs or end up on welfare, and to indicate that undocumented immigrants should not be allowed to stay in the country legally; and (d) Democrats are much more likely to believe that our government should take steps to ensure a more equal distribution of income and wealth, and that taxes on the wealthy
and on corporations should be raised so that programs to help poor people can be expanded. See our online appendix for question wordings and details regarding partisan differences in policy preferences.

10. We have no way of determining whether the attacks employed in our study reinforced the vote intentions of challenger co-partisans. However, no evidence of reinforcement (or backlash for that matter) was found in this group’s evaluations of their party’s candidate; that is, challenger favorability scores (measured on a scale of 1 to 7) did not change significantly (p < .10) as a result of the initial attack for either Democrats or Republicans.

11. Based solely on generic pre-attack candidate biographies, 91.7 percent of self-identified Democrats said they would vote for their party’s nominee when he was the incumbent, while 82.7 percent did so when he ran as a challenger; comparable figures for Republicans were 91.7 percent and 86.9 percent, respectively. Similarly, favorability scores were substantially higher for co-partisans (regardless of whether they were the incumbent/target or challenger/attacker) than for out-party candidates. Results were similar for self-identified liberals and conservatives.

12. Because Independents are also less likely than partisans to vote, any conversion they might experience following an attack becomes problematic with regard to actually benefitting the attacking candidate.

13. Initially, our model included an interaction term to account for respondents who both shared the views of the attacker and thought the issue addressed in the attack was salient. We calculated this variable as salience x a dummy variable coded “1” for those whose policy views corresponded with the policy position taken in the attack. However, the dummy variable and the interaction term were highly correlated (r = 0.9) and were subsequently removed from the model.

14. Although the concept of “issue ownership” (Petrocik 1996; Egan 2013) is known to be
multidimensional (Walgrave, Lefevere, and Tresch 2015), survey-based studies usually measure it by asking respondents whether one party or the other is better able to “handle” or “deal with” the issue in question. While Republicans and Democrats tend to regard their own party as being the most competent to deal with almost any problem, there are a handful of issues on which one side or the other enjoys an overall advantage. Among the four issues represented in our study, immigration is the only one where this is not the case: 31.2 percent said the Democrats would do “a better job of dealing with immigration,” 30.4 percent named the Republicans, 12.0 percent felt that it would be handled equally well by each party, and 26.4 percent did not believe that it would be handled well by either. The issue of national security was “owned” (defined as one party being preferred over the other by a margin of at least 10 points) by the Republicans, while Democrats were thought to be more competent with regard to both wealth and income distribution and the environment. Details are provided in our online appendix (see note 15).

15. Appendix A (containing additional information about the research design and analysis) and Appendix B (containing the background questionnaire and experimental treatments) can be accessed at http://users.ju.edu/pripper/apsa16appendix.pdf.

16. We should note that our randomization process appears to have been largely successful. No statistically significant differences ($p < .10$) were observed among members of the sixteen groups with regard to demographics, partisanship, ideological self-identification, issue positions, or baseline candidate preferences (vote choice, favorability ratings). Thus, if differences are found across groups after respondents read the attack, we can be confident that these are driven by exposure to the experimental stimulus.

17. Each candidate’s party affiliation and status as either challenger or incumbent was specified, but otherwise the biosketches were crafted in such a way as to ensure that the two
portrayals were essentially equivalent (see Craig and Rippere 2016).

18. On the potential persuasive effects of negative direct mail, see Gerber, Kessler, and Meredith (2011).

19. Despite our best efforts to maintain the proper balance, we must acknowledge that such matters are inherently subjective.

20. For those portions of our analysis where party ID (Democrat, Independent, Republican) or ideology (liberal, moderate, conservative) are collapsed into three categories: (a) individuals who “leaned” toward one party or the other were classified as partisans (see Magleby and Nelson 2012; Theodoridis 2016); but (b) respondents who placed themselves one step to the left or right of the ideological midpoint of 4 (described in our questionnaire as “moderate, middle of the road”) were classified as moderates rather than as liberals or conservatives.

21. Correlations between the four pairs of items outlined in note 9 are as follows: national security \((r = .40)\), the environment \((r = .55)\), immigration \((r = .36)\), and inequality \((r = .60)\).

