Abstract: Although there is evidence that negative advertising “works” at least some of the time, little attention has been given to the question of how candidates should respond when they are attacked. In this study, we proceed from the assumption that hard-hitting attacks on relevant topics (those that speak to how a candidate will perform in office), if well-crafted and credible, are most likely to have the desired outcome and, hence, are the ones that targeted candidates can least afford to ignore. We use experimental data, first, to confirm this assumption and, second, to assess the relative effectiveness of five response types: silence, counterattacks (favored by most consultants), denials, counterimaging, and justifications. Our results suggest that while some responses work better than others, there are a variety of ways, both positive and negative, to “reframe” a campaign attack so as to diminish its potential impact on voters.

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Michael Dukakis and John Kerry. Two Democratic nominees for president, but also two losers and two frequently cited examples when the question is asked, Why are campaigns today so negative? Answer: Because "going negative" works! That, at least, is the answer usually given by those who operate on the front lines of electoral politics. According to one observer, the 2004 Republican U.S. Senate primary in Florida (won by Mel Martinez) demonstrated "why candidates and political consultants use negative campaigning. It often works. . . . [W]hen executed and timed correctly, negative campaigning – particularly television ads and direct mail pieces – can work to devastating effect on the opposition" (Mark 2006, 188).

The presidential campaigns of 1988 and 2004 are often said to prove the same point. After Dukakis was portrayed as soft on crime by the infamous "Willie Horton" and "revolving-door" (prison furlough) ads, and as ineffective in an ad that highlighted his failure as governor of Massachusetts to clean up pollution in Boston Harbor, a 17-point lead over Vice President Bush quickly vanished. Sixteen years later, Kerry never fully recovered following a series of attacks by a group called the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth that raised questions about the candidate's service record (which included multiple Purple Hearts awarded for injuries sustained in combat) during the Vietnam War. Although a growing body of academic research has yielded mixed results on the effects of campaigns generally, and of campaign communications in particular, there is little doubt that consultants are correct when they insist, based on their considerable real-world experience, that "going negative" does indeed work. Except, of course, when it doesn't. As Kerwin Swint (1998, 2) has noted,

[i]f negative campaigning always "worked," then the most negative campaign would always win. It doesn't. . . . Negative campaign strategies, like all strategies, vary according to the circumstances and conditions faced in a campaign. Not every negative campaign is
successful, and the most negative campaign does not always win. Instead of saying that negative campaigning "works," it is more accurate to say that negative campaigning "can be a very effective tool."

Following this logic, we believe that negative campaigning can work if it deals with matters that people care about, if the message is well-crafted and credible, and if the facts presented are more or less correct (see Johnson 2007, 59).

Our interest is not, however, with the effectiveness of negative campaigning per se; the potential for attacks3 to shape voter behavior and election outcomes under certain circumstances is taken here as a given. What we want to know is this: When those circumstances are present, what is the best way for a candidate to respond? It is widely assumed that Michael Dukakis and John Kerry lost their respective races not simply because negative ads created (or reinforced) voter concerns about their values and leadership ability, but also because the candidates failed to address those concerns in a direct and timely manner. Reflecting on the Dukakis campaign, one professional consultant argued that “there’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” (cited in Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991, 224). Indeed, the Democratic nominees in 1988 and 2004 both chose (at least initially in the case of Kerry) to remain silent in the face of some arguably low blows leveled at them by the opposition. And both were defeated, in part because they wrongly believed that voters would figure out for themselves that the attacks were unwarranted. This, in any event, is the widely accepted common wisdom about how Bush 41 and Bush 43 managed to prevail in elections that many felt they might lose.4 It is a common wisdom that appears to have been shared by candidate Barack Obama in 2008. Asked in a Rolling Stone interview about previous Democratic nominees who responded meekly to hard-hitting Republican attacks, Obama replied,
“Yeah, I don’t do cowering” (Wenner 2008). Accordingly, his campaign established a website (fightthesmears.com) dedicated to setting the record straight whenever the other side made an accusation or otherwise put forth information that was considered to be false or misleading.

When Obama told Rolling Stone that candidates today must “respond forcefully, quickly and truthfully to attacks” (Wenner 2008), he spoke what most professional consultants would consider to be a truism. Yet just as attacks themselves do not always produce the desired result, some types of response (denial, counterattack, and so on) are likely to be more effective than others in different situations – and academic research has thus far not had much to say about what those situations might be. Using data from a randomized experiment, we shed new light on this (presumably) critical aspect of campaign communication. Our ultimate goal was to determine whether some responses are better at maintaining voter support for the targeted candidate and, going a step further, whether similar responses are equally effective across a range of attacks. Before attempting to answer this question, however, it was necessary for us to identify a subset of attacks that, if left unanswered, could be expected to inflict real damage on the target; in other words, even if negative campaigning doesn’t “work” all (or even most) of the time, are there certain charges to which voters tend to give greater weight in making their electoral decisions, i.e., charges that basically demand a response from any candidate who wishes to remain competitive? This is the question to which we turn first.

The Best Defense is a Good Offense, and Vice Versa

What is the impact of campaign advertising on voter decision making? Candidates, their consultants (especially media specialists), party leaders, and political journalists believe that the impact is often substantial and occasionally decisive, and there is no shortage of anecdotal evidence to suggest that they are correct. In addition to Dukakis and Kerry, political junkies will have little
difficulty naming several races over the years that, according to conventional wisdom, might have
turned out differently except for a well-conceived and well-timed ad or series of ads, usually
(though not always) delivered over the television airwaves. Recall, for example,

- the “white hands” spot in which incumbent Jesse Helms (R) accused challenger Harvey
  Gantt of supporting racial quotas in the 1990 North Carolina U.S. Senate election;
- two humorous ads run by Mitch McConnell (R) during the 1984 Kentucky U.S Senate
  race; bloodhounds were shown searching desperately for “missing in action” incumbent
  Walter Huddleston (the point being to highlight the latter’s poor attendance record); and
- an ad run by liberal challenger Lloyd Doggett in the 1984 Texas Democratic primary,
  portraying conservative U.S. Rep. Kent Hance as a “butler” who had helped the Reagan
  administration serve tax cuts on a silver platter to its wealthy supporters.5

