

Does Negative Advertising Work?

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In an overview of the use of negative advertising through the years, Kaid (1999) notes a real increase in the number of negative advertisements used in presidential campaigns. From 1952 to 1996, such ads made up about 38% of the whole campaign, but during the 1992 and 1996 campaigns, they made up more than half of the total advertising content. Moreover, Kaid (1999) notes that Bill Clinton's campaigns in 1992 and 1996 reached all time highs

in the use of negative ads with 69% and 68% respectively. But does negative advertising work?

The search for political advertising effects

Early studies on advertising campaigns focused mainly on the search for persuasive effects, as the predominant view at the time was that candidates could “persuade” voters by “injecting” them with appropriately elaborated messages through advertising campaigns. This “hypodermic” model was not substantiated by the findings of the studies, and thus, communication scholars reached the conclusion of “minimal” consequences. Iyengar and Simon (2000) point out that traditional research on campaign effects has looked mainly for persuasion effects. They argue that this focus ignored other highly important effects such as turnout, information dissemination, campaign agenda-setting and alteration of voting criteria. Moreover, significant evidence of persuasion were likely “to be minimal because most campaigns feature offsetting messages” (p. 151). On the same note, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1996) emphasise that “contrary to the findings of a generation of survey researchers, political advertisements, when isolated in the experimental setting, have strong persuasive effects on voters” (p. 117).

Another model which emerged from research findings was the “resonance” model. According to it, voter persuasion depends on the campaign context. This model distinguishes between short-term (circumstantial) influences and long-term (dispositional) influences. Both serve as filters in the voter’s attempt to interpret and understand the campaign (Ansolabehere et al, 1997). Finally, there is the “competitive” model which, according to Ansolabehere et al (1997), is the most sophisticated approach to the issue of campaign effects. In this model, the candidates are viewed not as independent but as interdependent actors and the effects of their messages are not viewed in isolation from one another but as conditioned by other candidates’ messages.

Campaign advertisements have, in general, the following effects (Kaid, 1999):

- 1) they communicate issue information to voters
- 2) they influence voter recall about specific campaign issues and candidate issue positions
- 3) voters tend to learn more from television ads than from television news or from televised debates
- 4) they can affect voters’ evaluations of candidate images

It can thus be argued that campaigns, although they may appear superficial, they offer information to voters and educate citizens (Iyengar and Simon, 2000)

The definition of “negative” advertising

The term “negative” advertising has been defined and used imprecisely by researchers. This has resulted in a problematic situation where the term combines distinct types of advertisements and assumes that any attack ad is an illegitimate and deceptive form of campaign (Jamieson, 2000).

Richardson (2001) argues that the notion of negative advertising has been defined too broadly and this has resulted in it being insufficiently holistic and too pejorative. According to him, this explains why there are contradictory research findings regarding its intended and unintended effects.

Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) identify three modes of negative argumentation: i) the direct attack, ii) the direct comparison ad and iii) the implied comparison ad. The aptly named direct attack, attacks a specific candidate or party directly. The authors found that it decreases the targeted candidate’s evaluation and voting preference scores significantly. The direct comparison ad features the candidate as well as the opponent and contrasts their records, their experience and their issue positions. The authors found that this mode produced the greatest statistically significant decrease in the targeted candidate’s evaluation and voting preference scores. Finally, the implied comparison ad does not make specific references to the targeted candidate and in some cases it may not feature the sponsoring party/candidate until the very end. These ads present in some detail the sponsoring candidate’s position, record or other characteristic that has become important during the course of the campaign, without mentioning the opponent. Such ads “lure” the viewer into comparing between the candidates. It could be argued that such ads are not “negative”, but their interpretation by the public attaches a negative character to them [a detailed discussion of this issue is provided by Jamieson (1984)]. According to the findings of Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991), such ads decrease the targeted evaluation and voting preference score significantly while increasing the respective scores of the sponsoring candidate.

