Abstract: Although there is evidence indicating 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. As a first cut at assessing the effectiveness of several response strategies, this paper considers the views of academics, professional consultants, and ordinary citizens who participated in two focus groups on the topic of political advertising. We proceed from the assumption that uncivil 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. The next stage of our research will use experimental data to test the relative effectiveness of four response types: counterattacks (favored by most consultants), counterimaging, justifications, and excuses.

Michael Dukakis and John Kerry. Two Democratic nominees for president, two losers, and two frequently cited examples when the question is asked, Why are campaigns today so negative?\textsuperscript{1} 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 between Mel Martinez (the eventual winner) and Bill McCollum 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 (including 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,\textsuperscript{2} and of campaign communications in particular,\textsuperscript{3} 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 attacks 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 against them were unwarranted. This, at least, is the widely accepted common wisdom about how Bush 41 and Bush 43 managed to prevail in elections that many felt they might lose. It is a common wisdom that appears to have been shared by presidential 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, popularized in the Doonesbury comic strip) 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 probably consider to be a truism. Yet just as attacks themselves do not always produce the desired result, some types of response (silence, denial, justification, 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. The present paper represents the first stage of a project that will hopefully shed new light on this (presumably) critical aspect of campaign communication. Our ultimate goal is 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 hopes to remain competitive? We decided that a good starting point for our research would be to use focus groups to get input from ordinary citizens regarding the kinds of attacks and responses they consider to be most effective.
The Importance of Playing Defense

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.  

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. According to Johnson (2007, 84), “Voters are not fools and understand when campaign commercials have crossed the line of fairness.” 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 project 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 must rely on indirect measures of ad exposure that are of dubious validity. Recent survey-based 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). 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 see Ridout and Franz 2008; Sides, Lipsitz, and Grossman 2010).

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; Stevens et al. 2008; Sides et al. 2003; 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 2010, 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, 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 a good basis for evaluation when the target is an incumbent, as will be the case in our experimental manipulations.

What, then, is the best way for candidates to respond when they are attacked? One option about which we have little to say is denial (or refutation). If the target can credibly maintain that the attack is based on false information (“it never happened”), he or she should quickly do so; 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). A second possibility that we will not examine closely is silence. In his classic work on variations in “home style” among members of Congress, Richard Fenno described how incumbents hoping to remain in office must explain (describe, interpret, justify) to constituents “what they have done while they have been away from home” (Fenno 1978, 136; also see Kingdon 1981, 47-54). Such explanations are 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. When that happens (and contrary
to what many practitioners believed in the early days of negative ads on TV; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991, 222), silence is rarely thought to be a wise strategy; some types of explanations may be more effective than others at mitigating the damage but, as GOP pollster David Hill (Craig and Hill 2010, 140-41) insists, “[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).

So if denial is a slam dunk (when the facts can be clearly established and there is little wiggle room for interpretation) and silence a no-go (except for outlandish charges made by trailing candidates in noncompetitive races), what other responses should we look at with our research? 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 minimize its perceived negative consequences), counterattack (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 she or 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 a candidate 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 a few others.
Many consultants are convinced, along with David Hill (see Craig and Hill 2010, 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 necessarily 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 plan to address. Our concern initially was simply with determining whether our focus group participants felt that the hard-hitting and occasionally uncivil ads they watched called for a “back at you” type of response; and, if so, should the response be at roughly the same level of negativism as the original attack? We suspect that most consultants would answer this question in the affirmative.
Other than counterattack, we had few preconceptions regarding the kinds of responses that might help to limit the damage when incumbents are charged with doing a poor job of representing their constituents. As it was impractical for us to incorporate inoculation into our research design, we were left with four possibilities from the list of strategies described earlier: excuses, concessions, justifications, and counterimaging. With academic studies offering little help in anticipating which of these might be the most efficacious strategy, we decided to turn to those on the receiving end of campaign communications to give us a better sense of what to expect.

