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Keep it Clean? How Negative Campaigns Affect Voter Turnout

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Keep it Clean? How Negative Campaigns Affect Voter Turnout

Abstract

This study examines the effects of negative political campaigns on voter turnout over the last 10 years. Voter turnout in the United States is extremely low in comparison to other advanced industrialized nations, and the negativity that surrounds our elections may be the key to understanding why. The study is also a response to recent scholarship with conflicting conclusions on how the tone of campaigns affects the electorate. The independent variable in this study is the degree of campaign negativity, as perceived by voters. It is measured by state exit poll responses over the past 10 years, and its effect on voter turnout is analyzed using multiple regression. The analysis reveals that when neither candidate is perceived to be "going negative," voter turnout goes up; however, when the Republican candidate is perceived to be negative in a campaign, voter turnout also goes up. The implications of these findings are discussed.

KEEP IT CLEAN? HOW NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNS AFFECT VOTER TURNOUT

Hannah Griffin

Abstract: *This study examines the effects of negative political campaigns on voter turnout over the last 10 years. Voter turnout in the United States is extremely low in comparison to other advanced industrialized nations, and the negativity that surrounds our elections may be the key to understanding why. The study is also a response to recent scholarship with conflicting conclusions on how the tone of campaigns affects the electorate. The independent variable in this study is the degree of campaign negativity, as perceived by voters. It is measured by state exit poll responses over the past 10 years, and its effect on voter turnout is analyzed using multiple regression. The analysis reveals that when neither candidate is perceived to be “going negative,” voter turnout goes up; however, when the Republican candidate is perceived to be negative in a campaign, voter turnout also goes up. The implications of these findings are discussed.*

INTRODUCTION

Amongst pollsters and campaign consultants, a debate continues over the advantages and disadvantages of “going negative.” Negative campaigns are characterized by an attacking tone in political debates and by political messages that focus on the character flaws or shortcomings of the opposing candidate. Some argue that Americans do not respond to politicians who attack their opponents.¹ Given the tone of recent campaigns, however, it seems that many campaign teams believe it is a winning strategy to play on the emotions of voters. This ground-level debate is mirrored in voting behavior scholarship. While there seems to be consensus amongst political psychologists that the tone of campaigns plays a role in voting behavior, studies analyzing the effect of negativity and attack messaging in political campaigns on voters have reached mixed conclusions.

Understanding this relationship has important implications for politicians and for voters. For the former, it informs campaign strategy. For voters, it could help make them vigilant of emotional manipulation. With this in mind, this project addresses the existing debate within voting behavior scholarship which, on one side, suggests that the anxiety emotion caused by negative campaigns leads to increased political attention and

¹ Maslansky, et al 2010.

voter turnout, and alternatively, that negativity in the political sphere causes people to tune out campaigns and stay home on Election Day.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The affective intelligence theory posited by Marcus and MacKuen suggests that when a voter experiences the anxiety emotion about a political situation, it causes the voter to pay closer attention to politics and to be able to “bring more information to task” during the judgment process.² The emotional cue warns the voter about changes in the political landscape and urges him or her to pay closer attention. This means that the voter will take the time to process all the information needed to make a fully informed political decision, and as a result, the voter will be better able to make the decision that will optimize his or her own self-interest.³ The affective intelligence theory, then, suggests that anxious citizens are more likely to vote and, possibly, to vote more rationally.

On the other hand, the absence of anxiety is also a cognitive cue to the voter signaling that there has been no major change and the voter can get by making decisions and judgments through the use of heuristics, such as source expertise.⁴ If the affective intelligence theory is valid, then electoral candidates who wish to generate interest in a campaign have an incentive to adopt a negative or attacking attitude toward the opposing candidate in hopes of generating a sense of anxiety about the consequences of the election.

The affective intelligence theory builds on previous research that suggests that all information received by a voter is not processed in the same way. Dual process models, such as Petty and Cacioppo’s Elaboration Likelihood Model, offer two “routes” through which information can be processed by voters: central or peripheral.⁵ While peripheral processing relies on the use of heuristics, central processing occurs when an individual “elaborates” on a piece of new information to fully understand it and its potential impact on the individual’s interests. Petty and Cacioppo suggest that because

² Cassino and Lodge 2007, 105.