Moreover, Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) distinguish between two types of negative advertising issue appeals: i) political issue appeals and ii) personal characteristic issue appeals. The former comments on the political record, the voting record, issue positions and the criminal record of a candidate while the latter comments on his/her medical history, personal life, religion, sex life, family members and current or past marriages.

More than two-thirds of respondents tended to consider negative political advertising on political issue appeals as “fair comment” while almost half of the respondents said that negative advertising on personal characteristics was “unfair” (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991). Mayer (1996) counterargues that, due to the changeability of issue positions during a campaign, a better guide on what a candidate will do if elected may be

provided by a judgement of his/her personality and character. In his words: “if candidates are free to portray themselves as leaders or deep thinkers or good managers or highly moral, then their opponents should be free to contest these claims” (Mayer 1996, p. 446).

Acceptance of negative political issue ads was most likely among people in higher educational and income levels. They exhibited higher levels of political efficacy and political participation. Men were also more likely to approve this kind of advertising than women. Approval of negative personal characteristic appeals was most likely to be found among poorly educated, low income people, with lower levels of political efficacy and political participation. Women were most likely to favour such ads than men. Of course, as Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) emphasise, acceptance or rejection of types of negative advertising also depends on the local political culture.

Newhagen and Reeves (1991) distinguish three categories of negative advertisements: i) true negative (or attack) ads, where there is an effort to diminish the image of the opponent without mentioning the sponsor, ii) comparative ads where the objective is to decrease the opponent’s image while increase that of the sponsor and iii) hope (or positive) ads, in which the sponsor is promoted as the person with the solution to a specific issue, without the opponent being explicitly mentioned. It is apparent that these three categories are quite similar to the modes of negative ads identified by Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991).

The campaign functions of negative political advertising

Sabato (1981) notes that, in an election, every voter has five principal choices “...voting for or against either of the party nominees, or not voting at all” (p. 324).

Negative political advertising serves a number of campaign functions (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991):

- i) creates awareness about candidates and their issue positions
- ii) helps voters in setting issue priorities on their political agenda
- iii) increases interest in the campaign by stimulating interpersonal and public discussion of it and by generating media coverage
- iv) increases voters’ evaluation of the sponsoring candidate while decreasing it for the targeted candidate, and
- v) ensures that voter evaluations of the candidates become polarised and thus the electoral choice becomes more simple

Mayer (1996) argues that negative campaigning “is not the plain and unmitigated evil” (p. 441) as it provides voters with valuable information which will help them decide on how to vote on election day. He argues that any substantive discussion on candidate policy intentions has to start by a discussion on the flaws and shortcomings of currently applied policies. If a

candidate is proposing a major policy reform, then he/she would have to explain what is wrong with the current policy. Moreover, negative advertising points out the candidates' weaknesses, their lack of abilities and virtues and their unsuccessful policy proposals. These are matters that voters should know about before they make their final voting decision. Finally, Mayer (1996) argues that the widespread use of negative advertising is one way of keeping the candidates "a bit more honest than they would be otherwise" (p. 442).

This view is supported by Finkel and Geer (1998) who argue that negative advertising can serve an important function in representative democracies. According to them, candidates should not only promote their own policies and accomplishments, but should also emphasise the weaknesses in the opponent's programme and qualifications. Moreover, dishonest claims appear not only in negative advertisements but in positive ones as well, when candidates exaggerate their record and their accomplishments. The truthfulness of the campaign and not its negativity per se is the issue that deserves more attention (Finkel and Geer, 1998).

Finally, it is not always the most liked candidate who wins an election, but the least disliked one. Each candidate has an obligation to present to the electorate the reasons why they should not vote for the opponent. In this context, a negative campaign becomes an integral and important part of the whole campaign (Devlin, 1995).

These views by Finkel and Geer (1998) and by Devlin (1995) seem to be close to reality as a post-election survey conducted by MORI in 1992 in Britain found that 55 per cent voted for the party they disliked less and only 37 per cent voted for the party they liked more (Kavanagh 1995). During the same election campaign the exit-polls seemed to confirm that the British electorate found the Conservative's negative message more believable than Labour's reassuring one (Scammell and Semetko, 1995).