The Focus Groups

Two focus groups, with the first-named author of this paper moderating and a combined total of twenty-one participants, were conducted on the University of Florida campus in late June 2010. These individuals were contacted by a professional recruiter, told that the topic of discussion would be “election campaigns and political advertising,” and offered an honorarium of fifty dollars for agreeing to attend; all were registered voters who said that they “always” or “almost always” voted in state and local elections. In recognition of the climate of polarization evident in American politics today, and of the aforementioned tendency for reactions to campaign communications to be shaped by one’s partisan attachments, we chose to (a) exclude strong Republican and Democratic identifiers, and (b) keep the two partisan camps apart. Thus, one group consisted of five weak (“not so strong”) Republicans, three Republican-leaning Independents, and one pure Independent; the second included eight weak Democrats, three Democratic leaners, and one pure Independent. Between the two groups there were nine men, twelve women, and a mix of ages from people in their twenties to those in their sixties; most were white, but there was a sprinkling of minorities (including one recently naturalized American citizen originally from Africa). Almost all were above
average in their level of political attentiveness, which is to be expected given the topics they were recruited to discuss.

Despite a lack of external validity, focus groups are increasingly used by scholars to provide insights into how people think about politically relevant topics such as campaigns and negative advertising (Kern and Just 1995; Lipsitz et al. 2005; Stevens et al. 2008; also see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). Similarly, media consultants and campaign strategists employ focus groups to test campaign themes (both pro and con toward each candidate) and to get voters’ impressions of specific ads that they are considering putting on the air. Even though results cannot be generalized to any larger population, it is possible through the informal give-and-take of these discussions to gain insights that will (for scholars) suggest avenues for exploration and testing in future research projects and (for consultants) occasionally make the difference between victory and defeat in a close election. Unfortunately, focus groups also have the potential to mislead.

Drew Westen (2007, 329), in criticizing how John Kerry’s advisors interpreted their focus group data in the 2004 presidential campaign, made a point that should be familiar to any student of public opinion:

[M]uch of political persuasion occurs through changes in networks that are inaccessible to consciousness. If you ask people conscious questions about unconscious processes, they will be happy to offer you their theories. But most of the time, those theories are wrong. And except when focus groups are performed by a very skillful moderator . . . they say nothing about what would happen if a candidate actually made an effort to shape public opinion rather than mirror it (emphasis in original).

In other words, asking people directly is not always the best approach for determining how they feel or why they acted, or might act, in a certain way. We were therefore less concerned with measuring
voters’ affective reactions to negative campaigning (we assumed that most would say they don’t like it, at least when attacks deal with matters of marginal relevance to a candidate’s ability to do the job; see Freedman, Wood, and Lawton 1989; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1989; Stevens et al. 2008) than with seeing whether they also recognized, and could articulate, its positive contributions (most notably, providing information) to democratic politics (Lipsitz et al. 2005). And even though we asked focus group participants to comment on specific campaign ads, and to consider what might be the best way for a targeted candidate to respond, we did not always take their answers at face value. Our goal was simply to get people talking about campaigns generally, and about negative campaigning in particular, and to see what they might say that could be used in designing our experimental manipulations. Here is some of what we learned:

1. Negativity isn’t necessarily the worst aspect of contemporary campaigns.

Although most Americans profess not to like negative campaigning, and even to regard its proliferation as something that is “undermining and damaging our democracy” (Sides, Lipsitz, and Grossman 2010, 524), many also concede that negative information can be useful to voters, and that some attacks are more legitimate than others. In focus groups held during the 2002 California gubernatorial race, Matt Grossman and colleagues (n.d., 8-9; also see Lipsitz et al. 2005) asked participants to indicate what they liked and disliked about campaigns; one of the main dislikes was negative campaigning, which was often considered to be irrelevant (in terms of addressing what the candidate would do if elected) and dishonest. When a similar question was posed in the Florida groups, the number-one concern was the role played by money and groups that use their financial resources to tilt the playing field and limit the choices available to voters on Election Day.

Katie (R): The person with the most money is going to win usually.
Debbie (IR): The special interests get what they want . . . [and the candidates who get elected] feel like they have political favors they have to pay back.

Beth (ID): You need to have personal wealth or the backing of someone with deep pockets to be successful.

Only a few people spontaneously mentioned negativity *per se* as a major concern; moreover, even when queried about it directly, there was relatively little concern expressed regarding the deleterious effects of attack politics on American democracy. Asked whether, as a general rule, candidates (a) “should never be critical of their opponents” or (b) “need to criticize their opponents because it is important to know the strengths and weaknesses” of everyone who is running, most respondents resisted taking a firm position either way. These results suggest that voters have a more “nuanced approach to criticism in campaigns” than the either-or alternatives posed in public opinion polls might lead us to believe (Lipsitz et al. 2005, 343).

