

POLITICAL ADVERTISING & INFORMATION

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Analysts, journalists, and scholars often view campaign strategy as a battle over the so-called center or middle of the electorate's ideological leanings. That is, successful candidates must adopt centrist positions within the distribution of public sentiment so as to maximize their share of the vote. This logic is used constantly by political observers as they dissect the moves of candidates during campaigns. Anthony Downs (1957) formalized this argument in *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. It has been over 50 years since Downs published this book, but it remains influential. As Stanley Kelley wrote in the forward to Downs's book, we are all struck by the clarity and simplicity of the argument: "Just as firms that stop seeking profits will soon cease to be firms, politicians who stop seeking votes will cease to be politicians." This powerful framework spawned an entire research tradition in electoral politics (e.g. Shepsle 1972; Enelow and Hinich 1980, 1984; Calvert 1985; Wittman 1983; Bartels 1986; Alvarez 1997; Franklin 1984), which has yielded significant insights about the behavior of voters and candidates in campaigns.

The basic spatial model posits, in effect, that Candidate A adopts a position it believes maximizes its vote share (given the distribution of voters in the electorate) and Candidate B does the same. Voters, then, evaluate these two candidates and choose the candidate closest to their own view. There are many assumptions underlying this model. Those assumptions have drawn comment and attention over the years (e.g. Stokes 1963). We want to address an assumption that has not received much attention. Namely, that spatial models have tended to ignore the role of attack politics.¹ Downs, in other words, assumes a positive campaign. In the initial setup, candidates only make self-promotional appeals – either stating what their views are on the issue or relying on their party reputation to define their position. The voters, then, make decisions based on those messages.

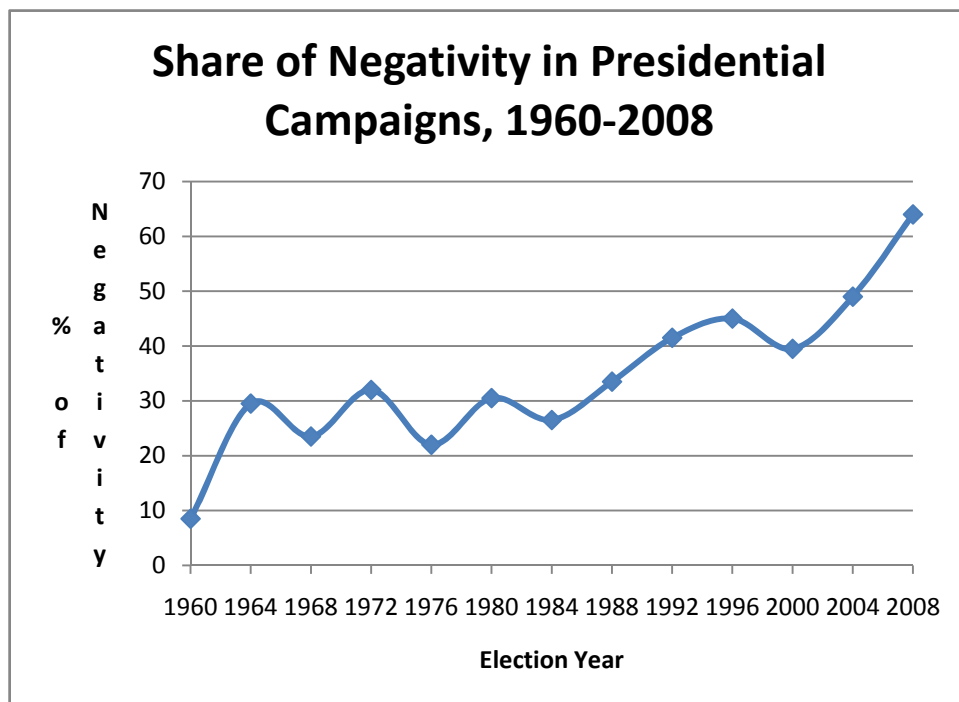
Campaigns, however, involve both negative and positive messages. Candidates often try to define their opponents as far away from the median voter (i.e. extreme) while they define themselves as near the median voter (i.e. centrist). This behavior – the attempt by candidates to define the opposition as out of touch with the mainstream – is

¹ There have been a handful of attempts to do so, see Mattes (2007) for a review of these efforts.

part and parcel of our electoral process (Geer 2006; Jamieson 1992; Mark 2006). So, if our models of party competition are to continue to provide useful empirical and theoretical insights, negativity must be part of them.