Thus, it can be argued that some of the criticism of negative campaigning misses the point. Parties and candidates quite reasonably have the right to point out any mistakes in the record of the rival candidate, to present themselves as a political alternative and compare and contrast themselves and other candidates and parties (Kavanagh, 1995). Moreover, most criticism of negative advertising does not make any distinction on the truthfulness, relevance or civility of the types of negative ads used. By combining them all together, a fair criticism against a specific ad (or a type of ads) is unfairly directed against all negative advertisements (Mayer, 1996).

Mayer (1996) points out that "rather than trying to limit or discourage negative campaigning as a generic category, we ought to recognise that some negative campaigning is good and some negative campaigning is bad - and then think more carefully about the kinds of moral criteria that really should make a difference" (p. 455).

Pollsters' perceptions of the impact of negative advertising

Pollsters and campaign managers believe that the use of negative advertising makes an impact. Republican consultant Roger Stone argues: "Voters will tell you in focus groups that they don't like negative ads, but they retain the information so much better than the positive ones. The point is, people like dirty laundry. Why do tabloids sell?" (cited in Devlin 1995, p. 197-198). Democratic consultant Philip Friedman is more blunt: "The big question in most campaigns...is whose negative campaign is better. If it's negative it works. If it's positive, save it for your tombstone" (cited in Lau et al 1999, p. 852).

Advertising executives in the UK hold the same view. Winston Fletcher argues: "Positive advertising does not work because all parties favour the same goals -peace, prosperity, better welfare services, safe streets and so on. The challenge is to say *how* they will achieve and that is too complex for an advert" (cited in Kavanagh 1995, p. 160). John Sharkey, who ran the Saatchi campaign for the Conservatives in 1987, claims: "Politics is of low interest to people. That is why you cannot be positive. People are not interested in following the complicated claims that politicians make to defend their record...You cannot persuade voters that they live in a nirvana or that politicians can deliver it. Essentially, you say 'Vote Labour and all hell will break loose'. People can understand this" (cited in Kavanagh 1995, p. 160).

Pollsters use negative ads because, in their perception, they (Devlin, 1995):

- 1) are more memorable than positive ads
- 2) improve the poll standing of the attacker and decrease the standing of the attacked candidate. Moreover, track polling monitors the effectiveness of the ads and can help avoid boomerang effects.
- 3) are newsworthy and thus gain additional free coverage in the media
- 4) are more creative and provocative and arouse people's interest
- 5) are more humorous

The view that negative advertising is newsworthy and attracts publicity has been also supported by Kavanagh (1995). As Jamieson and Cappella (1998) put it: "News coverage dramatically increases an ad's audience and, in the process, legitimises the sponsor as a serious player in the policy debate. Both of these factors create an incentive for ad producers to create ads that attack rather than support a plan" (p. 121).

Ansolabehere et al (1997) emphasise the role of "ad watch" reports in the US, which scrutinise political advertising campaigns for their accuracy and fairness. Studies have shown that these reports reinforce the campaign messages and thus, some candidates may make the strategic choice to design their advertising campaign in order to attract news coverage. This way, they can gain additional (and free) coverage on issues of their choice.

This does not mean that consultants do not understand the criticism directed against negative advertising. Perloff and Kinsey (1992) found that practitioners perceive that negative advertising intensifies voters' distrust of politicians. The same study showed that consultants believe that negative advertisements are very powerful in influencing voter attitudes towards a candidate and that the information these ads convey are better remembered by people.