2. People want to believe that they are not easily manipulated by negative ads.

Perhaps surprisingly, some practitioners buy into this – at least up to a point. Pollster David Hill, for example, maintains that the challenge of producing effective negative ads is greater today because voters are “catching on to the methods and means” used by consultants.

Once upon a time, the negative ad had some or all of the following ingredients: scary, from-the-dungeon music for the soundtrack; grainy black-and-white photos of your opponent, a few of which may have been “enhanced” to make him or her look fatter; and visuals of a few scandal headlines clipped from news sources, perhaps read aloud by someone who sounded like an angry judge at sentencing. . . . In the new millennium, that stuff doesn’t seem to be working the way it once did. Now, when I play a spot of that genre in a focus group, most often people just start laughing out
loud. . . . Or else they get mad. One guy in Florida stormed up to me after a dial test of a slyly negative ad . . . and got in my face, literally inches from my nose, snarling, “I know what you are up to and I don’t like it!” (see Craig and Hill 2010, 139-140).

Although the tactics described by Hill may still be effective at times (Brader 2006), some of our participants also took offense at the ominous music, menacing voiceover, and overall heavy-handed tone employed by some of the ads they viewed.19

Mark (D): I don’t like the voice in the ad. It makes the whole thing seem like a joke, too much over the top. These dramatic ads get old and are silly.

James (R): The tone of voice, so dramatic . . . it primes you not to like him.
Cindi (I): It distracts from the issues at hand.

Richard (IR): The music goes from a minor key for most of the ad, to a major key at the end. Instead of sounding like a death dirge [during the attack portion of the ad], the tone shifts to being very lighthearted and upbeat.

Referring more to the content than to the style of negative ads, others insisted that they were not swayed by such appeals.

Tony (I): Some people can see through the BS and consider the source. Personally, when someone throws dirt they’ve lost ground with me.

Anne (R): I look at the mudslinging and see two people in a competition who are just bringing out whatever they can to win. I see through that and throw it out the window.

This, however, is probably one of those occasions when we should not take what people say about their motivations at face value. The sheer volume of negative campaigning today, combined with the coverage it receives in the media (Lau and Rover 2009), may have increased the self-awareness of voters and made them less susceptible to negative appeals than they once were. Nevertheless, the reactions of our respondents to the ads they watched (see note 19) were entirely consistent with our assumption that going negative, with the right message and under the right circumstances, still has the potential to shape citizens’ vote preferences.
3. If you go negative, don’t make it personal.

This, at least, is what people usually say when asked directly (Freedman, Wood, and Lawton 1989; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1989; Stevens et al. 2008), and participants in our focus groups strongly agreed.

Daniel (R): I don’t like the rules of engagement that foster negativism, especially attacks on the person. That sours me a little bit on the campaign process.

Cindi (I): I get upset when they attack families, when it’s something very personal or very private. These attacks have no basis for the election . . . and they take away from a discussion of the issues.

Mark (D): It’s the character assassination kind of stuff that’s the problem. You can say whatever you want and maybe it’ll stick, but that’s not helpful. Pointing out reasons why a person shouldn’t be reelected is ok, but I don’t want to hear about their personal life.

Yet when pressed, many people recognize that even personal attacks have their place in a political campaign. Thus. . . .

4. If you get personal, be sure your attacks are relevant.

If citizens were better informed, more proactive as information seekers, and less susceptible to emotional appeals and misleading slogans (“pulling the plug on grandma” and the “death tax” were cited as examples), campaigns would be primarily about issues. But even if they didn’t always like it, respondents recognized that a candidate’s policy stands do not tell you everything you might want to know about the kind of representative he or she will be if elected.

William (R): I don’t believe that bringing out something negative about somebody is necessarily bad. Negative ads can be important and informative to find out who the individual is.

Richard (IR): There are some things that are completely irrelevant for judging a person’s character. Something like embezzlement is just wrong, but other things are murkier and more subjective.
Jessica (ID): There needs to be a mechanism of accountability. Negative campaigning presents a mechanism to judge a candidate’s character.

The relevance standard was also applied to attacks that questioned a representative’s performance rather than his or her character.