It is, by the way, no accident that most of the campaign ads that are remembered as having had a
major impact were negative in tone. While positive (or advocacy; Jamieson, Waldman, and Sherr
2000) ads may be an important part of the overall communications package (Diamond and Bates
1992; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1997; Goldstein and Freedman 2002; Franz et al. 2008),
attacks are more likely to be viewed as game-changers or game-deciders – especially in the case of
challengers, who are said to have little chance of unseating an incumbent unless they go negative
(Mayer 1996; Swint 1998; Mark 2006; Crigler, Just, and Belt 2006). One potential downside of this
approach is that it can generate a backlash against the sponsoring candidate (but see Weaver Lariscy
and Tinkham 1999 for a different view). According to Johnson (2007, 84), “Voters are not fools and
understand when campaign commercials have crossed the line of fairness.”6 Stay on the right side
of that line, however, and negative ads can (even if they don’t always) make the difference between
victory and defeat on Election Day.
Our research is based on the assumption that this is indeed the case. As noted earlier, academic studies have produced mixed results regarding the effectiveness of political advertising generally, and of negative advertising (or other forms of negative campaigning) in particular. Part of the problem is methodological as (1) experimental designs cannot fully capture the dynamics of any single campaign, much less of a complex communications environment in which multiple races are contested simultaneously; and (2) survey studies often rely on indirect measures of ad exposure that are of dubious validity. Recent work that addresses the latter issue by using satellite monitoring of campaign ads to create individual-level measures of (potential) exposure suggests that the impact of ads on candidate preference may be greater than previously thought (Goldstein and Freedman 2000; Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson 2004; Franz and Ridout 2007; Huber and Arceneaux 2007; also see Goldstein and Ridout 2004; Franz et al.; 2008). Yet even so, there are many scholars who maintain that campaign communications, including advertising, are important less for their persuasive effects than because they serve to activate existing predispositions (especially those rooted in partisan attachments), reinforce initial preferences, or mobilize/demobilize segments of the electorate that are more/less supportive of the sponsoring candidate.

The impact of specifically negative ads also is uncertain, with only a minority of academic studies indicating that going on the attack actually “works” as intended (Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007). It seems likely that the inconsistent findings of this literature are due in some degree to the fact that negativity lies in the eye of the beholder; that is, whether a tactic, a candidate, or a campaign is [perceived as] negative depends on whose ox is being gored. This self-serving subjectivity contrasts starkly with the perspective of social scientists who, in gauging the tone of a campaign, strive to take all available information into account and to weigh it impartially (Sigelman and Kugler 2003, 144; but...
Thus, for example, we should not be surprised to learn that self-identified partisans react differently to attacks coming from the other side than they do to accusations made by candidates of their own party (Iyengar, Jackman, and Hahn 2008; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Stevens et al. 2008; Geer 2006; but see Franz and Ridout 2007).

A greater or lesser receptivity to negative messages may also be associated with one’s level of political information, trust in government, gender, or any number of other individual-level factors (Kern and Just 1995; Sigelman and Kruger 2003; King and McConnell 2003; Lipsitz et al. 2005; Stevens 2008; Stevens et al. 2008). Further, we would expect to find both inter- and intra-election differences in response to negativity as a function of variations in context (local norms, prevailing public “mood,” office sought, positive or negative tone of other campaigns), the nature of the attack itself (whether based on issues, performance, or candidate traits; level of civility), the identity of its sponsor (candidate or third-party), and the quality of its presentation. On this last point, Democratic media consultant Mike Murphy (see Craig and Hill 2011, 136-7) has noted that political ads “vary widely in their creative quality. Some ads are poorly done and therefore mightily ineffective. . . . Unlike medicine, incompetent ad-making spin doctors operate in a commercial ‘wild west’ with lax professional standards; moreover, they often stay busy in their professional recklessness for a long time, resulting in large numbers of client casualties along the way.”

Given the range of possibilities, it is hardly surprising that scholars have had difficulty identifying the precise impact of negative messages, and the circumstances under which they are most likely to achieve the desired objective. Nevertheless, this is the starting point in our attempt to gauge the effectiveness of different kinds of responses to negative attacks. We take our cue from a survey experiment by Fridkin and Kenney (2008; also see Fridkin and Kenney 2011; Fridkin,
Kenney, and Woodall 2009), in which a series of campaign ads (described to respondents in the form of storyboards) were created so as to capture three dimensions: relevant vs. irrelevant, civil vs. uncivil, and issue vs. trait. First, although negative messages seek to inform voters about the “risks and unfavorable outcomes associated with supporting a specific candidate,” those messages may not all be deemed equally relevant. Voters especially want to know how a politician has influenced their lives, or is likely to influence their lives in the future; they should therefore be interested in learning, for example, “about an incumbent’s failure to provide for his or her constituents,” a nonincumbent’s lack of experience, or the fact that either candidate’s “ideological beliefs are far out of the mainstream.” Of less interest is “negative information that is only tangentially related to governing performance” or of no particular relevance to their daily lives, such as past bad behavior (drinking or drug use during college, marital problems) or “positions on issues that are no longer on the public agenda” (Fridkin and Kenney 2008, 697).

Second, the civility-incivility dimension speaks to the tone of the message. As Fridkin and Kenney (2008, 698) explain, some negative ads are presented in a strident manner that violates societal norms of politeness, while others “embrace a more measured and courteous tone” (also see Mutz and Reeves 2005; Geer 2006; Brooks and Geer 2007; Fridkin, Kenney, and Woodall 2009). The authors predict, and their findings confirm, that uncivil messages on relevant topics are the most likely to shape voters’ evaluations of the targeted candidate. As for the third dimension of campaign communications, issue vs. trait, this has been a point of contrast in numerous prior studies dealing with the effects of political advertising (Kahn and Geer 1994; Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Geer 2006; Brooks and Geer 2007). However, because a candidate’s issue positions often are used by one side or the other to impute personal traits (e.g., integrity, morality, compassion, strength, patriotism, or their opposites), the distinction should not be drawn too sharply (Druckman, Jacobs,
and Ostemeier 2004; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994). Accordingly, and also as a concession to the practical limitations of our research design, we begin by assuming that uncivil attacks on relevant topics are the most likely to be effective and, hence, the ones that targeted candidates cannot afford to ignore. Departing slightly from the Fridkin-Kenney model, we set policy (though not necessarily personal traits) aside and define relevance as a matter of how good a job one is doing at representing constituency interests and norms; this seems to be an good basis for evaluation when the target is an incumbent, as is the case in our experimental manipulations.

What, then, is the best way for candidates to respond when they are attacked? One option is simply to “stay on message,” that is, to do nothing. However, contrary to what many practitioners believed in the early days of negative ads on TV (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991, 222), silence is no longer considered to be a wise strategy. According to GOP pollster David Hill (Craig and Hill 2011, 140-41), “[e]very consultant worth his salt knows that you must respond to an attack” (emphasis added); the failure to do so “allows the opposition . . . [to create] uncontested frames that the media readily adopt, suggests that the candidate isn’t contesting the charge or has something to hide, and emboldens the person who threw the punch to follow up with another” (Westen 2007, 337).\(^{10}\) A more promising approach involves denial: Specifically, if the target can credibly maintain that the attack is based on false information (“it never happened”), she should quickly do so because there is a fairly good chance that the offending campaign will be penalized by voters for its actions (Johnson 2007; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991).\(^ {11}\)

What other choices might be considered when a candidate is attacked? Communications scholars and political professionals have identified a number of possibilities, including excuses (acknowledging the behavior in question but denying responsibility, e.g., by shifting blame elsewhere or citing mitigating circumstances), concessions (acknowledging the behavior, accepting
some degree of responsibility, and promising never to do it again), *justifications* (acknowledging the behavior and accepting responsibility, but attempting to downplay its negative consequences), *counterattacks* (the content of which may have little or nothing to do with the original attack, e.g., calling out one’s opponent for going negative in the first place, especially if he has pledged not to do so), *counterimaging* (a positive response that flips the attack on its head by “laying out for the voter a counterproposition to the content of the opponent’s negative ad,” e.g., police officers praising the record of someone accused of being soft on crime; see Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991, 244), *inoculation* (an attempt to limit potential damage by anticipating and responding to an attack before it is initiated; see Pfau and Kenski 1990), and perhaps a few others.  