³ Marcus, et al 2007.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Petty and Cacioppo 1996.

voters come into contact with too much information during the course of a campaign to be able to think carefully about each piece, peripheral processing becomes a voter's default setting. Only when motivation is high, meaning when the information is personally relevant, will information be processed centrally.⁶ The affective intelligence theory essentially argues that motivation and personal relevance become high when the anxiety emotion is triggered. Some research has provided evidence that negative campaign advertising has a positive effect on voter turnout. A study by Niven found that voter turnout increased in a mayoral election among those who received negative campaign mail.⁷ In their study of the 1998 senatorial elections, Jackson and Carsey also attributed increased voter turnout to negative television advertisements and found that positive advertisements have no significant effect on turnout.⁸ For candidates who want voters to reevaluate their political decisions, or to take voters off their default mode, this side of the scholarly debate suggests this can be accomplished by fostering an emotional response in voters. Negative or attack advertisements and messages are one obvious manifestation of this goal.

On the other side of the scholarly debate is the argument found in Ansolabhere and Iyengar's *Going Negative*. The authors present evidence which suggests that rather than encouraging voters to pay more attention to campaigns, negative political advertisements diminish voter turnout by reducing voters' faith in the electoral process and their sense of efficacy.⁹ In their experiments, viewers were shown a political advertisement about a real candidate during an actual campaign. The ad was either negative or positive in tone, meaning it was either anti-candidate B or pro-candidate A. The study examined presidential, senatorial, gubernatorial and mayoral elections. Depending on the race, the advertisement was either created by the authors or chosen from existing ads used by the candidates. After seeing an ad, the viewers were asked to describe their intent to vote. Whether those who expressed intention to vote actually voted in the coming election is unknown.¹⁰

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Niven 2006.

⁸ Jackson and Carsey 2007.

⁹ Ansolabhere and Iyengar 1997.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Ansolabehere and Iyengar found that while self-identified Republicans and Independents find negative advertisements more persuasive, negative advertisements decrease turnout among all partisan groups. Notably, negative advertisements had a significantly greater demobilizing effect on Independents than on Democrats and Republicans. They attributed this to the fact that independents, being less partisan, are already unlikely to vote. Their evidence suggests that negative campaigns have the effect of polarizing the electorate by demobilizing those not thoroughly rooted in the Democratic and Republican camps, thereby chasing off the Independent vote.¹¹ Their findings challenge the affective intelligence theory. While negative campaigns were persuasive for Republicans and did not have as great a demobilizing effect on partisans, negative advertisements did have a negative effect on overall voter turnout, with the greatest demobilizing effect on Independents.¹² The study also found that viewers who saw positive ads were better able to recall information about the candidate than the viewers who received the same information in a negative ad.¹³ This contradicts the affective intelligence theory tenet that the anxiety emotion causes voters to have a better understanding of political information. Finally, Ansolabehere and Iyengar found that positive messages “in which the candidates promote their own ideas, successes, and abilities,” can increase overall voter turnout by bringing back non-partisans.¹⁴ This challenges principles of the affective intelligence theory, which suggest that a sense of anxiety can engage voters. Other voting behavior scholarship has also found that negative campaigns decrease voter turnout.¹⁵

Assuming that an increase in strength of opinion will lead to increased likelihood to vote, other findings offer an alternative to the affective intelligence theory’s explanation of how political information affects voters. Taber and Lodge found that people with strong beliefs become attitudinally more extreme after receiving both pro and con arguments because they “assimilate congruent evidence uncritically but vigorously counter incongruent evidence.”¹⁶ Their findings suggest that both positive

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 111.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 113.

¹⁵ Krupnikov 2011.

¹⁶ Taber and Lodge 2006, 756.

and negative advertisements will increase voter turnout among those already likely to vote. The *Going Negative* studies also found that the effect of advertisements varies based on degree of partisanship. However, they found that negative advertisements decrease overall voter turnout by demobilizing all voters and especially nonpartisans, while positive advertisements increase voter turnout regardless of affiliation, or lack of.¹⁷ The existing scholarship, then, is divided over the effect of negative advertisements on voter turnout, as well as how this effect varies by party affiliation.

RESEARCH QUESTION & HYPOTHESIS

My experiment addresses the main debate over the effects of negativity in campaign messaging on voter turnout. Do negative campaign messages have an effect on voter turnout? Is this effect positive or negative?

Contrary to claims made by the affective intelligence theory, I expect that anxiety caused by negative, attacking statements in a political campaign will not increase voter attention, or turnout as applied to this experiment. Ansolabehere and Iyengar have offered substantial evidence that isolated exposure to negative advertisements lowers intent to participate in elections overall and specifically amongst Democrats and those who were already unlikely to vote. However, their experiments did not capture the voters' perception of campaign negativity on Election Day. Additionally, the experiment measured only intent to vote as expressed by subjects; it did not measure actual voter turnout. Expanding upon the experiments of Ansolabehere and Iyengar, I will analyze how the voters' perception of negativity in a given campaign affects voter turnout in that election.