Unintended Effects of Negative Advertising

A study by Garramone (1984) showed that voters did not perceive every type of negative advertisement as equally truthful. Advertisements perceived as not truthful appeared to exert a strong influence on viewers' feelings towards the sponsor and only a slight negative influence on their feelings towards the target. This "boomerang effect" resulted in voters' disapproval of negative political advertising. According to Garramone's (1984) findings, the only way to avoid the "boomerang effect" is for the advertisement to be sponsored not by a specific candidate but by an independent political action committee. The same study found that highly educated and highly involved voters are more likely to be negatively influenced by negative advertisement than less educated and less involved ones. Older voters tend to perceive such ads as less truthful compared to younger ones (Garramone 1984). Another study by Garramone et al (1990) found that negative advertisements led to greater candidate image discrimination and attitude polarisation but did not influence electoral involvement and turnout.

Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) identified three possible damaging effects as a result of using political advertising. The boomerang (or backlash) effect occurs as an unintended consequence when the broadcast of negative advertising reflects more negatively on the sponsor rather than on the target. The victim syndrome occurs when a negative ad is perceived by the electorate as unfair and thus it, thus, generates positive feelings towards the target. Finally, there is the double impairment effect which occurs when a negative ad generates negative feelings towards both the sponsor and the target. Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) found no statistically significant evidence to support the boomerang effect and concluded that the expectation of this effect "...as the natural and inevitable outcome of a negative political ad is overly simplistic" (p. 11). The same lack of evidence is reported for both the victim syndrome and the double impairment effect (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991). In their view the effects of negative advertising on people and institutions are still unclear.

Ansolabehere et al (1994) found that the use of attack advertising has significant "side-effects" in electoral participation. In their experiments, voting intention dropped by 5% when the subjects were shown an attack advertisement in place of a positive one. The authors argue that, since these findings occurred after only a single advertisement then a sustained

negative campaign lasting two or three weeks may have a significant influence in voter turnout. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1996) maintain that on the question of turnout “the overwhelming evidence is that negative ads demobilize the electorate, and positive ads can stimulate people to vote” (p. 112).

Research on the persuasiveness of negative advertising has yielded conflicting evidence. One (partial) explanation for these findings is the use of unreliable methodologies (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1996). This has led Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1996) to conclude that “negative advertising tends to alienate voters generally, producing lower turnout and lower efficacy. Sometimes this effect also manifests itself as a backlash against the attacking candidate, though at other times attacks boost a candidate’s support more than positive messages do” (p. 113). Moreover, the authors argue that the occurrence of these effects depends on the electoral context. Negative ads appear to be more persuasive in general elections than in primary elections.

Finkel and Geer (1998) cast doubt on the findings of Ansolabehere et al (1994) by arguing that negative advertising may demobilise some part of the electorate but may also stimulate another part by providing it with more information. Their study found no influence of negative advertising on voter turnout and negative advertising effect on voter withdrawal was the weakest among heavy media users, i.e. among the people who were most likely to have seen the negative campaign.

Kahn and Kenney (1999) argue that the effect which negative information exert on turnout depends largely on each person’s political profile. In their words: “Psychological attachments to a party, interest in politics, and cognitive understanding of political matters affect responses to negative information” (p. 885). Negative advertising does not have a uniform effect and voters’ responses to the negativity of campaigns depend on political predispositions. Thus, campaign tone is influential to independents, people with less interest in politics and people with less knowledge about politics (Kahn and Kenney, 1999).

Similarly, Wattenberg and Briars (1999) argued that negative ads may increase voter turnout if they persuade them that their choice between candidates is an important one. Their study also did not support the findings by Ansolabehere et al (1994). The authors clarify that this does not mean that the study by Ansolabehere et al (1994) was flawed. The difference in findings is more likely owed to the fact that Ansolabehere et al conducted an experimental study which, despite its high internal validity, did not capture real-life behaviour.

Answering back to the findings by Wattenberg and Briars (1999), Ansolabehere et al (1999) admit that experimental studies have high internal validity which requires real-world confirmation but argue that replication studies and application of their findings to real-life data bolsters their conclusion that exposure to negative ads lowers turnout significantly.