Consultants would probably agree with David Hill (see Craig and Hill 2011, 141), that in most instances “the best response is to make a counter-charge. You say that your opponent voted to raise taxes. He responds that you let a little old lady die by not [delivering] her Social Security check on time. . . . It’s a vicious and wild ride.” Negative attacks often appeal to voters’ emotions (such as fear) and, especially when this happens, it may be true that “the only appropriate response is an equally powerful emotional counterpunch” (Westen 2007, 68). We should be careful not to assume, however, that a counterattack must always employ an emotional hammer to achieve its objective. For example, sometimes an attack can be neutralized with a clever juxtaposition of words or images (accused by his opponent of missing 1,083 votes while serving in the U.S. House, Democratic Senate candidate Don Breaux replied that 1,083 was the number of jobs lost “every few working days” in Louisiana because of Republican economic policies; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991, 239-41), or with humor and ridicule (targeted for defeat in 1982 by a conservative group that depicted him as being out of touch with Montana voters, Democratic Senator Terry Melcher aired an ad that featured two talking cows mocking the outsiders’ “city-slicker, big-money
campaign tactics”; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991, 229-231; Trent and Friedenberg 2008, 169-71). In addition, there is some evidence suggesting that a counterattack strategy may be ineffective or even counterproductive in some circumstances (Freedman, Wood, and Lawton 1989). While that does not seem likely to be true as a general rule (Garramone 1985; Roddy and Garramone 1988), it is an empirical question and one that we will address in our analysis.

To get a better sense of how ordinary citizens think about such matters (including the pros and cons of different kinds of attacks and responses), we conducted two focus groups with frequent voters in June, 2010; one group consisted of Independents and weak or leaning Republicans, the other of Independents and weak or leaning Democrats. This was an exploratory exercise designed not for the purpose of hypothesis testing (for which focus groups are ill-suited), but rather to get feedback from rank-and-file voters that would help us to better understand how they viewed the often turbulent world of campaign politics. The methodology and results are reported more fully in Craig, Grayson, and Rippere (2010); for present purposes, we simply note several points emerging from those open-ended discussions that informed our subsequent research strategy and design. Most participants believed that

- if you go negative, attacks should be relevant to your opponent’s past or likely future performance in office (including issue stands);
- if you go negative, charges should be both specific and accurate;
- in response to attacks, concessions (at least in cases where the attack raises legitimate questions) are usually ineffective;
- in response to attacks, counterattacks can work if done the right way (following the same rules that govern attacks: be relevant, specific, and accurate); and
- in response to attacks, you may be able to maintain support by staying positive (which
isn’t necessarily the same as staying silent and ignoring the charges).

Keeping these principles in mind, let us turn now to a description of the experiment itself.

The Experiment

In order to test the effectiveness of different responses, it was first necessary to identify the kinds of attacks that demand a response; as stated earlier, our research is based on the assumption that relatively uncivil (or at least hard-hitting) attacks on relevant topics have potentially the greatest power to shape candidate preference and, as a result, are the ones that candidates can least afford to ignore. To simplify our task, we chose not to employ policy ads that are likely to be viewed through a partisan/ideological lens by many voters (Iyengar, Jackman, and Hahn 2008; also see Franz and Ridout 2007) but to focus instead on performance-based attacks wherein a challenger alleges that “the incumbent has lost his 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” (Johnson 2007, 65).

The structure of our within-subjects experimental design was as follows: Subjects received a written packet that contained general background information concerning two hypothetical general election races for the U.S. House. After answering several background questions (measuring partisanship and ideological leanings; feelings of trust in government and in fellow citizens; sense of external and internal efficacy), they were told to imagine themselves as voters residing in either Orlando or Fort Myers, Florida and then given short biographies for two candidates who supposedly would be on the ballot in fall 2012. The party affiliations of those candidates, and their status as either challenger or incumbent member of Congress, were specified, but otherwise the biosketches were written in such a way as to ensure that the two
portrayals were essentially equivalent. Armed with this preliminary information, subjects were asked to indicate a vote preference and to rate each candidate on a 7-point scale ranging from “very unfavorable” (1) to “very favorable” (7). They subsequently read what was described as a direct-mail attack by the challenger against the incumbent, and asked once again to register their vote choice and candidate assessments (and also to indicate whether they felt the attack was “too negative and should not be made publicly,” “negative but acceptable within the context of a competitive political campaign,” or “not really negative at all”). Next, they read a response by the incumbent and again answered the vote choice and candidate evaluation questions. Finally, subjects were taken through the same three stages (biosketch, attack, response) in a second hypothetical race involving two different candidates and taking place in a different locale (Orlando or Fort Myers, depending on which of these was used for race #1). Despite its fairly elaborate construction, most subjects were able to complete our full questionnaire in approximately 15-20 minutes.

The reason for having multiple races is that we wanted to test the effectiveness of responses to two separate attacks. One attack charged the incumbent with “helping himself to other people’s money” (hereafter labeled taking advantage: voting for pay raises, using party money to finance a family vacation, renting office space from his brother at inflated prices, overbilling clients for professional services, channeling no-bid government contracts to campaign donors), the other with being “arrogant” and “out of touch with the people who elected him” (hereafter called out of touch: voting to restrict public access to legislative business, 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 CEOs to finance his re-election campaigns, accepting gifts from lobbyists). These allegations, regarding matters
that are clearly “relevant” to the target’s performance as an elected representative, were made in language that might not be considered “uncivil” by Fridkin-Kenney (2011) standards, but that comes very close to that line, e.g., using such emotionally charged terms as “corrupt,” “immoral,” and “arrogant.” Both attacks were pre-tested with students enrolled in introductory political science classes at Samford University, and results indicated that both were successful at moving significant numbers of individuals from an initial preference for the incumbent to support for the challenger.