Hypothesis: The higher the campaign negativity for a given election is perceived to be by the electorate, the lower the voter turnout will be in that election.

¹⁷ Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1997.

METHODS & OPERATIONALIZATION

The experiment designed to test this hypothesis includes 41 cases, in which the unit of analysis is the state. The cases are taken from state exit poll data for presidential, senatorial or gubernatorial elections in the years 2000-2010.¹⁸ The sample includes 6 states from the 2000 presidential election, the 2000 North Carolina gubernatorial election, 3 states from the 2006 senatorial election, 20 states from the 2008 presidential election, 7 states from the 2010 senatorial election, and the 2010 California gubernatorial election.

In order to analyze the effects of campaign negativity on voter turnout, voter perception of negativity is used as the independent variable. This is measured by state-level exit poll responses to the following question: Which candidate attacked unfairly? Voters were given the following response options: The Democratic Candidate, The Republican Candidate, Both, or Neither. Since it is the voter's own perception of negativity that affects the individual's choice to vote or not, in this experiment, negativity is measured as reported by voters. Measuring negativity as reported by the voter is arguably a more accurate measurement of negativity than used by the *Going Negative* experiments, in which proctors determined the level of negativity. Voter perception of candidate negativity is operationalized by state exit poll response data, which is taken to be representative of the state electorate as a whole. The cases included in the sample are the only cases from all 50 states where the above question was asked in an exit poll in the election years from 2000-2010, as reported by CNN. For example, the exit poll prompt for the 2008 presidential election would read: Which candidate attacked unfairly? Obama, McCain, Both or Neither?

The experiment controlled for several additional variables that may affect voter turnout. These variables include education level, measured by state percentage of college degree-holders; region, where non-Southern states are coded as 0 and Southern states are coded as 1; competitiveness of election, which is measured by the winning candidate's margin of victory in percentage points; and racial composition of state electorate, which is measured by the percentage of the state population which is white.

¹⁸ Elections from 2002 were not included in experiment due to data irregularity.

Additionally, party identification is also included. It is measured by percentage of the state population that identifies as Democrat, Republican, and Independent.¹⁹

The dependent variable, voter turnout, is based on Census data and is reported as a percentage of the state's voting age population. Each voter turnout figure corresponds to the particular turnout rate for each of the 41 cases, so the state turnout for one race in one year. This operationalization of voter turnout is arguably more accurate than the method employed in the *Going Negative* experiments, which measured voter turnout by the participant's self-reported intention to vote. Their method is less valid because there is no way to confirm that those who reported intentions to vote actually voted. This experiment's measurement of voter turnout represents actual voter turnout for all states in the years included in the experiment.

¹⁹ All control variable data is taken from *The Almanac of American Politics*, with the exception of data from 2010. This information was retrieved from the U.S. Census Report Online.

DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1: The Effect of Campaign Negativity on Voter Turnout

Dependent Variable: State Voter Turnout

Independent Variables	B value	Std. Error	Beta weight	T-value	Sig.
Democratic Candidate Attacked Unfairly	.976	.654	.562	1.494	.146
Republican Candidate Attacked Unfairly	1.583	.554	.954	2.857	.008**
Both Candidates Attacked Unfairly	.982	.626	.629	1.568	.128
Neither Candidate Attacked Unfairly	2.204	.662	.912	3.329	.002**
Region	-3.160	3.232	-.111	-.978	.336
Competitiveness	.055	.113	.071	.484	.632
Racial Composition	.248	.094	.338	2.630	.014*
ID as Democrat	-.712	1.996	-.275	-.357	.724
ID as GOP	-.380	1.977	-.160	-.192	.849
ID as Independent	-.239	2.041	-.108	-.117	.907
Income	.000	.000	-.216	-1.552	.132
N=41 R Square= .732					

*p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01

Table 1 shows the results of a multiple regression measuring the predictive power of voter perception of campaign negativity on voter turnout. The independent variables account for about 73% of the variance in voter turnout. The perception that neither candidate attacked unfairly, meaning the campaign was clean, is a significant predictor of voter turnout. There is a strong positive relationship between electorate perception that the campaign was clean and voter turnout in that election. This relationship is significant at the .01 level with a beta weight of .912. This is strong evidence that as perception of campaign positivity increases, voter turnout also increases. The B value for this variable is 2.204. This means that for every 1% increase in

exit respondents who felt the campaign was positive, there was a corresponding 2.204% increase in voter turnout in that election. These findings confirm Ansolabehere and Iyengar's proposition that positive messages increase turnout across the electorate.

