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Going Offensive: Negative Political Advertising and Perception of Candidates

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Abstract: Since the foundational work of Ansolabehere and Iyengar in 1994, researchers have utilized a variety of scientific methods to understand the relationship between negative political advertising and voter turnout. Despite efforts to develop a scientific consensus, uncertainty regarding the nature of the relationship persists. This paper identifies the mechanisms driving the relationship between negative political advertising and voter turnout, providing an explanation for why these ads are not effective at mobilizing voters. To identify these mechanisms, researchers utilized web surveys containing different types of political advertisements to determine how ads influence perceptions of candidates. Our findings indicate negative advertising has few benefits, both reinforcing stereotypes for those identifying with opposing parties and increasing frustration among independents and those who identify with the party producing the advertisement.

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Introduction

As the amount of spending on political advertising skyrockets, the tone of political advertising is experiencing an unprecedented shift. The Wesleyan Media Project, a group of faculty and students from three universities, found spending on political advertisements during the 2020 presidential election reached an all-time high, totaling over $1.5 billion (Wesleyan Media Project 2021). This increase in spending is coupled by large changes in the tone and content of the ads. One type of advertisement in a political campaign's arsenal is known as an attack ad. Compared to traditional or positive political advertisements, where a candidate's platform and successes are highlighted, attack advertisements criticize an opponent and their platform. Attack advertisements, also referred to as negative advertisements, have been common in the United States for over a century, however, the share of attack ads to total ads has been increasing since the start of the 21st century. Where negative political ads composed just 31 percent of the total ads in the 2000 presidential election, negative ads accounted for over 60 percent of ads by the 2012 election (Wesleyan Media Project 2012).

With record spending on these negative advertisements, it would seem decisions to invest so heavily on this variety of ad must be supported by scientific evidence of a positive effect on voting behaviors. Surprisingly, this is not the case. Since the 1990s, studies looking to identify the effects of negative attack advertisements on voting behaviors have been conducted with mixed results. Competing conclusions have led to two sides within the debate, between multiple groups of researchers who have found negative ads create a mobilizing effect, encouraging consumers to vote, and those who have found the opposite in a demobilizing effect. With this disagreement and uncertainty, many questions remain, and further research must be conducted to make any definitive conclusions concerning how attack

advertisements affect voting behaviors.

Literature Review

The Foundation of Research on Campaign Advertising and Voter Turnout

In 1994, researchers Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar discovered groundbreaking evidence, documenting that negative attack advertisements lead to depressed voter turnout and "lower levels of political efficacy and a decreased probability of voting," (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). Their study included two components, an experimental design and an analysis of third-party data to complement their findings. The experiment took place over the course of three elections: the 1990 California gubernatorial race, the 1992 California Senate races, and the 1993 Los Angeles mayoral race. Researchers created two advertisements, one positive and one negative, that were identical in all respects but tone and the candidate sponsor. These ads, using real candidates, were embedded into a 15-minute local newscast for viewers to watch. After conducting a short pretest to gather information concerning participants' background and political interest, participants were taken to a viewing room where they watched the 15-minute newscast with either the positive or negative advertisement shown exactly halfway through.

Following viewing, participants completed a lengthy questionnaire regarding their beliefs and opinions on campaign issues and their voting intentions. Their results showed that exposure to negative advertising, as opposed to positive, depressed intention to vote by 5%, and as opposed to no political advertisement, depressed intention to vote by 2.5% (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994).

In their attempt to replicate their experimental results, researchers measured the tone of campaigns in each of the 34 states holding a Senate election in 1992 and compared turnout data, controlled for other intervening variables. They found negative campaigns decreased

turnout by 2% and increased ballot roll-off by 1.2% (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). These results began to worry academics and politicians across the country, claiming attack ads were threatening democratic values and harming the electoral process. Alarmed by the results of these experiments, researchers began a second generation of work to explore these findings further, ultimately starting a heated controversy about the nature of the relationship. Using survey data from National Election Studies, aggregate turnout data, and a detailed content analysis of campaign advertisements from 1960 to 1992, Finkel and Greer (1998) found the tone of political advertising in a campaign, "has a negligible effect on both aggregate trends in turnout and on individuals' self-reported vote during that time period." Finkel and Greer found evidence of a slight mobilizing effect, however it was not statistically significant, attributing increased turnout to negative advertisements' tendency to stimulate an immediate emotional response from voters. Finkel and Greer critique Ansolabehere and Iyengar's external validation of their experimental work, specifically with their measurement of tone. In Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994), tone was constructed from a content analysis of newspaper and magazine articles, reflecting the press coverage the campaign received, not the tone of the advertisements used by candidates.