22. The moderate category for each policy index (scores ranging from 2 to 10) included respondents whose values were 5, 6, or 7.

23. To construct the measurement of comparative/polarized party affect, we used questions from our survey which captured respondents’ positive and negative feelings about the Democratic and Republican parties (see questions 6a, 6b, 8a, and 8b in our questionnaire). Calculating the difference between the measures of respondents’ positive feelings about both parties as well as the difference between the measures of their negative feelings about both parties gave us two new variables, each coded between -3 and 3, where more extreme values correspond to more polarized feelings about the parties. After taking the absolute value of each of these measures and recoding them so their values range from 1 to 4, we added the two variables together to create an index of
affective polarization. Higher values represent respondents who have highly polarized positive and highly polarized negative feelings about the two parties, while lower values represent respondents who have less polarized or more moderate feelings about the parties.

24. We also divided co-partisans according to their party affiliation (see Table A9 in our online appendix). Although some variation was evident (e.g., for vote choice, the environment and national security attacks did more damage among Republicans, while the immigration and inequality attacks were more effective among Democrats), inter-party differences were inconsistent and, in most cases, not statistically significant.

25. We ran similar tests (not shown) for respondents who (a) shared the incumbent’s ideology, those whose ideological identity was opposite that of the incumbent, and self-identified moderates (see note 20); and (b) shared the presumed policy views (liberal, moderate, or conservative) of the incumbent, those whose preferences were more in line with positions usually taken by the challenger’s party, and those in the middle. As we saw with Independents, there was relatively little movement among either ideological or policy moderates. As for liberals and conservatives, some policy-based attacks produced significant change among some groups of voters (e.g., among those who read the immigration attack, the incumbent lost both vote support and favorability points among challenger co-ideologues), but no consistent pattern across either issues or groups was evident.
References


McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. 2016. Polarized America: The Dance of