However, the data also reveals that in states where voters perceived the Republican candidate to be negative during a campaign, voter turnout increased in that election. The positive relationship between perception of a negative Republican candidate and voter turnout is significant at the .01 level with a beta weight of .954. The B value for this variable is 1.583. This means that for every 1% increase in exit poll respondents who felt that only the Republican attacked unfairly, there was a corresponding 1.583% increase in voter turnout in that election. This suggests that negative campaign messages do not always decrease voter turnout as hypothesized. In fact, the beta weight data reveals that negative or attacking campaign behavior by a Republican candidate increases voter turnout at a greater rate than positive campaign behavior by both candidates. However, the beta weights are quite close, which reveals that the variables' impacts on voter turnout are relatively equal.

With beta weights of .954 and .912, respectively, these two variables have a stronger relationship than the only significant control variable, racial composition of the state. There is a positive relationship between percent of population that is white and voter turnout. The relationship is significant at the .05 level with a beta weight of .338. While I found that when campaign behavior by both candidates was positive, voter turnout increased, I did not find that voter turnout decreased when both candidates were perceived to be negative, so the relationship is not a perfect dichotomy.

CONCLUSIONS

These findings partly confirm my hypothesis that higher campaign negativity causes lower voter turnout. The results of the multiple regression reveal that the absence of negativity in a campaign, as perceived by voters, increases voter turnout. This offers some support for the assertions of scholars, such as Ansolabehere and Iyengar, that Americans are responsive to clean campaigns and that politicians do not have to resort to attack messaging to foster interest in elections. However, I did not find the relationship between campaign message tone and voter turnout to be a perfect

dichotomy. While this study shows that positive or clean campaigns increase voter turnout, when both candidates were perceived to be negative, voter turnout did not decrease.

This study also found a positive relationship between perception of campaign negativity and voter turnout. The existence of a significant, positive relationship between voter perception that the Republican campaign was negative and voter turnout does not support my hypothesis. It instead it offers support for the affective intelligence theory. The beta weight data from my analysis demonstrates that the perception of Republican candidate negativity explains slightly more of the increase in voter turnout than non-negative campaigns do. This evidence is contrary to my hypothesis. Still, the relative impact of the variables was very similar in strength.

As such, the results of this study do not offer conclusive evidence for one side or the other of this academic debate, but rather provide evidence for both. But how can the perception of negative campaigning and positive campaigning both increase election turnout? The most powerful variable in driving up voter turnout in this study is the perception that the Republican candidate was negative or aggressive. This may suggest that the voter response to negativity is contingent upon which candidate is doing the attacking. In their studies, Ansolabehere and Iyengar suggest that messages from candidates are better received by voters when the topic of the message is something the candidate's party is perceived to be better at. For example, Republicans' messages about defense get a better reaction from voters than Democratic messages about defense, and the opposite is true for a topic that the Democratic party is thought to "own," like employment.²⁰ It may be possible, based on the results of this study, that Republicans had "ownership" of the topics included in the attacking or negative messages during these campaigns, and that these messages encouraged political attention in voters across partisan groups. This is one possible route for further study.

Another possible explanation may lie in the different ways partisan groups respond to negativity. As previously noted, Ansolabehere and Iyengar suggest that Republicans reported higher intentions to vote after seeing negative political advertisements, regardless of the sponsor of the ad. The opposite was true of Democratic

²⁰ Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1997, 64.

voters, who only responded to positive ads.²¹ It could be that positive campaigns make voters from both parties turn out to vote, and that negative campaigns make only Republicans turn out to vote. The increase in voter turnout when the voting population perceives the Republican candidate to be negative may be explained by increased turnout among Republican voters. My model controls for party identification within the state, however, because of data limitations, I was not able to analyze the effect of negative campaign messaging on voter turnout within partisan groups. This is another avenue for further study.

Further research to analyze the effect of negativity in political campaigns on voter turnout within partisan groups is necessary to fully understand this relationship due to limits in this study's data. Determining how party identification affects response to negative advertisements may clear up the contradiction about campaign tone that exists in scholarship and in campaign practice. The answer may be, as the results of this study suggest, that each theory is partially right. Still, the underlying reasons for the success of positive and negative campaigns within partisan groups should be separately addressed in further study.

APPENDIX

Included elections:

- 2000 Presidential: Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Kentucky, and Florida
- 2000 Gubernatorial: North Carolina
- 2000 Senatorial: New York, Virginia and Minnesota
- 2006 Senatorial: New Jersey, Tennessee and Minnesota
- 2008 Presidential: California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin
- 2010 Senatorial: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri and Nevada
- 2010 Gubernatorial: California

²¹ Ibid.

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