Other researchers have looked to explain why these discrepancies may have occurred, "Contradictions may stem from incomplete models, inaccurate measurements, overgeneralizations from case studies, or inappropriate research designs," (Baumgartner and Leech 1996). Ken Goldstein and Paul Freedman evaluated the research designs of both Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) and Finkel and Greer (1998), concluding "Many of the conclusions on both sides of the demobilization debate rest on inadequate data and misspecified models," (Goldstein and Freedman 2002).

The Problem of Media Exposure

The commonly accepted problem when studying this topic is gauging exposure to the advertisements themselves. In experiments, such as those done by Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994), researchers can control exposure to the advertisements, but any attempt to investigate outside of the lab requires further measures to be put in place to measure exposure. Finkel and Greer (1998) relied on political advertising archives, a collection of advertisements made during campaigns, to create a general mix of advertisements viewers were likely to see.

While political advertisement archives may include most if not all the political advertisements produced for a particular campaign, it fails to capture how many times an advertisement was aired. An advertisement aired only once is weighted the same as an advertisement that aired hundreds of times. Relying on archives also fails to account for market variation; exposure to different advertisements varies by media market, as battleground states receive more exposure to ads than states that consistently lean towards one party. Advertisement archives also cannot compensate for the viewing habits of the individual voters, people who watch television more are naturally exposed to more advertisements. Goldstein and Freedman explain in their research, "In any given media market, individuals who watch more television will be more likely to encounter campaign advertisements who watch less, particularly if their viewing habits coincide with the broadcasts in which campaign advertisements are most likely to be aired," (Goldstein and Freedman 2002).

To combat this problem, Goldstein and Freedman (2002) developed a new method for measuring accurate information on the distribution of political advertisements. Utilizing a tool called Marketed by Campaign Media Analysis Group, CMAG, Goldstein and Freedman were able to access the transmissions of both national and cable networks in the country's top media markets. CMAG data contained information on not only which advertisements were aired, but

also how many times those advertisements aired in what markets. Goldstein and Freedman could then aggregate the data by the number of broadcasts per candidate in each market, allowing them to measure exposure accurately. However, Goldstein and Freedman also looked to eliminate other factors that would affect voter turnout. To do so, they focused on varying geographic regions across the state, specifically focusing on areas of different economic status, religious beliefs, political leaning, and race.

Goldstein and Freedman (2002) found while exposure to positive advertising had no significant effect on turnout, negative ads had a substantial mobilizing effect. Holding all other variables constant, a person with an average level of exposure to negative advertising experienced a 2.8% increase in their chances of voting when compared to no exposure to negative ads. This percentage grew with additional exposure to negative ads, increasing to 7.2% after another standard deviation of exposure, and 10.8% after two standard deviations (Goldstein and Freedman 2002). Where Finkel and Greer (1998) found certain groups of people may be mobilized by negative advertisement, Goldstein and Freedman (2002) established findings of a significant mobilizing effect. Goldstein and Freedman attributed this mobilization to the negative advertisements' tendencies to engage voters, raise interests, and communicate the importance and stakes of the outcome of the election.

Continued Exploration

In 2006, Deborah Brooks performed an analysis of the conclusions from all newspaper and magazine articles on Lexis/Nexis discussing the relationship between campaign tone and turnout. Of the 410 relevant articles published between 1994-2006, two-thirds of the articles implied that negative campaigning depresses turnout, while only 6% implied there is a stimulating effect (Brooks 2006). This tendency for the media to imply a demobilizing effect appears to be in direct contradiction of the findings of the scientific community. In 2007,

Richard Lau of Rutgers University and his team conducted a meta-analysis of research on the effects of negative campaigning. Focusing solely on the findings themselves, instead of the raw data used in the studies, Lau et al. (2007) found 111 studies containing 294 pertinent findings relating to negative campaign advertising and voting behavior. Lau and his team found, "the research literature provides no general support for the hypothesis that negative political campaigning depresses voter turnout. If anything, negative campaigning more frequently appears to have a slight mobilizing effect," (Lau et al. 2007).

In 2013, Jared Barton, Marco Castillo, and Ragan Petrie conducted field experiments in two local California elections. Sending out negative and positive letters to potential voters, Barton and his team looked to test the effect of advertisement tone on donations to the candidates and voter turnout. Using a pre-experimental survey to confirm the tone of the message, subjects in the interview read both messages from one of the candidates and were asked about the tone of the messages, their informational content, and their affect toward the sender of the message (Barton et al. 2013). This survey also allowed researchers to examine participant explanations for differences between positive and negative messages, particularly whether they found the negative messages more informative, to test the findings of Finkel and Geer (1998). Researchers found while the positive letter was seen to be informative, the negative letter was found to be between "somewhat (informative)" and "not very informative," suggesting participants finding the negative ads more informative is likely not the link to voter turnout.