Faced with a potentially damaging attack, how should candidates respond? Among the possibilities discussed earlier, three were eliminated from consideration: concessions (unlikely to work in most circumstances), inoculation (not practical to test with our research design), and excuses (which involve acknowledging the behavior in question but denying responsibility; these are rarely used in campaigns, and the political accounts literature suggests they would probably not be successful if they were; see McGraw 1990; McGraw and Hubbard 1996). That leaves five types of responses whose relative effectiveness we sought to determine for each of the two attacks: silence, denials, counterattacks, counterimaging, and justifications. These are summarized in Table 1, with complete wording available via our online appendix (see note 14).

Table 1 about here

We suspect that denials are the best choice when available, that is, when the facts are clearly on your side and there is little wiggle room for interpretation; in real life, most attacks have some factual basis (even though they may be exaggerated or misleading) and are not always so easily rebutted. Except for outlandish charges made by trailing candidates in noncompetitive races, it seems likely that silence will often be the least effective strategy. As for counterattacks, logic suggests that the same standards apply to them as to attacks in general: They should work best when
the charges are specific (a point driven home repeatedly by our focus group participants\textsuperscript{20}) and address matters relevant to the office that people care about; when the message is well-crafted, credible, and hard-hitting (if not necessarily uncivil); and when the facts presented are basically correct, or at least difficult to prove incorrect.\textsuperscript{21} In challenging the conclusion by Freedman and colleagues (1989) that counterattacks may do more harm than good, Republican media consultant Doug McAuliffe rejected the notion that target candidates are better off when they “turn the other cheek” and refrain from responding in kind. McAuliffe (1989, 36) argued that whereas voters can usually see “bogus, frivolous, or mean-spirited attacks by desperate candidates” for what they are, ads that are more grounded “demand a smart counter-punch, or an attack that changes the subject.” Or, as Democratic consultants James Carville and Paul Begala so eloquently put it, “It’s hard for your opponent to say bad things about you when your fist is in his mouth” (cited in Westen 2007, 337).

In addition to highlighting the importance of specificity in both attacks and responses, the focus group discussions helped to shape our thoughts about counterimaging. It may be risky for candidates to “turn the other cheek” when attacked, but can a response be “positive” and “hard-hitting” at the same time? Jamieson (1992, 108) is undoubtedly correct in suggesting that all responses seek to reframe; they simply go about doing so in different ways. With counterimaging, however, the challenge is to meet 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.\textsuperscript{22} An excellent example of this occurred during the 2008 Democratic presidential primary, when Hillary Clinton aired an ad that noted (without mentioning his name) her opponent’s lack of experience; it showed young children sleeping as a narrator described a hypothetical call to the
White House at 3 a.m. and warned, “Something’s happening in the world. Your vote will decide who answers that call. Whether it’s someone who already knows the world’s leaders, knows the military – someone tested and ready to lead in a dangerous world. . . . Who do you want answering the phone?” The Obama campaign responded with an ad that opened with basically the same imagery as Clinton’s but conveyed a very different (and we would argue, forcefully positive, the implied comparison notwithstanding) message: “It’s 3 a.m. and your children are safe and asleep. But there’s a phone ringing in the White House. Something’s happening in the world. When that call gets answered, shouldn’t the president be the one, the only one, who had judgment and courage to oppose the Iraq war from the start, who understood the real threat to America was al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, not Iraq . . . who led the effort to secure loose nuclear weapons around the globe?” The counterimaging responses used in our experimental manipulations are patterned after the Obama ad, though they obviously lack the latter’s powerful visual imagery; we predict that their effectiveness will be less than that of denials but roughly comparable to that of counterattacks.

A review of hundreds of campaign ads suggested to us that our final response type, justifications (acknowledging the behavior in question and accepting responsibility, but attempting to minimize its negative consequences), is used infrequently in the real world. According to political accounts studies, however, there are occasions when a justification can help to sustain a politician’s level of support when she has done something, or is portrayed as having done something, inappropriate or unsavory (McGraw 1990; McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995; Chanley et al., 1994; Smith and Powers 2005). An example of this, illustrating Jamieson’s point that responses are about reframing, is the case of Texas’ John Tower. Running for reelection to the U.S. Senate in 1978, the Republican incumbent was photographed at a candidate forum
refusing to shake the outstretched hand of his opponent, Robert Krueger – an act of apparent incivility that threatened to derail his campaign. Tower’s response was to appear in a TV ad in which he looked straight into the camera and claimed that the issue was really one of honor; saying that Krueger had “slurred” his wife, daughters, and falsified his record, Tower explained that “[m]y kind of Texan doesn’t shake hands with that kind of man. Integrity is one Texas tradition you can count on me to uphold” (Jamieson 1992, 108-109). Having explained (justified) what at first seemed unexplainable, he narrowly won in November. As operationalized for our study, justifications do not carry nearly as strong an emotional punch; if anything, they resemble 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”) and, as a result, we expect their effectiveness at mitigating damage done by the attack to be fairly modest.

In sum, we hypothesize that denials will be the most successful of the response strategies tested in our research, followed in order by counterattacks (“the best defense is a good offense”), counterimaging, and justifications; silence is predicted to be of little value at all in the face of a credible, hard-hitting attack. These expectations were tested empirically using a 2 (Attack Type: taking advantage and out of touch) X 4 (Response Type: denial, counterattack, counterimaging, justification) within-subjects experiment conducted in March, 2011. As noted earlier, subjects were exposed to multiple treatments, each involving an attack and response ad pair; in other words, everyone was exposed to two of the eight possible pairs (that is, they saw both attacks plus two of the four responses). Respondents were 278 students enrolled in introductory political science courses at the University of Florida, who received a small extra-credit bonus for their voluntary participation. They were assigned randomly to one of the sixteen research groups (or orders) and informed that the study dealt with political campaign advertising; all indicated that
they were eligible to vote in the United States.

We should note here that our randomization process appears to have been successful. No statistically significant differences (p < .10) were observed among members of the sixteen groups with regard to gender, partisanship, ideological self-placement, or baseline candidate preferences (vote choice, favorability ratings), that is, after respondents read the biosketches but before they saw an attack or response. In addition, there were no statistically significant differences for these same variables among respondents assigned to the four response ad types in either of our two races. Accordingly, if differences are found across research groups after respondents’ exposure to the attack and response messages, we can be confident that these are driven by exposure to the experimental stimuli.

Results

Effectiveness of the Attacks

Our sample was comprised of 62.1% women and 37.9% men (plus one person who did not indicate gender on the questionnaire); 64.8% freshmen and 35.3% upperclassmen; 46.2% self-identified liberals, 17.0% moderates, 35.7% conservatives, and 1.1% other; and 47.6% self-identified Democrats, 8.7% independents, 40.7% Republicans, and 2.9% other. Based solely on the biosketches, most Democrats (77.5%) said they would vote for their party’s candidate regardless of whether he was incumbent or challenger; likewise, Republicans (86.6%) usually preferred the Republican candidate, while independents were more evenly divided between the two (54.2% would support the Democrat, 35.4% the Republican, with 10.4% undecided). A similar partisan bias was observed for the candidate favorability ratings.