Moreover, they point out that the data used by Wattenberg and Briens (1999) have serious internal validity problems. Thus, they conclude that “the experimental, survey, and aggregate data converge on the same conclusion: negative advertising demobilizes voters” (p. 907).

Jamieson (2000) concludes that contrast advertising (i.e. containing only moderate levels of attack) is the most effective type of ad in mobilising voters. Strong attack ads can demobilise the electorate. Moreover, attack ads reduce both turnout and the sponsoring candidate’s vote while contrast advertising increases both turnout and vote share (Jamieson, 2000).

Finally, Thorson et al (2000) claim that “we need to turn our attention away from the question of “Do negative attacks work”? -obviously a question in which the candidate is interested, but not of a particular relevance to the citizen. When we ask, “What are the effects of negative ads on the polity?” the answer is mixed -and the down-side is frightening” (p. 36).

Success of “attack” ads

Democratic pollster Ed Mellman argued: “When we ask people about negative ads, they’ll say they don’t like them. But that’s not the point. The point is that they absorb the information” (cited in Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991, p. 15). This view of pollsters is supported by cognitive psychology research. Kellerman (1984) in an overview of the negativity effect points out that there is a tendency for negative information to be weighted more heavily than positive information in the process of social stimuli evaluations formation and that such information also exhibit a greater capacity to change existing impressions.

A study by Pinkleton et al (2002) showed that participants found negative advertising less useful than positive advertising. The authors argue that the fact that political consultants consider negative advertising useful indicates that voters and consultants perceive “effectiveness” in different ways.

Moreover, Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) found that voters’ evaluation of negative political ads was related to the nature of the issue appeals presented in the ad. They also found that although the electorate evaluated such ads negatively regarding fairness and credibility, they nevertheless, found them persuasive and informative. The information dissemination and decision-making facilitation of negative advertisements also emerged in other studies (e.g. Garramone et al 1990). Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) do not favour direct attack ads, but argue that direct or indirect comparison ads are an appropriate part of any campaign as they help voters compare candidates’ records and positions, define the scope of the campaign and decide on the worthiness of each candidate. Kaid (1999) notes that negative ads tend to be more issue-oriented and less image-oriented than positive ads. In that light, it could be argued that negative advertising helps in bolstering political discourse.

Basil et al (1991) found that the effectiveness of individual ads depended on the surrounding context of the campaign. Thus, they argued, the match between an ad's valence and surrounding material makes the ad influential. Moreover, they also found that recall for negative ads was markedly higher. Arguing that a) the purpose of a campaign is to influence voters and not just to promote a memorable message and b) that most television programming and advertising is positive, Basil et al (1991) conclude that a positive political ad would ensure similar valence to the surrounding context and would enhance voters' liking of the sponsoring candidate while avoiding any boomerang or double impairment effects.

Lau et al (1999) found no consistent evidence that negative ads work to the advantage of their sponsors and/or to the disadvantage of their targets. Moreover, they found no evidence that negative ads are significantly more disliked than other political ads. In their view a well-planned negative campaign can lead to electoral success and that the same can be said with greater confidence about a well-planned positive campaign. Finally, their study found insignificant unintended effects of negative ads on electoral participation and public confidence in the political process. This conclusion is similar to Kavanagh's (1995) view that negative campaigning may work in the right circumstances.

On the other hand, Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy (1993) found data which generally support the use of negative advertising. They argue that negative messages derive their impact from a broader range of intervening variables than do positive messages. Thus, the use of positive ads limits the criteria of potential voters while an effective negative message adds more dimensions for judgement and influence. They emphasise that for a negative advertisement to "work" it has to be deemed as credible and stimulating. This way, there will be no boomerang effect and, despite voters' less positive attitude towards the advertisement and the sponsoring candidate, the net effect of its use will be positive. This enhanced utility of negative ads seems to outweigh any negative impact they might have on source evaluation.