After sending out positive, negative, or no advertisements to their sample, researchers then waited until after the election to follow-up to determine whether the advertisements had any impact on turnout. Barton and his team found that recipients of the negative message were

4% more likely to go the polls than recipients of the positive, as positive message decreased turnout at a statistically significant level. However, Barton and his team did recognize the limitations of their work, specifically to the timing of the exposure to the ad. As targeted voters received the message several months prior to Election Day, it is impossible to determine whether turnout behavior was affected by a message. This issue of exposure timing has been explored in other relevant studies.

Mechanisms of Change

Where the research previously discussed have focused on how the content and tone of political ads have directly impacted changes in voting behaviors, several researchers believe the methods used to look at the relationship fail to explain why the relationship may or may not exist. Looking to expand on previous studies, researchers have focused on the mechanisms of change behind exposure to different types of political ads and changes in voting behavior. Two of the most prominently covered factors hypothesized to motivate change have been the timing of exposure to the advertisement, and the emotional reactions of viewers.

In 2011, Yanna Krupnikov of Indiana University argued the empirical stalemate of negative advertisements' effect on turnout was the failure to consider the timing of exposure to negativity. Krupnikov used two tests to explore how timing affects the relationship between negativity and turnout. Using data from the National Annenberg Election Survey and the Wisconsin Advertising Project from the 2004 presidential election, the first test estimated exposure to the amount of negativity in an individual's media market based on when they would have been exposed. The second test used data from the National Election Studies, considering negative advertising in presidential elections from 1976 to 2000 (Krupnikov 2011). This test acted as both a complement and a check to the first test and provided a baseline comparison to existing research.

Krupnikov looked at three different types of negativity: overall negativity, overall targeted negativity, and late targeted negativity. Overall negativity was measured as the total percentage of negative ads aired over the course of the campaign, not accounting for timing or target. Overall targeted negativity took the target of the ads into account but not timing, resulting in two variables: percentage of negativity about the respondent's preferred candidate and percentage of negativity about their opposition. Late targeted negativity accounted for both the amount of negativity shown after October 1, 2004, and who the ad was targeting. Krupnikov hypothesized that selection of a preferred candidate was the deciding factor in when negative ads would affect voter turnout. If voters are exposed to negative ads before picking a preferred candidate, their feelings toward that individual may change, but it should not affect their voting behaviors. However, if voters were exposed to negative ads after picking a preferred candidate, it may convince individuals that their selection is no better than their opponent, so voters would be less inclined to vote. Krupnikov found that overall negativity did not have a statistically significant effect on voter turnout, but late targeted negativity had a significant negative effect on turnout when timing and target were jointly considered, decreasing likelihood to vote by as much as 6% (Krupnikov 2011).

In his 2012 work on dynamic causal inference, Matthew Blackwell built on Krupnikov's findings by creating a model considering changes in campaign strategy over the course of an election cycle. Blackwell discredits the application of traditional causal inference methods in political research as they fail to account for dynamic adapting methods required for a successful campaign. Blackwell used data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project in conjunction with weekly polling data and predicted race competitiveness to determine the effects of negative advertising on turnout. Blackwell concluded negativity had a large and

statistically significant mobilizing effect for its sponsor when accounting for the timing of exposure.

Other researchers believe the emotions the advertisements elicit are the main motivator behind changes in voting behavior. Paul Martin looked to understand the causal mechanisms that connected negative advertising and turnout. Using data collected by the Wisconsin Advertising Project, compiled under the direction of Ken Goldstein, and National Election Studies data, Martin tested the effects of intervening variables related to negative advertising on whether the participant voted in the 1996 presidential election (Martin 2004). Martin then proposed three intervening mechanisms he believed is the link between the negative advertisements and voting behaviors:

1. Republican Duty: American citizens share deep concern over the future of their country, and negative ads stimulate concern, thereby encouraging participation.
2. Candidate Threat: Negative advertising evokes anxiety within the public, stimulating interest in campaigns and political participation.
3. Rational Actor: Citizens participate in politics if the utility of their participation outweighs the cost of the effort, and marginal utility of a vote is directly related to the closeness of a race. Negative campaigns may signal to potential voters the relative closeness of an upcoming race, spurring participation.

These three mechanisms relate to how viewers felt after watching the video. Martin believed that only by looking at the reactions and emotions of viewers could researchers begin to understand what motivated potential changes in voter turnout, regardless of the direction of the relationship.