Katie (R): Being critical isn’t necessarily being negative. It’s perfectly fine for a candidate who’s running against an incumbent to stand up and say, “This is my opponent’s track record.” That’s very different than making an irrelevant attack.

Polling helps candidates to decide which issues voters care about, and negative ads on “irrelevant” issues are rare (Fridkin and Kenney 2008, 718). Our participants felt that the same is not true for attacks on character and performance, and they considered this aspect of negative campaigning to be particularly distasteful.

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

The desire for specificity was clearly evident in respondents’ comments about the campaign ads they watched. Although there was considerable disagreement regarding which ads were most effective (that is, which “raised a red flag” that would make people hesitant to vote for the targeted candidate), perhaps the most frequently noted shortcoming of ads that were perceived as ineffective was that they did not provide enough information.

James (R, on an ad critical of the incumbent’s frequent travels): It doesn’t give enough context to prove that the trips are wasteful. If they had said the target was sitting on a beach in Barcelona and doing nothing, that would be different. But it doesn’t give you enough information to make a judgment.

Richard (IR, on an ad accusing the opponent of failure to pay his taxes on time): Paying $6,000 in back taxes or fines isn’t much if you make a lot of money. That isn’t a very strong attack. It needs to provide more facts about what really happened.

Michael (D, on an ad saying that the target’s business associate was accused of fraud): There is no connecting of the dots. It mentions bank fraud but doesn’t tie [the candidate] to that fraud. The ad just seems too thin. It makes me feel like I’m being manipulated.
Jason (D, on an ad accusing the incumbent of favoring “special interests”): When they say that special interests affected his decisions, that initially sent up a red flag. But then after thinking about it I realized it could be any special interests, like kindergartners or something.

This is a reaction that may be shaped in a specific instance by one’s partisan leanings (Democrats saying that a Republican attack is short on facts, and vice versa), but we encountered it often enough to conclude that we should take it into account in developing the negative ads for our project.

A corollary to the specificity rule has to do with our earlier point about getting your facts straight: When going negative (and we suspect this is especially true for personal attacks, though it probably applies to some degree across the board), you should take every precaution to ensure that the information upon which your charges are based is correct. As several respondents noted, one of the worst things about negative ads is that they often exaggerate, distort, and/or take the words and actions of the target candidate out of context – and, worst of all, some are simply not true.

Beth (ID): Any facts out there are fair to use. If it’s factual, it’s ok. What’s not ok is when it’s outright lies, or twisting the facts in such a way that you’re deceiving the electorate – that’s a problem. Facts are fair game, but untruths are bad.

Katie (R): It bothers me that negative ads are really powerful, and they show only a tiny sliver of information that can influence you heavily if you’re not informed enough to investigate further.

Because the ads in our experimental manipulations will involve hypothetical candidates, variations in accuracy (and the effectiveness of denial as a response) are something that we leave for scholars to examine more closely in the future.

6. **In response to attacks, concessions are usually ineffective.**

Looking back, some exceptions to this general rule can be found. Criticized on several fronts by his Democratic challenger in 1978, Sen. Charles Percy (R, Illinois) answered not by addressing...
the charges directly but rather by offering “a public act of contrition.” Specifically, he aired an ad in which, surrounded by his family, he referred to opinion polls saying “that many of you want to send me a message. . . . Believe me, I’ve gotten the message and you’re right. Washington has gone overboard. And I’m sure I’ve made my share of mistakes. But in truth, your priorities are mine too” (Jamieson 1992, 118). More recently, in the 2010 Arkansas Senate runoff primary, Democratic incumbent Blanche Lincoln surprised many pundits by narrowly defeating a more liberal challenger who, among other things, had seized on the anti-incumbent, anti-Washington sentiment (“it’s time for a change”) that was evident in many parts of the country. Admitting later that she had initially underestimated the public’s mood, Lincoln’s final television ad showed her looking straight into the camera and saying, “I know you’re angry with Washington; believe me, I heard you on May 18th” (the date of the first primary, in which she failed to get enough votes to avoid a runoff). This last-minute “mea culpa about Washington being broken” was apparently enough to put her over the top (Bash 2010).