Another study by Weaver-Lariscy and Tinkham (1999) found that negative advertising has a strong positive effect on its sponsor and that this impact is sustained for a considerable period of time. The authors argue that, given the short duration of campaigns, this effect becomes particularly important. Moreover, they found that even when negative messages are offset by the opponent's defensive messages or by the perceived low credibility of the attacking candidate, these strategies only work temporarily. Any boomerang effect may occur in the short term only.

The lack of agreement among researchers on the general effectiveness of negative advertising is explained by Basil et al (1991) as an outcome of the lack of clarity of what constitutes an "effective" ad: negative ads have been found to be both "effective" (remembered) and "ineffective" (causing a boomerang effect). If the "success" of an ad is defined as recognition

memory, then negative advertising increases both the accuracy and speed of visual recognition. Thus, Newhagen and Reeves (1991) point out that from a practical viewpoint “negative advertising...is probably a good bet” (p. 215).

Criticism of Research into Negative Advertising

According to Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991), the findings of studies based on the use of self-created ads, which rarely are as sophisticated as actual political spots, should be accepted with much caution. Moreover, the use of hypothetical candidates or material from previous elections casts doubt on how “genuine” the responses to it are, as viewers cannot vote for these candidates (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1996). The same applies to the findings of studies using single-point-in-time methods which do not yield the necessary data. Moreover, the term negative political advertising has been defined very loosely in order to include a number of campaign advertising strategies. This lack of conceptual differentiation exacerbates the belief that negative political advertising is inherently bad.

Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1996) emphasise that a fundamental problem with survey research is the inability to accurately determine who has (or has not) seen a specific advertisement. Reliance on self-reports or recall of a particular advertisement in order to measure exposure to advertising can cast doubt on the findings of surveys. In their view “such measures are notoriously unreliable and bias survey findings away from finding any effects” (p. 103). Moreover, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1996) point out that experimental standards have been extremely lax and there has been no adequate differentiation in issue content and advertisement tone, thus making it difficult to infer which stimuli factors are responsible for the effects of negative advertising.

Another shortcoming in the research on the effects of political advertising is that the participants are usually students who are not representative of the general public. Finally, almost all studies involve only a small number of people. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1996), emphasise that a typical experiment involves about 150 subjects while some researchers have used as few as 15 people. As the authors comment: “with such small sizes one needs to find enormous effects in order to detect statistically significant results” (p. 105).

Among the studies criticised by Ansolabehere et al (1994) and Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1996) for having a problematic experimental design are many of the most ‘prominent’ ones in the field (e.g. Garramone 1984, Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991). Jamieson (2000) criticises Ansolabehere and Iyengar for not distinguishing between ads which contain both advocacy and attack and those that only contain attack, and for not determining whether the subjects of their experiment thought that the ads they saw were truthful or deceptive. These shortcomings make the discussion of the findings unclear.

As Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1996) argue, all the aforementioned constraints make the generalisation of study results very difficult. These shortcomings can only be tackled with better experimental design. Samples should be larger, comprising at least 250 subjects (depending on the study) and should not consist of college students but from more representative samples even if this makes the sample selection not random. Studies on the effects of a single advertisement should use even larger samples consisting of at least 1,000 subjects. The end purpose is to have demographically representative samples.

Conclusion

Research on negative advertising has been hampered by terminological and methodological inconsistencies which make the drawing of any conclusions quite difficult. It is still unclear whether negative advertising is more informative than positive advertising or whether it affects voter turnout. Moreover, it is early to talk about a causal relationship between negative advertising and negativity towards democratic processes. Not only the evidence is inconclusive (although a strong case is made by Ansolabehere, Iyengar and their colleagues) but any negative advertising effects have not been disentangled from the general negative feeling about politics which exists in many Western democracies. Nevertheless, negative advertising is a significant tool in any election campaign and can be useful in introducing questions of dilemmatic nature to the electorate and in contrasting between candidates. Mayer (1996) and Finkel and Geer (1998) rightly point out that challenging the opponent's record and policy proposals is a fair electoral strategy and thus, truthful "negative" advertising is a useful and integral part of the election campaign.

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