Unanswered Questions

With a record number of votes cast and the highest turnout percentage in over a hundred years during the 2020 presidential election, every vote matters (DeSilver, 2021). As negative political attack ads continue to be utilized by campaigns at all levels of government, it important for campaigns to understand the impact these advertisements have on their target audience. This research looks to expand on previous research, studying not whether political attack ads affect turnout, but the mechanisms which negative ads affect voters' opinions and behaviors. Using questions that focus on how participants view candidates, their opponents, and the election as whole, this study looks to build upon prior literature by determining how effective negative advertisements are at changing the opinions of potential voters. By identifying how negative political ads affect perceptions of candidates, inform voters of relevant issues, and influence perceptions of the election, political campaigns will be better able to allocate and distribute resources in a way to benefit their campaign. I hypothesize negative ads will be effective at influencing viewers, but not in the intended way. I believe negative advertisements will not only harm the image of the candidate being attacked, but will also decrease support for the candidate who created the ad. If this is found to be true, it would be strong support for Ansolabehere and Iyengar's demobilization hypothesis based on decreased political efficacy and apathy towards candidates.

Methods

To gather data for this study, researchers developed an online survey that was conducted during March 2022. Where studies looking at the relationship between negative political advertising and voter turnout had traditionally analyzed television and marketing data, this study looked to analyze opinions of voters. While the data analyzed in previous studies can be used to develop a model to predict how negative political advertisements influence the

behavior of individuals, surveys allow researchers to gain insight about attitudes that are difficult to measure using other techniques (McIntyre 1999). Since surveys can gather information about the characteristics, opinions, and attitudes of potential voters, it was the ideal way to collect data for this research.

Materials

The survey was modeled after the pre-experimental survey utilized by Barton, Castillo, and Petrie in their 2013 study. While the survey was designed to ensure the manipulation of text would be properly identified as either negative or positive to the viewer, it also played an additional surprising role, allowing researchers to examine the elements of the messages that were the drivers of behaviors. By asking participants their open-ended impressions of each message, how informative each message was, and how they viewed each of the candidates, the pre-experimental survey served as the perfect building block to create an assessment of participant opinions and attitudes regarding the advertisement.

To create a streamlined and simplified survey experience for all participants, the questionnaire was constructed and distributed using Qualtrics Survey Platform. The survey consisted of four sections: an introduction, a manipulation, a response section, and a demographics section. The introduction quickly thanked the participants for their time, indicating the survey should only take between four and six minutes. The introduction did not inform participants the purpose of the study, only that they would be watching a video as part of the experiment.

During the manipulation section, participants were shown one of four videos, two sponsored by Republican candidates and two by Democrats. Using the Qualtrics randomizer tool, all four of the videos were presented an equal number of times to create comparable groups. While the ads vary in length, between 30 and 90 seconds, they all fit into the traditional

window of a television advertisement. The ads were pulled from two different congressional races, two from Ohio's 15th Congressional District and two from Louisiana's 2nd Congressional District. Mike Carey of Ohio's 15th Congressional District utilized both positive and negative advertisements, and one of each was chosen to represent Republican negative and positive advertisements. Likewise, Troy Carter of Louisiana's 2nd Congressional District used both positive and negative ads, representing both types of Democrat advertisements. Both Carey and Carter won their seats in a special election and, at the time of this study, are serving their first term in Congress.

After watching the video, participants were then asked a variety of questions about the advertisement and their opinions about the candidate. Participants were asked about their impressions of the video, how informative the ad was, the tone of the video, and how the advertisements impacted their views of candidates. For a complete list of questions used in the questionnaire, please consult the appendix. By seeing how participants initially react to the advertisement, researchers were able to better identify and understand the mechanisms that would translate from an initial reaction to changes in voting behavior on election day. The demographics section collected basic information about participants about factors that may influence their perceptions of the advertisements. Researchers collected information about race, gender, age, voting history, party identification, and voter registration status. While variables such as race and gender may not be central to the question this research asks, previous research has found interesting links between race, gender, and susceptibility to negative advertising, so these variables were included as well.

Procedure

Students were given the opportunity to participate in the study via their classes. After receiving permission from professors, researchers made an announcement to the class asking

for their participation and informing them of the $25 Amazon gift card drawing. Those who wished to participate could scan a QR code linked with the URL address of the survey. Participants would then read the introduction and instructions of the study, followed by viewing the randomized advertisement. After viewing, participants would respond to questions about the video and then several questions about the participant's demographics. Once all the questions were answered, participants would enter their e-mail to be contacted about the winner of the drawing and were thanked for their time.