This need to incorporate negativity in our models of party competition is particularly important in light of what is now unfolding in presidential elections. Figure 1 charts the steep increase in attacks over the last twenty years. From 1964 to 1984, negativity comprised about a quarter of the appeals presidential candidates made in their television advertisements. Starting in 1988, the rate begins to climb to where in 2008 about two-thirds of appeals by presidential nominees were negative. And this proportion for 2008 may well under-estimate the frequency of attack. The Wisconsin Advertising Project issued a press release in October 2008, claiming that nearly *all* of the ads aired by McCain were negative.² However one wants to slice it, it seems clear that negativity is a central part of politics. And with the parties continuing to polarize, there should be even more grist for the attack mill in the coming years (Geer 2006). And for those who have any doubt about the importance of negativity, it might be worth reading some of Rush Limbaugh's recent comments about President Obama and the Democrats.

Figure 1



² http://wiscadproject.wisc.edu/wiscads_release_100808.pdf

It is against this background, we argue that by including negativity we will not only enrich our understanding about how candidates behave in campaigns, but we will develop better insights into how voters behave. Our goal here is not, however, to build a formal model that includes negative campaigning. Instead, we relax the assumption of a positive only campaign, allowing candidates to attack the other side within a very simple spatial model. These suggestions represent little more than an initial effort to think about the implications of negativity for the behavior of voters and candidates. We start by developing some hypotheses that arise from adding negativity to our models and then we test them using new experimental data collected via Polimetrix. The results underscore the pay off for giving negativity a more central role in our models.

Negativity and Party Competition

In this section, we sketch out a series of ideas where negativity is critical to understanding candidates and campaigns. Consider the following: Suppose Candidate A is a little left of center, while Candidate B is at the median. B has an edge, which suggests A will counter in *some way* (if A wants to win the election). One option is to shift positions so as to match B and split the votes. But changing positions is costly. Consider the backlash against Mitt Romney during the 2008 nominating process because of his frequent position changes on salient social issues over the years. Another option is that A (who is left of center) can attack B (who sits right at the median), claiming that B is really much more extreme on the issue than voters realize. This effort seeks to push *perceptions* of B's position off the median. More importantly, even if A does not succeed in convincing voters that B's position really is more extreme than they think, the *uncertainty* that A may instill in voters as they think about B's position has important implications for vote choice. As Enelow and Hinich (1984) described in theory and Bartels (1986), Alvarez (1997), and Vavreck (2008) have shown empirically, when voters have uncertainty about candidates' positions they are less likely to evaluate that candidate favorably (than if they had no uncertainty about the candidate's position). In other words, in most spatial voting frameworks, uncertainty about candidates' positions is a drain on

voters' utility for that candidate.³ So it is easy to envision an important role for attacks in basic models of party competition.

By explicitly considering the role of negativity, we gain substantial theoretical leverage on three key matters. First, the classic spatial account of party competition assumes that candidates take positions to win elections, yet scholars pay very little attention to the potential divide between the positions candidates *take* during campaigns (to win elections) and the positions they *actually* hold. The assumption is typically that when Candidate A adopts a position in a campaign, it is the *actual position* of A. But is it? Candidates have an incentive frame their positions in the most positive manner – the most centrist manner. That is, A wants to benefit from taking the median position, but in so doing may have to duck various aspects of a past record (or a party reputation) that suggest a different position. There, of course, is plenty of discussion about how campaign attacks can be misleading; and, while true, not enough attention is paid to candidates' incentives to mislead on the promotional side as well.

Our second hypothesis is that voters use both the claims of A and of B when identifying the candidates' positions on issues. We could describe the resultant candidate position as perceived by voters as a sort of “weighted average” (although we do not mean this literally) of the positions each candidate attributes to the other. This means negativity has an essential informative function that helps voters make judgments that advance the likelihood of getting the benefits they desire from government. This adjusted way of thinking about what drives the public's perception of the candidates on issues recasts our thinking about what has been called “misperception.” It may be that when the public sees A as more extreme than the A claims to be, it is *not* misperception. But, instead, it is an accurate assessment of that position reflecting the information from both A and B about A.