These and a few other notable exceptions aside, our focus group participants were dubious about whether an apology would be enough in instances where the attack raised legitimate questions about the targeted candidate:

Katie (R): It depends on the severity of the offense, and whether or not I believe that he’s actually remorseful.

Sharon (D): I’d be more inclined to accept an apology from someone who paid their taxes late than from someone who took money from lobbyists.

Jessica (ID): Apologies just go in one ear and out the other.

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 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 will not be looking at them in our experimental work.

7. In response to attacks, counterattacks can work if done the right way.

As noted earlier, this is the preferred strategy for many consultants (if not always for their clients; see Craig and Hill 2010, 138-39). There is, however, nothing inherently more effective about counterattacks compared with other options that are available; many campaigns end up as “he said/she said” contests in which the winner is not the candidate with the most counterattacks or the one who counterattacks last – but rather the one whose message resonates best with voters (or, in some cases, who seems the lesser of two evils). While we are unable to capture all of the possible permutations with our experimental design, both the academic literature and comments by focus group participants provide guidance: First, be relevant; respond by confronting your opponent on a matter (issue, trait, performance) that indicates which candidate will serve the public best if elected (Fridkin and Kenney 2008; Freedman, Wood, and Lawton 1989). Second, get your facts straight. Third, be specific; given their stated preference for specificity when the initial attack is launched, we might assume that voters will apply the same standard in a charge/countercharge exchange. In real life, of course, there is little doubt that emotion, ideology, and/or partisanship often, and perhaps usually, trump specificity in shaping people’s responses to campaign communications. A better way to think about it might be to suggest that, all else equal, voters find detailed accusations to be more persuasive than vaguely worded broadsides; accordingly, we will take specificity into account when designing our experimental manipulations.

Fourth, it’s ok to be hard-hitting so long as you remain civil (another “rule” that presumably applies to attacks and counterattacks alike). As reported earlier, Californians were evenly divided in
2002 as to whether candidates in general “should never be critical of their opponents” or whether criticism was important for learning about the “strengths and weaknesses” of all candidates. Asked specifically about gubernatorial hopefuls Gray Davis (D) and Bill Simon (R), who were waging a nasty back-and-forth negative campaign during that time, the number choosing the “never be critical” option jumped to 62 percent (Lipsitz et al. 2005, 343). Concepts such as “incivility” and “mudslinging” are subjective and difficult to define with any degree of precision. But like Justice Brennan famously said about pornography, people seem to recognize (and disapprove of) those things when they see them in a political campaign. Several of our focus group respondents had strong views along these lines.

James (R, on whether it’s possible to unseat an incumbent without going negative): The challenger can point out flaws in the incumbent’s record in a noble way. But that’s not the way it usually happens.

Lindsay (ID): I don’t need someone to tell me that so-and-so is a liar. Just give me the facts and I can figure it out for myself.

Jessica (ID): I find a lot of value in a candidate who can subvert the competition without pointing fingers or throwing dirt.

However, while there is little doubt that many citizens dislike incivility, this is another instance where we hesitate to take their remarks at face value. One participant (who has been politically active for years) seemed closer to the mark, while at the same time reminding us that the dirt you throw should be about something that matters.

Michael (D): If you have real dirt on someone, you should put that in the ad and it will probably be effective. Ads that are iffy or don’t have really strong charges don’t work as well. . . . I don’t think there’s any question that you want to try and destroy the other person any way you can. But you need to do it without subjecting yourself to scrutiny by picking out little things that will make people question why you attacked those things.

Following Fridkin and Kenney (2008), then, we plan to assess the effectiveness of counterattacks that, like the initial accusations themselves, are designed to be relevant, specific, and closer to the
uncivil end of the spectrum.

8. In response to attacks, you may be able to win support by staying positive.

Although this is not the approach preferred by consultants, staying “above the fray” may pay off under some circumstances (Freedman, Wood, and Lawton 1989; Kahn and Geer 1994). Some of our focus group respondents urged that candidates consider doing so before responding to attacks in kind.

James (R): The candidate who’s attacked should change the subject, switch topics and talk about other issues. Go positive. . . . You can be aggressive and still be positive. Engage people. Positive can show a fighting spirit.