Findings

Survey Demographics

After two full weeks of data collection, a total of seventy-five responses were gathered for analysis. Of this number, 76% of respondents were between the ages eighteen to twenty-one, 23% were between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-five, and the remaining 1% was under eighteen. Approximately 75% of respondents were White, 8% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 8% were Hispanic or Latino, 5% were Multiracial or Biracial, and 4% were Black. In terms of gender, 74% of participants identified as female, 24% identified as male, 1% identified as non-binary/non-conforming, and the final 1% preferred not to say. The group was also skewed in terms of party identification, with 57% identifying as a Democrat, 25% as Independent, and only 18% as Republican

Given this study used a convenience sampling method to acquire participants, the findings of the survey are limited. Future efforts to investigate this relationship or recreate these results should acquire a larger sample, with a greater diversity of ethnicities, genders, and party identification. With such a small sample, researchers decided not to run any form of regressions regarding the data, as any of the limited statistically significant results would not be applicable to a greater population. For the purposes of the study researchers compared the positive and

negative ads from the same election and party to understand how the different types of ads influenced perception of candidates. The basic findings of from each group are explored first, independently, followed by comparisons of variables of interest to the video of opposite tone.

Positive Democrat Advertisement

Participants in this group were shown a positive advertisement by Troy Carter of Louisiana. Of the twenty-one participants who viewed this video, thirteen identified as a Democrat, five identified as a Republican, and three as an Independent. Participants were able to understand the ad, as 90.4% of viewers correctly identified the ad as positive or claimed it was neutral. In addition to recognizing the tone of the ad, viewers also believed they learned something about the candidate from the ad, as 85.7% found the ad to be informative. In the open-response section, one viewer left their impressions, "Troy Carter has clearly achieved much in his life and is attempting to use his accomplishments to sway voters of a variety of backgrounds, including white voters given the choice of narrator."

Participants were shown a list of words after watching the video and were asked to select all that applied to how they felt after watching the video, a full list of these words can be found in the sample survey in the appendix. The most common words selected were "confident" and "proud", which were selected ten and eleven times respectively, while the only words with negative connotations "frustrated" and "stressed" were only selected three and one time respectively.

Negative Democrat Advertisement

Participants in this group were shown a negative advertisement by Troy Carter of Louisiana. Of the twenty participants who viewed this video, fifteen identified as a Democrat, three identified as an Independent, and two as Republican. Viewers of this advertisement were also able to understand it, 95% of respondents correctly identified the ad as negative. Like the

positive ad, participants learned from the negative ad, as 90% of participants found the ad to be informative.

Despite interpreting and learning from the advertisement in a similar way, the words used to describe how participants felt after watching the video varied greatly from the positive ad. Words like “disappointed” and “frustrated” were used in excess of ten times each, and “worried” and “confused” were close behind with nine and eight uses. The term “angry” occurred six times, and “stressed” occurred three while the only two words with positive connotations, “relieved” and “confident” both appeared only once.

Comparison of Variables of Interest

The results from the two Democrat ad viewing groups were broken down into six variables: candidate likability, opponent likability, desire to donate to candidate, desire to donate to opponent, professionality of candidate, and professionality of opponent.

Candidate Likability

There was large difference in how likable the candidate (Troy Carter) was perceived after watching the two videos. While 90.4% of viewers who watched the positive video thought it made him appear more likable, that number only reached 40% among the negative advertisement group. The negative group also saw a rise in percentage who believed the ad made him less likable, reaching 35% as opposed to 5% in the positive group. These findings demonstrate that negative ads are not as effective at increasing support for a candidate and can potentially lead to a backlash effect and mobilize viewers against them.

Opponent Likability

The negative video was much better at influencing how likable his opponent was compared to the positive ad. In the negative group, 80% of viewers found the candidate being attacked (Karen Carter Peterson) to be less likable after watching the ad. In the positive ad group,

66% found the ad had no impact on how they viewed his opponent, although it is interesting to note that 24% or respondents found his opponent less likable after the video despite her name never being mentioned. The results reinforce the common idea that negative ads should be used in order to decrease support for an opposing candidate

Desire to Donate to Candidate

After viewing, 57.2% of respondents who had watched the positive ad claimed to be more likely to donate to his campaign than before watching it, while 38% experienced no change in their desire to donate. This number decreases to 30% in the group who watched the negative ad, while 35% of respondents claimed to be less likely to donate after watching the ad. These findings support that ads may have different purposes, as positive ads seem more effective at motivating viewers to donate than negative ads.

Desire to Donate to Opponent

Another large difference between the two groups of Democrat ad viewers came in the form of desire to donate to opponent. After viewing the positive ad, which didn't mention the opponent by name, 62% of viewers experienced no change in their desire to donate to his opponent while 29% were less likely to donate. In the negative ad group, 65% of viewers believed they were less likely to donate to his opponent and only 20% experienced no change. This finding is interesting in relation to the last variable, as our results show that negative advertising might decrease donation support for both candidates.