The impact of our two attacks (taking advantage and out of touch) on vote choice and candidate evaluations, and, inferentially, the likelihood that silence would be a suitable response
in either case, is shown in Table 2. Looking at vote choice (columns 1 and 4), we see that taking advantage had an effect that was both statistically significant and substantively quite large: support for the incumbent dropped almost 15 points, from 48.9 to 34.2 percent. Do negative ads work? This one certainly did, suggesting that the target candidate would be ill-advised not to offer some sort of response. In contrast, the loss of support (5.4 points, from 48.2 to 42.8%) caused by out of touch was in the expected direction, but just barely misses being statistically significant at $p < .10$. On the one hand, it is tempting to speculate that these results reflect the different content of the two ads, for example, that voters may view charges relating to abuse of office as being (a) more relevant to future performance and/or (b) more credible (less typical of routine campaign “mudslinging”) than those that accuse the incumbent of representational shortcomings.

Table 2 about here

At the same time, each attack lowered the mean rating of the incumbent by more than a full point (1.416 for taking advantage, 1.004 for out of touch, both $p < .001$; see the second and fifth columns in Table 2) on the 7-point favorability scale. While the potential for backlash is evident in the fact that attacks also lowered sponsor favorability (0.583 and 0.692 points, respectively, both $p < .001$), there is a clear net advantage in these instances to going negative. Since candidate evaluations are thought to be the most proximal determinants of vote choice (Kelley and Mirer 1974), it is possible that either attack (including out of touch), if left unanswered, could influence the outcome by helping to shape people’s perceptions of the candidates, regardless of whether it had an immediate or direct effect on the vote decision itself.

Given the nature of our sample (and relatively short pre-treatment questionnaire), we had limited opportunity to examine whether respondents’ prior attitudes and personal characteristics
might have mediated the effect of their being exposed to these ads. We did, however, observe two patterns worth noting. First, both attacks (but especially *taking advantage*) eroded support for the incumbent more among his own co-partisans than among either those who identified with the opposing party or Independents. While this might seem counterintuitive, it undoubtedly reflects the fact that most opposing partisans planned to vote for the challenger to start with, that is, there was a great deal more potential for movement among those who shared the incumbent’s party affiliation. Second, each attack was less effective (and more likely to produce a backlash against the challenger/sponsor) among respondents who believed that it was “too negative and should not be made publicly”; indeed, for *out of touch*, the incumbent’s vote share actually increased slightly (7.4 points, \( p < .20 \)) following the attack.

Overall, though, to one degree or another, both of the negative appeals designed for this experiment “worked” in the sense of strengthening the position of the challenger (sponsor) relative to that of the incumbent (target). Under the circumstances, if silence by the target candidate seems unlikely to reverse such movement, what kind of response holds the greatest promise of doing so? That is the question to which we now turn.

**Effectiveness of Responses**

Of the four specific response types tested here, our expectation is that denials will be the most effective, followed by counterattacks, counterimaging, and justifications. The results in Table 3, presented separately for *taking advantage* (columns 1-3) and *out of touch* (columns 4-6) are consistent with the notion that denials are perhaps the best strategy for countering campaign attacks. Denials

- increased the incumbent’s vote share by 32.8 percentage points in *taking advantage*, and by 21.0 points in *out of touch*; and
• boosted mean incumbent favorability by 1.179 and 0.733 points (on the 7-point scale), respectively, while simultaneously lowering challenger favorability by 0.742 and 0.587 points, respectively.\textsuperscript{35}

All of these changes are highly significant (p < .001) and substantively meaningful. As noted earlier, denials may be less effective when attacks are either true or (as with criticisms of the target’s policy positions and their actual/likely consequences) at least arguable. Nevertheless, our results suggest that denials are a good choice when the facts are more or less clearly on your side.

Table 3 about here

To a lesser degree (and with one notable exception), counterattacks also were effective in our experimental setting. In terms of vote choice, counterattack produced a 12.0 point gain for the incumbent on taking advantage (p < .10) but had no impact on out of touch (which, recalling the findings reported in Table 2, did not do much immediate damage to begin with). In both cases, however, counterattacks improved incumbent favorability (an average of 0.351 and 0.208 points, respectively, p < .05) and lowered challenger favorability (an average of 0.733 and 0.479 points, respectively, p < .001), highlighting the potential for future changes in vote support. As one might expect, counterattacks did more to raise the challenger’s negatives than to increase incumbent favorability – but the net result is the same. Even if a good offense is not always the best defense against an attack (and has the same limitations as any other negative ad, including the potential for backlash), consultants apparently are correct in assuming that the right kind of counterattack will resonate with many voters.

Our third type of specific response had slightly more mixed results. First, counterimaging produced a significant shift in voting intentions only on taking advantage (a gain of 16.2 points}
for the incumbent, p < .05; the comparable figures for *out of touch* are 7.4 points, p < .20). Second, as counterimaging is basically a positive response (attempting to portray an alleged or potential weakness as a strength), we would not necessarily expect it to affect challenger favorability at all—and it does not for *taking advantage* (p > .10); but for *out of touch* there is a puzzling (if small) boost for the challenger: a mean increase of 0.914 points, p < .05. In other respects, however, the effect of staying positive is precisely what it should be, with (1) incumbent favorability rising an average of 1.059 and 0.776 points (p < .001), respectively; and (2) relative favorability (not shown; see note 31 and our online appendix) moving an average of 1.191 and 0.582 points (p < .001), respectively, to the benefit of the incumbent. In the real world, we suspect that counterimaging is difficult to do well (above-average creativity was needed to design the Obama response to Clinton’s 3 a.m. spot) and is better suited for some types of attacks than for others. That said, our results provide at least some hope for the optimists among us who believe that staying positive is a viable option even for candidates whose opponents choose to go negative.

Finally, justifications proved to be more effective than we had anticipated. Incumbent vote share increased in each instance (26.5 percentage points for *taking advantage*, p < .01, and a more modest 14.6 points for *out of touch*, p < .06). Further, this type of response once again helped to re-shape respondents’ perceptions of the candidates: incumbent favorability rose 0.925 points on *taking advantage* and 0.806 points on *out of touch* (both p < .001), while challenger favorability dropped 0.621 and 0.694 points (both p < .001), respectively. Although our research indicates that justifications are rarely used in political campaigns (in part because, like denials and counterimaging, they are not always a viable option), these results suggest that they can be effective in some circumstances.
Because the literature has almost nothing to say about variables that might mediate the impact of responses on vote preference and candidate favorability, we looked closely at just one possibility: The lack of prior research aside, common sense led us to predict that all types of responses would be more effective among the incumbent’s co-partisans, first, because “voters do not react to campaign messages as dispassionate observers, but as biased partisans” (Iyengar, Jackman, and Hahn 2008, 1); and second, because co-partisans are the ones whose support for the incumbent dropped off most sharply after the attack and who therefore possessed the greatest potential for recovery if the incumbent could give them a good reason to ignore or discount the original message. According to our data (not shown; see our online appendix), however, shared partisanship did not have a consistent mediating effect for any of the four responses. In other words, answering an attack can help to mitigate its harmful impact – but this recovery appears not to be simply a matter of “shoring up the base,” or at least that portion of it whose confidence in their party’s nominee may have initially been rattled.