Table 1: Five Policy-Based Attacks on Incumbent, by Party of Challenger

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attack Type</th>
<th>Democratic Challenger Attack on Republican Incumbent</th>
<th>Republican Challenger Attack on Democratic Incumbent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inequality</td>
<td>Incumbent represents “the powerful few, not you.”</td>
<td>Incumbent stirs up “class warfare” with ideas that are outdated and ineffective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- supports the fantasy that lowering taxes on the rich will benefit working families</td>
<td>- ignores the fact that more people are living in poverty than before Obama was elected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- opposes a higher minimum wage, child-care tax credits, and paid sick leave policies</td>
<td>- thinks that higher taxes, more spending, and bigger government will solve every problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- opposes a federal jobs program to rebuild our nation’s crumbling infrastructure</td>
<td>- supports rules and regulations that make it harder for businesses to create new jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- is unconcerned that the richest 3% hold more than half of the nation’s wealth</td>
<td>- opposes policies that would help to create opportunities for all citizens to have a better life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td>Incumbent should stop “political grandstanding” on this important issue.</td>
<td>Incumbent is “the best friend that an illegal alien ever had.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- proposes to deport immigrant children</td>
<td>- supports giving amnesty to illegals and even allowing them to become citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- opposes a “path to citizenship” even for those with high-tech skills that could help to jumpstart the American economy</td>
<td>- objects to building a fence along our southern border and hiring more federal border agents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- is willing to risk a government shutdown if restrictive new laws are not adopted</td>
<td>- wants to give illegals taxpayer-funded benefits such as drivers licenses and Social Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- falsely claims that immigrants have taken millions of jobs away from American workers</td>
<td>- opposes state governments penalizing businesses that hire undocumented workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Incumbent “has his head in the sand about climate change.”</td>
<td>Incumbent supports policies that “cost billions of dollars, lead to higher energy prices, and destroy American jobs.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- fails to recognize that it is a serious threat to our national security</td>
<td>- voted against the Keystone XL pipeline that would create thousands of new American jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- ignores scientific evidence of human responsibility for warming trends</td>
<td>- supports a moratorium on oil and gas exploration in the Gulf of Mexico, which also costs jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- opposes stricter limits on carbon pollution and then accepts campaign money from the polluters</td>
<td>- wants to impose stricter pollution controls that will prove burdensome for businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- inaction on the issue puts our families, homes, and businesses at risk now and in the future</td>
<td>- is beholden to environmental extremists and has little regard for anyone’s job but his own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Security</td>
<td>Incumbent hasn’t learned from “mistakes of the past.”</td>
<td>Incumbent is “dangerously wrong” on national security.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- supports a reckless increase in defense spending that will dramatically increase our national debt</td>
<td>- does not grasp the threat posed by radical terrorists and the spread of WMDs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- believes that the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was worth the high cost in money and lives lost</td>
<td>- supports deep cuts in military spending that would leave our troops without the equipment and logistical support they need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- is prepared to send ground troops to fight terrorist groups in the Middle East</td>
<td>- is willing to negotiate with foreign nations even if they have ties to terrorist groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- says that the U.S. should act unilaterally in taking military action if other countries choose not to get involved</td>
<td>- thinks we should ask other nations for permission before acting to protect our own security</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Effectiveness of Issue-Based Attacks on Vote for Incumbent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>National Security</th>
<th>Immigration</th>
<th>Inequality</th>
<th>All Attacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Prop</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Prop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Respondents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>0.485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-attack</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>0.425</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>0.419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff</td>
<td>-0.075</td>
<td>(0.056)</td>
<td>-0.066</td>
<td>(0.054)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.113</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent Co-Partisans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>0.932</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-attack</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>0.780</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff</td>
<td>-0.153</td>
<td>(0.063)</td>
<td>-0.160</td>
<td>(0.068)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenger Co-Partisans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>0.203</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0.149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-attack</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>0.162</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff</td>
<td>-0.041</td>
<td>(0.063)</td>
<td>-0.060</td>
<td>(0.056)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.262</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.143</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.370</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-attack</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.370</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0.500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>(0.131)</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>(0.100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.421</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data are from a July 2015 national survey of registered voters, conducted by qSample. Respondents who say they lean toward one party or the other are classified as partisans.
### Table 3: Effectiveness of Issue-Based Attacks on Incumbent Favorability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incumbent Favorability</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>National Security</th>
<th>Immigration</th>
<th>Inequality</th>
<th>All Attacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-attack evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff</td>
<td>-0.638</td>
<td>(0.120)</td>
<td>-0.461</td>
<td>(0.101)</td>
<td>-0.652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Independents</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4.111</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4.180</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline evaluation</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3.815</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3.940</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-attack evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff</td>
<td>-0.296</td>
<td>(0.238)</td>
<td>-0.240</td>
<td>(0.199)</td>
<td>-0.343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.112</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.117</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.032</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data are from a July 2015 national survey of registered voters, conducted by qSample. Respondents who say they lean toward one party or the other are classified as partisans.
Table 4: Effectiveness of Issue-Based Attacks (Incumbent Co-Partisans), by Partisan Strength, Ideology, and Policy Position

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Vote for Incumbent</th>
<th>Incumbent Favorability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Coeff.</strong> (S.E.)</td>
<td><strong>Odds Ratios</strong> (sig. results only)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote for Incumbent, Baseline</td>
<td>1.951*** (0.389)</td>
<td>7.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Incumbent</td>
<td>-0.065 (0.298)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Strength</td>
<td>0.383** (0.194)</td>
<td>1.467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Strength</td>
<td>0.152 (0.147)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan and Ideological</td>
<td>0.362 (0.270)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Strength</td>
<td>-0.066 (0.113)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan and Policy</td>
<td>0.895*** (0.250)</td>
<td>2.446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Salience</td>
<td>-0.133 (0.152)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe Candidates Need to</td>
<td>-0.214* (0.122)</td>
<td>0.807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticize Opponents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarized Affect Toward</td>
<td>0.201* (0.109)</td>
<td>1.223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Parties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment Attack</td>
<td>-0.264 (0.450)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Security Attack</td>
<td>-0.059 (0.430)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inequality Attack</td>
<td>-0.818* (0.431)</td>
<td>0.441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-4.134*** (1.037)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 322 322

R² 0.272 0.054

Note: Data are from a July 2015 national survey of registered voters, conducted by qSample. The vote choice model is a logit model in which the dependent variable is a dummy measuring post-attack vote for the incumbent (1 = yes, 0 = no). The favorability model is an OLS regression in which the dependent variable is change in incumbent favorability from baseline to post-attack (T2 rating - T1 rating). Significance tests are one-tailed: *p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01.