Professionality of Candidate

The biggest difference between the two groups was how they viewed the candidate who made the ads. After watching the positive ad, 90% of viewers believed Troy Carter was professional, while only 5% found him unprofessional. However, after watching the negative advertisement, only 5% of respondents found him to be professional, and 75% considered him

unprofessional. A difference of 85% between the two groups is significant. If professionalism is identified as a significant motivator for candidate choice, the decision to run a negative advertisement may be detrimental to a campaign.

Professionality of Opponent

The use of negative advertising had a substantial effect on the view of how professional an opponent is viewed. After viewing the positive video, 72% of respondents found Troy Carter's opponent to be neither professional nor unprofessional, but 55% of the group who watched the negative ad found his opponent to be unprofessional and only 35% believed they were neither professional nor unprofessional.

Positive Republican Advertisement

Participants in this group were shown a positive advertisement by Mike Carey of Ohio. Of the eighteen participants who viewed this video, seven identified as an Independent, six identified as a Democrat, and five as Republican. Viewers of this advertisement were able to identify the tone, as 83% of respondents correctly identified the ad as positive or categorized it as neutral. However, compared to the Democrat advertisements, participants were less unified on how much they learned from the video with 67% finding the video informative, while 33% believed it was not.

Despite a more balanced sample in terms of party identification, the terms used to describe participant's feelings towards the ad were very different compared to the positive Democrat ad. The terms "frustrated", "confused", and "disappointed" all appeared six times as the most used terms. Even though the ad spoke highly of the candidate, the terms "happy", "confident", and "proud" each occurred only three times. I hypothesize one reason for this decrease was due to a loss of support from Republican viewers. One Republican respondent detailed his grievances with the ad, "He did not dive into much actual positions on different

arguments, so you have to assume they are similar to his party." I also believe this decrease in use of positive terms was due to a loss of support from Independent viewers, specifically regarding Carey's support for former President Donald Trump. Several viewers commented on Carey's support for Trump, "To endorse and support Trump and speak of a positive and happy America is contradictory. It felt deceitful and dismissive of so many realities to watch the video. It didn't calm me, it irritated me." Another found the video's focus on Carey's support for Trump took away from the content of the ad, "He just talked about Trump, using buzzwords like 'radical agenda', the only way it would have been effective is if I were illiterate."

Negative Republican Advertisement

Participants in this group were shown a negative advertisement by Mike Carey of Ohio. Of the sixteen participants who viewed this video, nine identified as a Democrat, five identified as an Independent, and only two as a Republican. Viewers of this advertisement were able to identify the tone, as 94% of respondents correctly identified the ad as negative and the remaining 6% categorized it as neutral. Unlike the other three advertisements previously discussed, not a single viewer categorized the video incorrectly. Despite easily identifying the tone of the ad, viewers did not feel they learned much from it, 69% of respondents said the video was either "not very informative" or "not informative at all", while the remaining 31% believed it was "somewhat informative." Several respondents decided to elaborate on this point, "It provided no real information on the candidate besides the fact that he preys on similar demographics as Trump." Others decided to more succinct with their criticism saying things like, "Extremely bias with absolutely no facts," or "It's Democratic party slander."

This desire for more relevant content can be seen in the words participants used to describe how the felt after watching the ad. The words "confused", "frustrated", and "disappointed" all appeared seven times, while "worried", "stressed", and "angry" each appeared

four. Once again, the only terms used with positive connotations: “confident”, “happy”, and “proud”, all only appeared once. Researchers again posit this trend to a loss of Republican support. One Republican viewer explained why they felt frustrated with someone they felt like they should support:

> “Even if I agree with some of the things said in the video, some things could have been said in other ways. That video was almost made to look like a horror film when it’s just politics, they need to relax. Politicians should talk about what they want to improve, not just belittle others.”

Comparison of Variables of Interest

Candidate Likability

With little support by the viewers for the Republican candidate in general, the findings for each of the variables is not only less stark, but less clear as to its significance. Only 39% of those who watched the positive ad believed it made Mike Carey more likable, while 44.4% found the ad made him less likable. Support for Carey fell even further after watching the negative ad, as only 13% of the group believed the candidate was more likeable, while 69% found the ad made him less likable. While the difference in likability between the groups is 26%, the low initial percentage points to bias among participants.