³ For this to hold, voters must have concave utility functions. Following Enelow and Hinich (1984), most scholars assume voters' utilities are described by a quadratic loss function. This assumption implies that voters are risk-averse, that they prefer what they know to what they do not know, thus, in this setup of the model, uncertainty results in drains on utility. A few scholars have experimented with other loss functions (Shepsle 1972), but not many. Shepsle argued that voters might be risk averse near the median but risk accepting in the tails (the function is concave generally, but convex in the tails). Even in this setup, uncertainty about candidates' positions near the midpoint would result in losses in utility.

Our third hypothesis continues on this general theme of voters' efforts to evaluate candidates' views on issues. We have just posited the idea that voters' perceived placements of candidates are the product of a weighted average of positive and negative issue position statements made by both candidates during the campaign. But it seems also worth considering a potential asymmetry between attacks and positive statements by candidates. If A claims to support withdrawing troops from Iraq, few inferences can be made about B's view on that issue. However, if A attacks B for not supporting a troop pull back in Iraq, it does suggest that A supports such a move. Otherwise, why would A go on the attack? That means attacks may not only define the opposition, but the candidate who aired the attack as well. This informational advantage of attacks has not drawn attention in previous work and seems to add another wrinkle into the ongoing discussion about the merits of negativity in American elections (e.g. Geer 2006; West 2006; Buell and Sigelman 2008).

These simple, and in our view non-trivial, observations have important implications for understanding the competition between candidates and voters' response to that struggle. To summarize, we have three contributions to make in this paper:

- (1) To understand the positions candidates have on an issue, we need to consider not only what contenders say about themselves but what the opposition says as well.
- (2) To assess the accuracy of the public's perceptions of the candidates' views on issues, we must assess what both sides say during the campaign.
- (3) Attacks not only help define the subject of the attack, but the attacker, too. Promotional claims lack this dynamic.

The Design of Our Experiment

To test these ideas we conducted a randomized experiment of 3,989 people in which we manipulated negative and positive radio advertisements of candidates in a controlled setting. The experiment employs a representative sample of registered voters

through the internet.⁴ We conducted a pilot test during the 2006 campaign period and the actual experiment during the 2007 statewide election campaign period.

Our experiment was embedded in a survey about the media and contemporary issues. About half way through a 10-minute on-line survey, respondents were shown a radio player on the screen and told to push the play button. Text on the screen informed them that they were about to hear an advertisement (or set of ads) being aired in a local campaign. Respondents can only play the ads once and after they play them, a pop-up window asks them to confirm that the ad(s) played and they were able to hear them.⁵ We assigned respondents to one of five conditions. To be clear, every respondent heard some kind of radio ad. There is no group of people who heard nothing. The randomized groups heard different sets of ads for two candidates, Rob Smith and Joe Brown, each running for Congress. Although the candidates' names are not real, the advertisements are real scripts of ads aired during the 2006 Congressional elections.

To conduct this trial, we recorded six radio advertisements and randomly assigned respondents to one of five conditions.⁶ There are three scripts in total and we recorded each ad with a male voice and then with a female voice in order to test for gender effects. We wondered if a female voice might make a difference in the perceptions of attacks, but that was not borne out by the data. This is an interesting non-finding, but one that we do not discuss in depth here. The use of difference voices does, however, increase the generalizability of the findings.

The five treatment conditions included single exposures to either a positive ad or one of two attack ads, and then two conditions in which respondents saw two ads – the positive ad and one of the attack spots. Each condition contains roughly 800 respondents. The size of these groups gives us tremendous power to detect even small effects from the advertising.

The candidate we are interested in is Rob Smith. The first ad we produced is a promotional ad for Smith. One-fifth of the respondents heard only this ad. The ad is typical of most promotional ads in state-wide races. It introduces the candidate and

⁴ This work was conducted by Polimetrix, Inc. of Palo Alto, CA. Polimetrix invited 5,000 of their PollingPoint Panelists to take our survey, which contained the experiment we describe above.

⁵ We experienced no problems with audio streaming among respondents in our treatment groups.