Discussion

The conventional wisdom shared by most political consultants, that negative ads “work,” is an overgeneralization: Like their positive counterparts, some negative ads work but others don’t – a conclusion corroborated not only by our own results, but in real life by the fact that many candidates who choose to go negative end up losing their race. Our findings are, however, consistent with the prevailing view among practitioners that to remain silent in the face of an attack is risky. The focus of this paper has been to determine whether certain kinds of responses (or rebuttals) are better than others for helping a candidate to mitigate the damage done by a relevant, hard-hitting, and well-crafted attack made by a credible opponent. As expected, denials proved to be the most consistently effective across the board in terms of helping the incumbent to
regain lost ground following an attack. When denials are not available (the charges made against your candidate are true or at least arguable), our results suggest that the next best choice might be to counterattack; the preferred weapon of many consultants, this type of response appears to work by raising the sponsor’s negatives more than by causing voters to view the original target (the counterattacker) in an improved light. As with any negative ad, of course, a counterattack can backfire if it is thought by voters to be untrue, unfair, or “over the top” in terms of its level of incivility. Counterimaging is difficult to do well and probably not an effective choice in all circumstances. Nonetheless, as several focus group respondents insisted, there are occasions when the right kind of (aggressively) positive response can help to mitigate the damage done by an opponent’s attack; in contrast to counterattacks, this is accomplished primarily by boosting the target’s standing rather than by inflicting damage on the sponsor. Finally, we found that justifications, though seldom used in campaigns, can sometimes be effective as well (both raising target favorability and lowering evaluations of the sponsor).

This study is not without its limitations, the most obvious of which have to do with two issues of external validity: an unrepresentative sample, and the inability to faithfully re-create a political campaign in the laboratory. Yet other approaches have shortcomings of their own, and we share with Arceneaux (2010) the belief that the best way to study campaign effects generally, and the effects of political advertising in particular, is with a healthy mix of observational and experimental (lab, field, and survey) designs. Beyond the obvious, however, our experiment was structured in such a way that a number of potentially relevant considerations were not addressed. For example,

- selective/limited exposure: unlike voters in an actual campaign, all of our participants were exposed to the relevant communications (thus, the magnitude of the effects
observed here may be exaggerated);

- timing: was Barack Obama correct when he said that candidates today must “respond forcefully, quickly and truthfully to attacks” (Wenner 2008; emphasis added)? most consultants would probably agree that he was;
- repetition: both attacks and responses are more likely to produce the intended results if voters are exposed to them on multiple occasions;
- decay vs. sleeper effects: while the impact of campaign ads tends to dissipate over time (Gerber et al. 2011; Hill et al. 2007), it is possible that the effect of an unanswered attack may actually become stronger (Weaver Lariscy and Tinkham 1999).

In addition, we only were able to examine one among many possible election scenarios: an experienced challenger attacks an incumbent member of Congress based on the latter’s alleged representational shortcomings. How might our results have been different if the incumbent, or an outside group, had been the attacker? if the attack had dealt with the target candidate’s policy positions, or the likely (or actual) consequences of his policy positions? if the target had taken steps to inoculate himself in anticipation of criticism that was likely to occur later in the campaign (Pfau and Kenski 1990)? if one or both candidates had been women? if the exchange had occurred early in the campaign vs. right before election day? and so on and so forth.

There are many complexities that we must leave for future research to unravel. What our results make clear (some prior research to the contrary notwithstanding) is that going negative can work, even if it doesn’t always – and that one of the things influencing whether it works in a particular instance is the manner in which the target candidate chooses to respond. As campaign communications in competitive races are never one-sided, we believe that it is time for scholars to start paying closer attention to the nature and relative effectiveness of these responses.
Notes


2. On the effects of negative campaigning, see Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995); Kahn and Kenney (2004); Lau and Pomper (2004); Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner (2007); Lau and Rovner (2009). 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.

3. We acknowledge in principle the distinction made by many consultants and scholars between straight attack and comparative/contrast ads (Jamieson, Waldman, and Sherr 2000); 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) and is less useful as a description of entire campaigns than of discrete communications (Buell and Sigelman 2008; Lau and Rovner 2009).

4. See Devlin (1989, 2005); Pfau and Kenski (1990); Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991); Mark (2006); Westen (2007); Swint (2008). Although Westen believes that timidity has lately been mainly a Democratic trait, Buell and Sigelman (2008, 7) cite Republican Thomas Dewey’s upset loss to Harry Truman in 1948 as “the leading example of what can happen when a candidate refuses to join battle with a shrill opponent.”

5. These ads and many others are discussed in Kern (1989); Pfau and Kenski (1990); Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991, 1997); Diamond and Bates (1992); Mark (2006); Swint (2008); West (2009). Also see the essays by professional consultants Charlie Black (R), Whit Ayres (R), and Mike Murphy (D) in Craig and Hill (2011).

7. For aggregate-level evidence making the same point, see Shaw (1999, 2006); Franz and Ridout (2010).

8. In an innovative study that used continuous monitoring of citizens’ responses to U.S. Senate ads, Iyengar, Jackman, and Hahn (2008) concluded that the ads did more to prime the partisanship of voters than to persuade them; also see Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995).

9. The race described to respondents was hypothetical, based upon a general election matchup between Democratic and Republican nominees for U.S. Senate in North Dakota.

10. A related context in which silence might be politically risky was noted in Richard Fenno’s classic study of variations in “home style” among members of Congress. According to Fenno (1978, 136; also see Kingdon 1981, 47-54), incumbents hoping to remain in office often are called upon to explain (describe, interpret, justify) to constituents “what they have done while they have been away from home”; such explanations are said to be particularly important in cases where the representative has taken a position or cast a vote at odds with voter preferences, or been accused of behavior that is judged to be unethical or otherwise inappropriate – the kinds of things, in other words, that provide the basis for negative attacks at election time.

11. We say “fairly good” because candidates who are supported by a third party may be able to disassociate themselves from false attacks against the opponent made by that individual or group. Further, like negativity itself, what constitutes the “truth” is open to interpretation, even among scholars; see, for example, the different takes on Bush 41’s 1988 campaign by Jamieson (1992) and Geer (2006). Denial is probably better for rebutting demonstrably false accusations of personal misconduct (e.g., falsifying one’s educational background or military service record,
failing to pay taxes, engaging in shady business practices) than for countering charges (no matter if exaggerated, distorted, or presented out of context) that are fundamentally political in nature.