Opponent Likability

A strange result was the difference in the likability between the two groups. As the negative ad was a traditional attack advertisement, most would expect the likability of the candidate being attacked (Allison Russo) to fall. However, while 50% of the positive group found the ad had no impact on the likability of his opponent, 69% of the negative group reported no change in their opinion. Despite the attack advertisement’s focus on hurting the image of Russo, a higher percentage believed the ad had no effect than a group who had never heard her name. Equally interesting was the 39% of the positive group who found her more likable without

her name being mentioned, and the small 13% of the negative group who believed the ad made her less likable. The results of this question indicate the negative ad resulted in intense backlash, with the targeted individual being viewed the same by most viewers, and only 13% being persuaded into negative feelings.

Desire to Donate to Candidate

Of those who watched the positive ad, only 33% were more likely to donate to Mike Carey, while 56% claimed to be less likely to donate after watching the video. These percentages are only worse for Carey in the negative ad viewing group. Only 6% of those who watched the negative ad claimed to be more likely to donate to the candidate after viewing, while 69% claimed they were less likely to donate to Carey after viewing. This drop, similar to the one seen in the Democrat advertisement comparison has serious implications for the use of negative advertisements and campaign donations.

Desire to Donate to Opponent

The backlash effect can once again be seen in respondents desire to donate to candidates being attacked in negative advertisements. While 39% of the positive ad group experienced no change in their desire to donate to Carey's opponent, an equal 39% found themselves more likely to donate to Russo. After viewing the negative ad, 75% of the group found no change in their desire to donate to Russo, but only 6% found the ad made them less likely to donate. The negative ad had not only led 69% of viewers to be less likely to donate to Carey, but it only decreased desire to donate to Russo by 6% in the same group. If these results are more consistent with a larger and more representative sample, running an attack ad could potentially be the equivalent of shooting yourself in the foot.

Professionality of Candidate

The difference in tone between the advertisements is clear when looking at perceptions of

professionality. In the positive group, 67% of viewers believed the ad made Carey look more professional, while only 6% said it made him look unprofessional. Despite many in the positive group believing the ad made him less likable and made them less inclined to donate, participants still found Carey to be professional. Only 6% of the negative group found Carey to be professional, while 88% found the advertisement made him unprofessional. This intense reverse is like the one seen between Democrat advertisements, reinforcing the idea respondents find attack ads extremely unprofessional.

Professionality of Opponent

The difference in professionality of opponent is less stark than the difference between the Democrat ads, but still raise interesting concerns. After watching the positive ad, 67% of viewers found Carey's opponent to be neither professional nor unprofessional, while the remaining 33% found her to be professional. After watching the negative ad attacking Carey's opponent, 50% still found Russo to be neither professional nor unprofessional, with only 19% finding the attacked candidate to be unprofessional. Not only did the negative advertisement have a substantial negative impact on how Carey was viewed, but it did little for him in changing viewers' opinions on his opponent.

Conclusions & Implications

While the results of the survey did not have enough data to make conclusions about the relationship between negative political advertising and voter turnout, it did provide valuable insight regarding how the ads affect viewers and their perceptions of the candidates involved in the election. Using these findings, it becomes easier to see the benefits and costs of using a negative advertisement during a campaign. If the findings of this study are applicable to a wider population, candidates and their campaign strategists need to reconsider whether negative

advertisements are worth the risk and potential backlash effects they may result in.

While the data shows that negative ads are effective at decreasing support for a candidate's opponent the potential drawbacks may outweigh the positives:

1. Decreased perception of candidate likability
2. Decreased perception of candidate professionality
3. Increased experience of negative emotions, including stress and frustration

Along with these potential negatives, there is still the possibility of backlash effect, as the ability for a negative ad to decrease support for an opponent is not a guarantee. As seen in this study with the negative Republican advertisements, the use of negative advertisement may decrease support for the candidate who made it while only making small gains in decreasing support for their opponent. The findings of this study seem to mirror the findings of Ansolabehere and Iyengar in their initial study reviewing the relationship between advertising and turnout, negative advertisements have a substantial impact on viewers perceptions of the political process and political efficacy.

By using negative advertisements, candidates not only decrease support for their opponents, but themselves as well. In doing so, I hypothesize voters are discouraged to participate in elections as they become apathetic towards making decisions between two candidates they view in a negative light. While this study may not be able to make conclusions about how advertisements effect turnout, the findings of this study provide insight into the mechanisms behind changes in behavior, supporting the demobilizing effect established by previous research.

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Appendix
Survey

Negative Political Advertising and Voter Opinion

Start of Block: Welcome!

Q22 Hello! Thank you for participating in this study. With the limitations of doing research on my own as an undergraduate student, your assistance is appreciated. This survey should only take about 4-6 minutes, and including your e-mail at the end enters you into a drawing for a $25 Amazon gift card. By clicking the arrow below, you will be asked to watch a short video and then answer the questions that follow. Thank you again for your assistance!