⁶ Samples of the radio ads can be heard at www.lynnvavreck.com.

describes some valence issues and the positions the candidate holds on largely uncontroversial topics. The script for this ad appears below. The ad uses a single voice, either the candidate's brother, David, or his wife, Susan. We used a former equity actor as "David" and he coached the other participants as we recorded the scripts.⁷ The positive Smith ad introduces the Congressman and has a pleasing piano track running in the background. It was based on a positive ad aired by Congressman Rob Simmons who's wife Heidi made a similar ad in 2006 when he ran in Connecticut's Second District.⁸

Positive Smith Ad "Susan"

David/Susan Smith: I'm a father/mother, a public school teacher, and an independent voter, and I support Rob Smith for Congress because he fought to lower taxes for hard working Americans 33 times since he's been in Washington. He supports our troops in Iraq and wants the best possible resolution for our troops and for our country. Rob supports federal funding for Medicare prescription drug coverage and Rob is committed to reducing our dependence on foreign oil. How do I know his record so well? I talk to him everyday, I'm his brother/wife, David/Susan. Rob Smith is a problem solver and a moderate voice in government.

Rob Smith: I'm Congressman Rob Smith and I approve this message.

Using this promotional Smith ad, we created two attack ads by Smith's opponent, Joe Brown. One of the ads attacked Smith for being "too liberal" on the issues. The other took exactly the opposite position – and attacked Smith for being "too conservative". The attack on Smith's liberal stands was based on an RNC ad aired in the Ohio Senate race on Sept. 18, 2006, called "Come On." The ad appears below.

Brown's Attack on Smith (too liberal)

Voice 1: Rob Smith claims to have cut taxes for the middle class 33 times.

Voice 2: Rob Smith a tax-cutter? Come on. Rob Smith has voted for higher taxes over 35 times, according to *Congressional Quarterly*. He voted twice to raise gas taxes, letting down hard working families. He let us all down when he voted to

⁷ We thank Bret Nighman, who appeared in *Quincy, M.E.* and Michael Chwe, Ryan Enos, and Jeff Lewis for recording various parts of the advertisements.

⁸ This ad is calledm, "Heidi" and was aired on Sept. 15, 2006.

raise taxes on Medicare. And then he let down our men and women in Iraq when he voted against supplemental funding for our troops. Tax after tax there's a record: Rob Smith is too liberal. What a let down.

Joe Brown: I'm Joe Brown, and I approve of this message.

The attack on Smith as "too conservative" was based on Joe Courtney's ad for the House race in Connecticut's 2nd District. The ad was called "Number 1" and aired on September 15, 2006. This ad appears below:

Brown Attack on Smith (too conservative)

Voice 1: Until I checked, I didn't know Rob Smith voted with George Bush more than any local Congressman. He even sided with Bush on lowering taxes for the wealthiest families in America, while the rest of us struggled to make ends meet. He voted for George Bush's big oil energy policies 6 times. Smith was the deciding vote to pass Bush's confusing prescription drug plan. And he refuses to hold Bush accountable for his disastrous policies in Iraq.

Joe Brown: Well I'm Joe Brown, and I approve of this message, because ...

Voice 1: ... because Rob Smith is out of touch ... and too extreme.

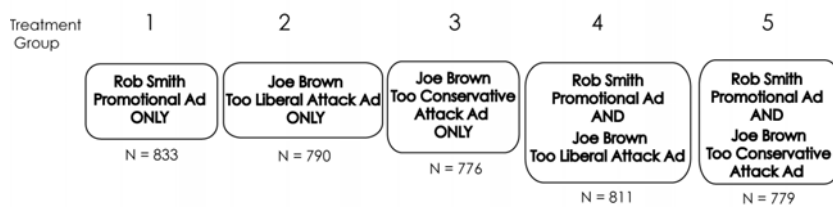
Joe Brown: ... And now you know.

We changed very little about the general framework of the attack ads, but did change the issues mentioned in Smith's promotional ad to coincide with those mentioned in the attack ads. We wanted to have a realistic manipulation, but also one that gave us control over the relevant variables. The issues we are trying to measure are basic ideological leaning, support for Bush's policies in Iraq, support for Medicare's prescription drug plan, support for energy independence, and support for lowering taxes. Each ad covers the same issues so we can assess how the information and tone in the ad affects people's decision making about both candidates.