12. Some of these strategies are drawn from the work on “political accounts” by Kathleen McGraw and colleagues (McGraw 1990, 1991; McGraw, Timpone, and Bruck 1993; McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995), which served as the inspiration for our own project. Also see Chanley et al. (1994); Gonzales et al. (1995); Smith and Powers (2005).

13. Attacks based on the target’s policy stands and (for incumbents) actions in office are, of course, very common and should be considered in future studies on this topic.

14. All sixteen of the packets used for this experiment are available in an online appendix at http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/sccraig/mpsa12appendix.html. We were assisted in writing not only the candidate biographies, but also the attacks and responses described below, by an experienced campaign consultant who has worked on numerous legislative races over the years. The personal information we provided to respondents appears to have advantaged neither candidate unduly, as vote intentions based on the biosketches alone (prior to an attack being made) were shaped largely by respondents’ partisan loyalties and/or ideological leanings, and the baseline favorability ratings for all four candidates were quite similar (scores ranging between 4.77 and 4.99 on the 7-point scale). Readers will note, by the way, that all of our office-seekers are men; the decision to hold gender constant was based on research indicating that voters sometimes react differently to attacks made by and against male and female candidates (Fridkin, Kenney, and Woodall 2009; Hitchon and Chang 1995).

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

16. Some alleged shortcomings were said to have occurred during the incumbent’s prior
service as a county commissioner or state legislator.

17. There are a few exceptions, including Charles Percy (R) in the 1978 Illinois U.S. Senate race (Jamieson 1992, 118) and, more recently, Blanche Lincoln in the 2010 Arkansas Democratic Senate runoff primary (Bash 2010). We suspect that the occasional success of concessions is highly situational, depending on voters’ attitudes about the candidates, the alleged offense, the sincerity of the request for forgiveness, and other considerations. Believing, as did our focus group respondents, that they are more likely than not to fail when the charge against you is serious and credible (Chanley et al. 1994; also McGraw and Hubbard 1996), we chose not to include them in our experimental work.

18. For an altogether different take on “excuse giving” as a blame-management technique, see Malhotra and Kuo (2008).

19. It should be noted that we test the silence hypothesis indirectly, i.e., by measuring the impact of an attack prior to the introduction of any response. A more realistic approach might be to assess this impact after a longer time interval than the one used here; see, for example, Weaver Larisey and Tinkham (1999).

20. Each session included a discussion of thirteen attack ads (two or three thematically similar ads at a time), accessed via the Internet and drawn from U.S. House races in 2004, 2006, and 2008. Even when the charges involved activities that most participants agreed were unacceptable (e.g., corruption in office, failure to pay taxes), they were moved less by broad characterizations of alleged misbehavior (e.g., that the target candidate is a tool of unpopular special interests such as oil companies) than by evidence of specific misdeeds (e.g., that he allowed those interests to pay for expensive vacations abroad).

21. In our hypothetical campaign scenarios, it makes little sense to talk about whether the
facts alleged in either attacks or counterattacks are true. Nevertheless, we have attempted to make those allegations appear more *credible* by attributing each one to a published news report (in the *Orlando Sentinel*, *Fort Myers News-Press*, *Tallahassee Democrat*, and various others). No such attributions were used for denials, justifications, or counterimaging.

22. Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991, 244) define counterimaging as a positive response that offers voters “a counterproposition to the content of the opponent’s negative ad.”


24. Although Tower’s message certainly contained elements of a counterattack, his political survival depended first and foremost on “justifying” his own actions to Texas voters.

25. As required by the university’s human subjects review committee, respondents were asked to sign a consent form. To prevent a sense of coercion, they also were offered an alternative means to earn the extra credit.

26. To clarify: In each of the 16 packets, two pairs of candidates were introduced; these were held constant across all packets, that is, Democrat #1 and Republican #1 always competed against one another, as did Democrat #2 and Republican #2. Further, candidates were described using the same biographical information across all packets (e.g., Democrat #1 was always an environmental engineer from Fort Myers, Republican #2 always a criminal defense attorney from Orlando, and so on). However, the incumbent/challenger status of candidates in each pair was rotated across packets (sometimes the Democrat was said to be the incumbent, other times the Republican), as was the order in which the races were presented (sometimes the Democrat #1 vs. Republican #1 matchup was first, other times it followed the Democrat #2 vs. Republican #2 contest). Through a process of *counterbalancing* (random sorting of the candidate pairs, their
incumbency status, and attack/response ad pairs), all possible combinations were used across the 16 research groups; this effectively controls for presentation or order effects that might influence respondents’ reactions to the ads. Our counterbalancing scheme is outlined in Table A1 in the online appendix.

27. Liberals are those who scored 1, 2, or 3 on the 7-point scale, and conservatives those who scored 5, 6, or 7. Democrats and Republicans include strong identifiers, weak identifiers, and independents who said they lean toward that party. Chi-square tests indicate that there are no significant differences in the distribution of these four characteristics (gender, year in school, ideology, and partisanship) across the 16 research groups.

28. These percentages are based on a pooling of results from the two races (Orlando and Fort Myers) to which each respondent was exposed. Indeed, results from these races are pooled for all subsequent analyses reported in this paper; that is, Republican #1 and Republican #2 (for whom the mean baseline favorability ratings were not significantly different) are treated as if they were the same candidate, as are Democrat #1 and Democrat #2 (the former was evaluated more favorably than the latter prior to being attacked, though the magnitude of the difference was very small, i.e., just over 0.2 on the 7-point scale).

29. Respondents who failed to indicate a preference are included in the analysis and classified as not supporting the incumbent) rather than treated as missing.

30. As the effects of some campaign ads are short-lived (Gerber et al. 2011), the incumbent in this case might simply cross his fingers and hope for the best, especially if the attack occurred fairly early in the campaign. In the face of a double-digit loss of support, however, and anticipating that other attacks might follow as the campaign progressed and the incumbent failed to defend his record, a strategy of silence would seem to us to be problematic (Weaver Larisey and Tinkham,
31. Calculating “candidate differential” as incumbent favorability minus challenger favorability (scores range from +6 to -6, positive values indicate that the former receives higher marks), there is a mean shift toward the attacker of 0.828 points resulting from taking advantage, and 0.309 points resulting from out of touch (both \( p \leq .001 \)).

32. More detailed results are available on our online appendix (see note 14). For this analysis, leaners were treated as partisans, and Independents as being among those who did not share the incumbent’s party affiliation. Differences between partisan groups were smaller and less consistent for candidate evaluations than for intended vote, and for out of touch relative to taking advantage.

33. Only 23.7% felt this way about taking advantage, and 24.5% about out of touch (compared with 71.2% and 68.0%, respectively who said the ad was “negative but acceptable within the context of a competitive political campaign,” and 4.3% and 6.8%, respectively, who somehow believed that the ad was “not really negative at all”). See our online appendix for detailed results.