End of Block: Welcome!

Start of Block: Video (Republican Negative)

Q7 Please use the hyperlink below or copy the URL into a new tab to watch a short video before responding to the remaining questions.

Video Link: https://youtu.be/GhFNAr5Wesg

End of Block: Video (Republican Negative)

Start of Block: Video (Republican Positive)

Q8

Please use the hyperlink below or copy the URL into a new tab to watch a short video before responding to the remaining questions.

Video Link: https://youtu.be/oXgLVJjr9HY

End of Block: Video (Republican Positive)

Start of Block: Video (Democrat Negative)

Q10

Please use the hyperlink below or copy the URL into a new tab to watch a short video before responding to the remaining questions.

Video Link: https://youtu.be/_w9ZweeF7d0

End of Block: Video (Democrat Negative)

Start of Block: Video (Democrat Positive)

Q9

Please use the hyperlink below or copy the URL into a new tab to watch a short video before responding to the remaining questions.

Video Link: https://youtu.be/2bAZtktaccg

End of Block: Video (Democrat Positive)

Start of Block: Video Response

Q11 What are your impressions of this video?

_____

Q12 How informative is this video?

- Very informative (1)
- Somewhat informative (2)
- Not very informative (3)
- Not at all informative (4)

Q13 What is the tone of this video?

- ○ Positive (1)
- ○ Somewhat Positive (2)
- ○ Neutral (3)
- ○ Somewhat Negative (4)
- ○ Negative (5)

Q21 How do you feel after watching this video? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Relieved (1)
- ☐ Happy (2)
- ☐ Confident (3)
- ☐ Proud (10)
- ☐ Frustrated (4)
- ☐ Confused (5)
- ☐ Stressed (6)
- ☐ Dissapointed (7)
- ☐ Worried (8)
- ☐ Angry (9)

Q14 How does this video make you feel about the **candidate it is focused on**?

- Much more likable (1)
- Little bit more likable (2)
- No change (3)
- Little bit less likable (4)
- Much less likable (5)

Q15 How does this video make you feel about **their opponent**?

- Much more likable (1)
- Little bit more likable (2)
- No change (3)
- Little bit less likable (4)
- Much less likable (5)

Q16 How does this video impact your desire to donate to the **candidate it is focused on**?

- Much more likely to donate (1)
- Little bit more likely to donate (2)
- No change (3)
- Little bit less likely to donate (4)
- Much less likely to donate (5)

Q23 How does this video impact your desire to donate to **their opponent**?

- ○ Much more likely to donate (1)
- ○ Little bit more likely to donate (2)
- ○ No change (3)
- ○ Little bit less likely to donate (4)
- ○ Much less likely to donate (5)

Q17 How professional do you consider the **candidate the video is focused on**?

- ○ Extremely professional (1)
- ○ Somewhat professional (2)
- ○ Neither professional nor unprofessional (3)
- ○ Somewhat unprofessional (4)
- ○ Extremely unprofessional (5)

Q18 How professional do you consider **their opponent**?

- ○ Extremely professional (1)
- ○ Somewhat professional (2)
- ○ Neither professional nor unprofessional (3)
- ○ Somewhat unprofessional (4)
- ○ Extremely unprofessional (5)

End of Block: Video Response

Start of Block: Demographics

Q1 What is your age?

- Under 18 (1)
- 18 - 21 (2)
- 22 - 25 (3)
- 26 - 29 (4)
- 30 or over (5)

Q2 Which of the following best describes you?

- Asian or Pacific Islander (1)
- Black or African American (2)
- Hispanic or Latino (3)
- Native American or Alaskan Native (4)
- White or Caucasian (5)
- Multiracial or Biracial (6)
- A race/ethnicity not listed here (7)

Q22 Which of the following best describes your gender identity?

- ○ Male (1)
- ○ Female (2)
- ○ Non-binary/Non-conforming (3)
- ○ Other (Please elaborate below) (5) _____
- ○ Prefer not to say (6)

Q4 Are you registered to vote?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)
- ○ Unsure (3)

Q5 Did you vote in the 2020 presidential election?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)
- ○ Ineligible to vote (3)

Q6 In 2022, the next Midterm election will be held. How likely are you to vote?

- ○ Extremely unlikely (1)
- ○ Somewhat unlikely (2)
- ○ Unsure (3)
- ○ Somewhat likely (4)
- ○ Extremely likely (5)

Q7 Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else?

- ○ Republican (1)
- ○ Democrat (2)
- ○ Independent (3)
- ○ Something else (4)

Q20 Please enter your e-mail address below. This information will be kept confidential and will only be used to communicate with the winner of the Amazon gift card.

_____

End of Block: Demographics