James’ remarks may have reflected wishful thinking on his part, especially when he suggested changing the subject (something that resembles the “silence” option that helped bring down Dukakis and Kerry). Nevertheless, we agree that there are times when the effects of an attack can be blunted with positive cues, for example, through counterimaging, defined as a positive response that offers voters “a counterproposition to the content of the opponent’s negative ad” (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991, 244). James does not believe that being positive precludes one from being aggressive, and neither do we. Counterimaging will therefore be one of the responses included in our experimental manipulations.

The Experiment

In order to test the effectiveness of different responses, we must first identify the kinds of attacks that demand a response; as stated earlier, the next phase of our research is based on the assumption that relatively uncivil 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.
Staying away from policy-based ads that are likely to be viewed through a partisan/ideological lens by many voters (see note 19), undergraduate subjects will first be presented with attacks charging 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). As for the range of responses that subjects will be exposed to, we eliminated four possibilities: silence (too risky in most instances), denials (the best choice when available, though most attacks have some factual basis and are not so easily rebutted), concessions (unlikely to help if the alleged offense is serious and credible), and inoculation (not practical to include in our research design). Two communication strategies that will be examined are counterattack (favored by many, if not most, consultants) and counterimaging (staying positive while trying to provide an alternative frame for voters).

Drawing on the political accounts literature, we also plan to consider two other response types: excuses (acknowledging the behavior in question but denying responsibility) and justifications (acknowledging the behavior and accepting responsibility, but attempting to minimize its perceived negative consequences). Studies suggest that the latter are generally more likely than the former to help sustain a politician’s level of support when she or he 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). One of our favorite examples of this, and one that nicely illustrates Jamieson’s point that responses are about reframing (see note 15), 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 the election in November.23

Based on our review of hundreds of campaign ads, neither justifications nor excuses appear to be used with much frequency in the real world; instead, what you see are candidates who answer charges primarily with counterattacks and denials (including accusations of mudslinging and of lying about or distorting one’s record) plus an occasional concession, counterimaging message, or some combination of the four types. Yet because studies suggest that justifications and excuses can be helpful to incumbents who have supported a policy that is unpopular with constituents, we want to determine whether they might also work in a campaign context. Specifically, we will test the effectiveness of a justification based on moral/ethical principles (the Tower handshake incident, for example) and of an excuse based on claims of having been misinformed or misled (as with members of Congress who supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 because they believed administration reports that Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction).24 Our expectation is that the best defense will usually prove to be a good offense – in other words, that the consultants are correct in saying that an appropriate and well-crafted counterattack is the most effective of the response strategies to be tested in our research. Comments by our focus group respondents lead us to predict (with caution) that counterimaging will also be effective for some voters, and based on the accounts literature we expect the same to be true for justifications based on moral/ethical principles. We anticipate observing only small effects, if any, for excuses that attribute
one’s behavior to a lack of information.

**Conclusion**

Let us close by repeating our prediction, stated in the last paragraph, that the best response to an attack is most likely to be an *appropriate and well-crafted* counterattack. At the beginning of this paper, we took exception to the notion that negative campaigning is widely used because it works. Of course, it works, for some candidates some of the time; but for others it doesn’t work at all (in the sense of increasing the attacker’s share of the vote through either persuasion or mobilization effects), and on occasion it can backfire and make things worse rather than better. Our belief is that negativity will most often have the desired outcome when it deals with matters that people care about, when the message is credible, logical, and creatively presented, and when the facts are correct. Indeed, it is when these conditions are met that the targeted candidate may be forced to respond in order to remain competitive. But just as all attacks are not created equal, the same is true for responses. One of the challenges we face with our experimental design is in making the ads used (both attacks and responses, though we are concerned here mainly with the latter) as “equal” as possible, that is, ensuring that our estimates of the relative effectiveness of different response types are not unduly colored by differences in the quality of the various presentations. To the extent that we are successful, our expectation is that counterattacks usually will be more effective than counterimaging or justifications, and that both counterimaging and justifications will be more effective than excuses.
Notes

1. It is not relevant to the question addressed here whether campaigns are more negative than they used to be. Perhaps they are (Geer 2006; West 2009), perhaps not (Buell and Sigelman 2008; Lau and Rovner 2009), though attack-oriented politics is hardly limited to the modern era (Mark 2006; Johnson 2007; Swint 2008). Either way, the historical trend is not our focus.


3. On the effects of negative campaigning, see Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995); Allen and Burrell (2002); 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.