A fifth of the sample was assigned to each attack condition only. So some respondents heard only Brown's attack on Smith for being too liberal, while others heard only the opposite (he is too conservative) attack. Finally, we coupled the attack ads (separately) with the promotional ad. Another fifth of the sample heard the Smith

promotional ad and Browns’ attack saying Smith was too liberal. The final fifth heard the Smith positive ad and Browns’ other (he is too conservative) attack. Figure 2 presents the experimental design.

Figure 2: The Design of Experiment

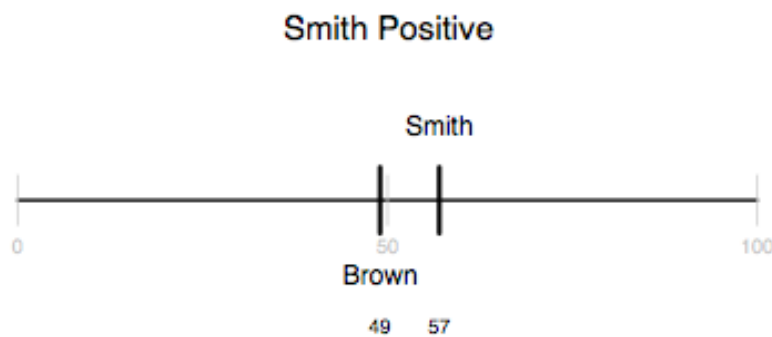


Results

In order to test the effect of the advertisements we asked respondents to place candidates, themselves, and some notable political elites on a liberal-conservative dimension ranging from 0 to 100. As evidence of construct validity, respondents placed themselves, on average, at 53.8. They placed John McCain at 62.5 and Hillary Clinton at 29.3. In what follows, we shall examine what happens to ideological placement when the respondents hear different radio advertisements about Smith.

SMITH POSITIVE AD ONLY: Respondents who only heard the Smith promotional ad placed Smith at 57 and Brown at 49. It is worth noting here that these respondents have not yet heard the name Joe Brown, they know nothing about him. Thus, this (49) is Brown’s placement before any information about him is revealed. It seems that our respondents assume unknown candidates are moderate. Further, most people (84%) refused even to rate Brown, which makes sense since they had not heard of him prior to

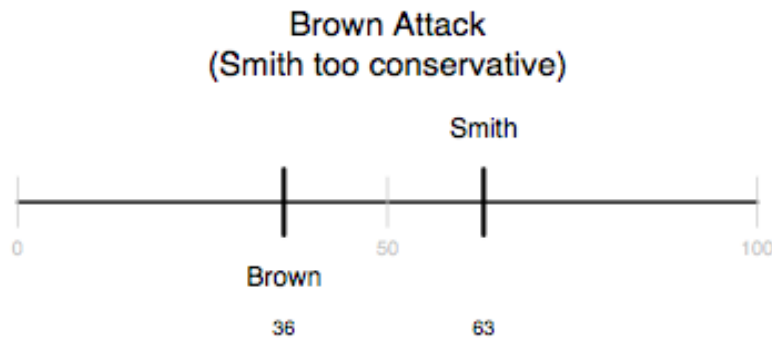
the survey. In contrast, nearly 60% of respondents did place Smith on the scale—more than three times as many people that rated Brown in this condition. That Smith scored a 57, on average, suggests that the ad as painted him as a slight conservative. It is not entirely clear how that is the case, since the ads says Smith favors federal funding for prescription drugs. But perhaps the call for lower taxes and support our troops in Iraq had that effect. The figure below displays these placements. Even this small difference between the candidates is statistically significant at the .001 level.⁹



BROWN’S “TOO CONSERVATIVE” ATTACK ON SMITH ONLY: Respondents who only heard Brown’s attack on Smith that accused Smith of being too conservative changed their placements of *both* candidates. These respondents placed Smith at 63, about 6 points more conservative than those who only heard the positive Smith ad. More importantly, however, hearing Brown’s attack on Smith also moved people’s placements of Brown – to the left. Respondents in this group placed Brown at 36. The near 30-point difference (compared to a difference of about 8 points above) between the candidates’ placements is also significant. In spatial terms, differences are important to helping voters make choices among candidates. Brown’s attack ad made people think Smith was more conservative than people who heard only Smith’s positive ad thought he was. The attack moved Smith to the right. More interestingly, perhaps, the attack defines Brown as

⁹ All subsequent results are statistically significant at this level unless otherwise noted.

a liberal – only slightly to the right of Hillary Clinton. Bear in mind, Brown has said *nothing* about his own positions on issues at any time. These placements are represented in the Figure below.