34. We also hypothesized that negative attacks will have the greatest impact among the less politically attentive (cf. Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Lau and Erber 1985; but see Garramone 1984), women (Fridkin and Kenney 2004), and those who believe that office-seekers “need to criticize their opponents because it is important for voters to know the strengths and weaknesses of all candidates.” No consistent mediating effects were observed for any of these variables.

35. Reflecting these changes, denials shifted the relative standing of the candidates by an average of 1.939 and 1.320 points, respectively, in favor of the incumbent (see note 31 and our online appendix).
References


the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC.


negativity on citizens' evaluations of candidates.” American Politics Research 32: 570-605.


Smith, Elizabeth S., and Ashleigh Smith Powers. 2005. “If Bill Clinton were a woman: The effectiveness of male and female politicians' account strategies following alleged transgressions.” *Political Psychology* 26: 115-134.


Union Square Press.


## Table 1: Five Responses to Attacks on Incumbent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Attack 1: Taking Advantage</th>
<th>Attack 2: Out of Touch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>No response given</td>
<td>No response given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>Candidate did nothing wrong: pay raises enacted before he took office; only personal money used to pay for family vacation; office complex where district office is located no longer owned by candidate’s brother; overbilling was due to a clerical error and quickly corrected; investigation by Attorney General found no evidence of wrongdoing</td>
<td>Candidate did nothing wrong: voted for greater public access rather than less; opposed the project in question and others like it; still owns home in district, but rents apartment for son in college; last campaign financed mainly by small donors; lobbyist is candidate’s brother-in-law, but was nonetheless reimbursed for alleged gifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterattack</td>
<td>Opponent is the one deserving of criticism: filed false business tax return; accepted illegal campaign contributions; steered government contracts to business clients and campaign donors; opposed stricter ethics laws for state officials</td>
<td>Opponent is the one deserving of criticism: voted to let insurance companies raise rates; has poor attendance record in state legislature; voted for cuts in education budget while sending own children to private schools; told reporter that constituents “have no idea what they’re talking about”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterimaging</td>
<td>Candidate is a man of character: helped support family after father died; put himself through college and earned scholarship to graduate school; started own business that creates many jobs; has served his country (military reserves), community (volunteer work), those less fortunate (established college scholarship fund), and church (charitable activities)</td>
<td>Candidate is someone you can trust: helped support family after father died; put himself through college and earned scholarship to graduate school; started own business that creates many jobs; stands up to special interests in Congress; declines any campaign contribution over $500; has frequent town meetings to hear constituents’ concerns; does local volunteer work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>Candidate’s actions were reasonable/warranted: pay raises did not apply to anyone currently in office; vacation followed official trade meetings, with the party reimbursed for personal expenses; district office is the same one used by predecessor, and rent has not increased since then; dispute over fee charged for professional services settled amicably; no personal or close political connections to recipients of state contracts</td>
<td>Candidate’s actions were reasonable/warranted: only supported limited “sunshine law” exceptions; changed position after learning more about the impact of earlier bill; living in apartment only until new house is built in the district; most spending in last campaign was done by the national party and independent groups, in full compliance with federal law; tickets were birthday and Christmas gifts to candidate’s children from their uncle, who happens to be a lobbyist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Effects of Attack Ads on Vote Choice and Candidate Evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Attack 1 (Taking Advantage)</th>
<th>Attack 2 (Out of Touch)</th>
<th>( \text{N} )</th>
<th>Prop</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Prop</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Prop</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vote for Incumbent</strong></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Prop</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>0.489</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>4.938</td>
<td>(0.073)</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>4.848</td>
<td>(0.071)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Favorability, Incumbent</strong></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>4.382</td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>3.522</td>
<td>(0.079)</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>4.264</td>
<td>(0.076)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Favorability, Challenger</strong></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>0.482</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>4.858</td>
<td>(0.073)</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>4.844</td>
<td>(0.076)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Post-attack evaluation**

| **Vote for Incumbent** | N                           | Prop | 278 | 0.342| (0.028) | 274 | 3.522| (0.079) | 276 | 4.264| (0.076) |
| **Favorability, Incumbent** | N                           | Mean | 278 | 0.428| (0.030) | 274 | 3.855| (0.079) | 276 | 4.152| (0.079) |
| **Favorability, Challenger** | N                           | Mean | 278 | 0.054| (0.042) | 274 | -1.004| (0.071) | 276 | -0.692| (0.073) |

**diff**

| **Vote for Incumbent** | N                           | Prop | 278 | -0.147| (0.041) | 274 | -1.416| (0.083) | 276 | -0.583| (0.068) |
| **Favorability, Incumbent** | N                           | Mean | 278 | -0.054| (0.042) | 274 | -1.004| (0.071) | 276 | -0.692| (0.073) |
| **Favorability, Challenger** | N                           | Mean | 278 | -0.054| (0.042) | 274 | -1.004| (0.071) | 276 | -0.692| (0.073) |

**Note:** For vote choice, difference is calculated as proportion (post-attack vote) – proportion (baseline vote). For favorability, difference is calculated as mean (post-attack) – mean (baseline). Significance tests are 1-tailed.
Table 3 Effects of Response Ads on Vote Choice and Candidate Evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Attack 1 (Taking Advantage)</th>
<th>Attack 2 (Out of Touch)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vote for Incumbent</td>
<td>Favorability, Incumbent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N Prop</td>
<td>N Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-attack evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-response evaluation</td>
<td>67 0.284 (0.055)</td>
<td>67 3.388 (0.149)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff</td>
<td>0.328 (0.081)</td>
<td>1.179 (0.183)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N Prop</td>
<td>N Mean</td>
<td>N Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>68 0.387 (0.056)</td>
<td>74 3.554 (0.169)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterattack</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-response evaluation</td>
<td>75 0.507 (0.058)</td>
<td>74 3.905 (0.142)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff</td>
<td>0.120 (0.081)</td>
<td>0.351 (0.143)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N Prop</td>
<td>N Mean</td>
<td>N Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>68 0.338 (0.057)</td>
<td>68 3.441 (0.156)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterimagery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-response evaluation</td>
<td>68 0.500 (0.061)</td>
<td>68 4.500 (0.189)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff</td>
<td>0.162 (0.083)</td>
<td>1.059 (0.165)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N Prop</td>
<td>N Mean</td>
<td>N Mean</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>68 0.353 (0.058)</td>
<td>67 3.627 (0.160)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-response evaluation</td>
<td>68 0.618 (0.059)</td>
<td>67 4.552 (0.160)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diff</td>
<td>0.265 (0.083)</td>
<td>0.925 (0.143)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For vote choice, difference is calculated as proportion (post-response vote) – proportion (post-attack vote). For favorability, difference is calculated as mean (post-response) – mean (post-attack). Significance tests are 1-tailed.