4. 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).

5. 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 primarily 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.”

7. 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 (2010).


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

10. 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).

11. 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.

12. A preliminary sketch of that design will be presented below. One interesting question that we leave to future research deals with the notion of issue ownership (Petrocik 1996; Damore 2004); specifically, is the effectiveness of negative attacks (and of responses) a function of the degree to which they involve issues generally thought to be better handled by the sponsoring candidate’s party?

13. 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.

14. See especially the work done on “political accounts” by Kathleen McGraw and various colleagues (McGraw 1990, 1991; McGraw, Timpone, and Bruck 1993; McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995; McGraw and Hubbard 1996), which served as the inspiration for our own project. Also see Chanley et al. (1994); Gonzales et al. (1995); Smith and Powers (2005).

15. In fact, Jamieson (p. 108) is probably correct in suggesting that all responses seek to reframe; they simply go about doing so in different ways.

16. As mentioned earlier, it is generally believed that challengers have no choice but to go negative if they are to defeat an incumbent officeholder. Hill suggests that the “all negative, all the time” campaign, with its pattern of escalating attacks and counterattacks, may actually favor incumbents (and other well-known personalities) because of its expense; that is, “the more money you spend on rebutting attacks, the less . . . you have for building name identification and cultivating a positive image” – things that challengers and other underdog candidates need but don’t usually have as much of as their opponents (see Craig and Hill 2010, 141).

17. In a sidebar to the article by Freedman and colleagues, Republican media consultant Doug McAuliffe took sharp exception to 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).

18. This question was posed in a 2002 California survey, which revealed an even division of opinion between the two choices (Lipsitz et al. 2005, 343).

19. Following a discussion of campaigns in general, each focus group viewed and discussed 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; the targets included eight incumbents, three challengers, and two candidates for open seats. Staying away from policy-related topics where opinions are likely to be shaped by one’s ideology or partisanship, we asked people to comment on accusations involving the failure to keep campaign promises (saying one thing and doing another), being a tool of special interests, unethical behavior, playing by a different set of rules than the rest of us (e.g., tax delinquency, breaking election laws, channeling government funds to family members), and ineffectiveness as an elected representative (e.g., missing votes or meetings, failure to get bills enacted). A complete list of these ads is available on request from the authors.

20. Jamieson (1992, 118-19) suggests that an admission by Dukakis that he made a mistake in supporting a prison furlough program for first-degree murderers might have limited the damage inflicted by the “Willie Horton” and “revolving-door” ads in 1988.

21. In the 2008 race for the Democratic presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton aired an ad that emphasized (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 quickly by producing an ad that opened with basically the same imagery as Clinton’s but conveyed a very different (and we would argue, aggressively 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?” See http://www.swamppolitics.com/news/politics/blog/2008/02/obama_returns_fire_at_clintons.html.

22. Excuses and justifications are similar to counterimaging in that they encourage voters to view what happened in a different light than the attacker intended; that is, they attempt to reframe the behavior under scrutiny. In our formulation, counterimaging is distinguished from the other responses in that it (a) is positive in tone, (b) neither acknowledges that the behavior occurred, nor addresses the question of who should be held responsible if it did, and (c) may speak to candidate traits or character rather than behavior (e.g., the Obama response described in the previous note).

23. 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.

24. See Chanley et al. (1994); McGraw (1990); McGraw, Best, and Timpone (1995); McGraw and Hubbard (1996). The “misinformed” excuse can be tricky, as one clearly does not want to suffer the same fate as George Romney (governor of Michigan and putative front-runner for the 1968 Republican presidential nomination, whose candidacy collapsed after he confessed to having been “brainwashed” by military leaders during a visit to Vietnam).
References


aversion: The uncertain link between negativity and campaign satisfaction.” Paper presented
at the 2003 annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA.
Sigelman, Lee, and Mark Kugler. 2003. “Why is research on the effects of negative campaigning so

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.

Stevens, Daniel. 2008. “The relationship between negative political advertising and public mood:

Stevens, Daniel, John Sullivan, Barbara Allen, Dean Alger. 2008. “What's good for the goose is bad
for the gander: Negative political advertising, partisanship, and turnout.” *Journal of Politics*
70: 527-541.

Press of America.

Union Square Press.


10, 2008): 70-76.