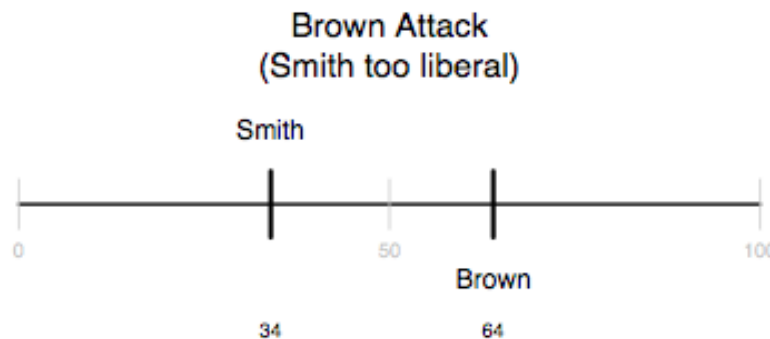


It is also important to note that there were no differences in the willingness of respondents to rate Smith in either the “positive” or “attack” condition. As mentioned above, 59% of those who heard the positive ad placed Smith on the ideological scale. In the “negative” only condition, 60% placed Smith. At least in this case, the negative and positive ad produced the same amount of *uncertainty*.¹⁰ Slightly fewer placed Brown on the scale, but still 53% did so just based on his attack on Smith. That is more than a three-fold jump from the share that was willing to place Brown in the positive only condition. These data strongly support our hypothesis that attack ads help to define the opposition in the minds of voters and do so far more effectively than positive ad.

BROWN’S “TOO LIBERAL” ATTACK ON SMITH ONLY: Nearly a mirror opposite of the effects from the “too conservative” attack, people who heard only the “too liberal” attack by Brown on Smith placed Smith at 34 and Brown at 64. The positions of the candidates nearly flipped exactly between these two conditions. When compared to the people who heard only Smith’s promotional ad, however, this “too liberal” attack ad moved people much more than the “too conservative” attack ad moved them.

¹⁰ Uncertainty is a term that has been defined in a number of ways. Here we have a limited definition in mind, since we are only interested in the share willing to estimate Smith’s position.

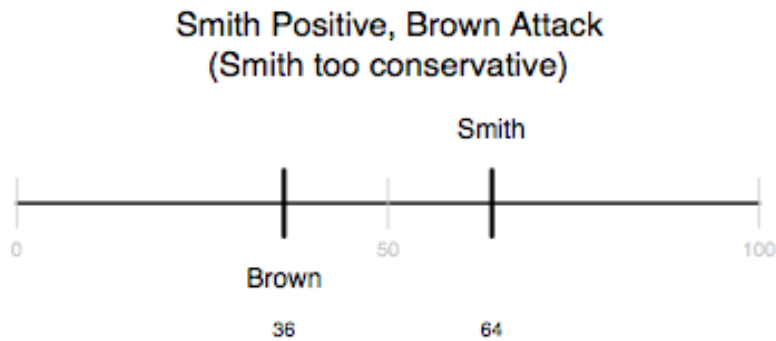
Respondents in this treatment group placed Smith 23 points to the left of those people who heard only Smith’s positive ad. The attack from the right really defined Smith. The attack, however, also defined Brown, as it did above. Respondents in this condition rated Brown more conservative than John McCain after hearing this attack on Smith. Again, it is important to remember that Brown has said nothing about himself in this ad (see the figure below).



The share that was willing to venture a guess did decline in the “too liberal” condition from the “too conservative” condition. Here 53% of respondents rated Smith on the liberal-conservative scale—a drop of 6 percentage points from the “too conservative” group. The proportion that placed Brown increased three times from the share that placed him in the positive only condition. These data further confirm the findings in the previous condition.

SMITH POSITIVE AND BROWN “TOO CONSERVATIVE” ATTACK: What happens to the effects of the attacks when we couple them with a counter message from Smith? Respondents who saw both the Smith positive ad and Brown’s attack on him for being “too conservative” were unmoved by hearing Smith talk about himself. The order of the ads was randomized, so some people heard the attack first; others heard the positive ad first. So, this finding cannot be attributed to order effects. These respondents placed Smith at 64.1, essentially the same place they put him when they heard only the attack from Brown. Smith’s positive message did not neutralize this attack. As expected, hearing Smith’s positive ad did nothing to people’s ratings of Brown. The figure below

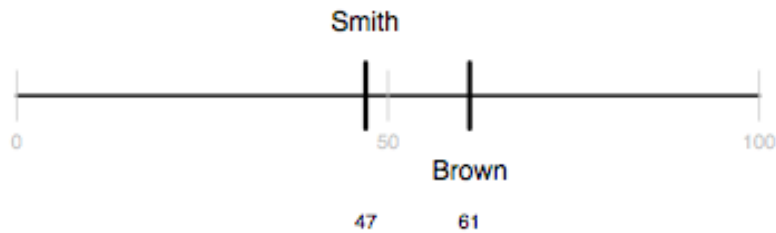
presents these results.



Hearing the two ads does increase the number of people who are willing to place Smith and Brown. About 2/3rds of respondents were willing to place Smith on the scale—a jump of 8 percentage points from the positive only condition and a jump of 7 percentage from the “too conservative” condition. So while the positive ad did not alter the average placement, it did give respondents more confidence in making a judgment about Smith’s ideological views.

SMITH POSITIVE AND BROWN “TOO LIBERAL” ATTACK: The effects of seeing the Smith positive ad in addition to the Brown too liberal attack ad are quite different than in the previous group. Respondents in this group were affected by Smith’s self-promotion and changed their rating by moving Smith 13 points to the right – placing him close to the median at 47. This result is more in line with our expectations about voters weighing both types of information they get from both candidates before making a judgment about a candidate’s placement. To recap – voters who heard only the Smith positive ad placed him at 57. Those who heard only Brown’s “too liberal” attack ad placed Smith at 34; and those who heard **both** placed Smith at 47. This isn’t literally the average of the two solo ad placements, but it is close.

Smith Positive, Brown Attack (Smith too liberal)



The share willing to place Smith after hearing both of these ads was not much different than when respondents heard only the positive ad. For the positive/“too liberal” condition, 58% placed Smith. That is nearly identical to the 59% who were willing to place him after hearing just the positive ad.

Why would the mechanism be different in the conservative attack with positive ad group compared to the liberal attack with positive ad group? Another way to look at this is that people who heard only Smith’s positive ad placed him at 57 – and those who heard only the attack placed him at 63, only a difference of 6 points. While statistically significant, this difference may not be as substantively important as the move to the left after hearing Smith attacked for being “too liberal.” This move, 23 points, is four times as big as the movement from the “too conservative” group. A possible interpretation of this is that people thought Smith was a little on the conservative side after hearing his positive ad, after all, it does talk about bringing our troops home from Iraq “safely”, thus the 57 placement is slightly to the right of center. This coupled with a few points of extra movement to the left from the liberal attack only condition could produce the results above as an artifact. Consider that both attack conditions place Smith about 30 points from the end-points.

The biggest moves come from hearing only the too liberal attack, which moves placement of Smith by 23 points to the left and placement of Brown by 15.4 points to the right compared to a positive only baseline. Note this is the biggest move in BOTH directions. So, calling your opponent TOO LIBERAL marks them as a liberal, but it defines the attacker as more conservative, too. It may be the terms liberal and

conservative play differently with voters and we should not assume symmetrical effects.

We turn now to a brief discussion of how these ideological placements change relative to voters' placement of themselves. In typical spatial terms, how close do respondents place these candidates to themselves on the ideological dimension? As a baseline, we note that respondents who heard only the positive Smith ad placed him very close to themselves – only 2.8 points to the right, on average. If respondents heard the attack on Smith's being too conservative only, they placed Smith farther to the right relative to their ideal points – by about 10 points. Respondents who heard only the “too liberal” attack, however, placed Smith roughly twice as far to the left of themselves – about 20 points. Again, as above, when the positive ad and the “too liberal” attack are heard in concert, moderation ensues. Smith is then only about 6 points to the left of respondents, on average. Both Smith and Brown are moved farther away from respondents' ideological self-placement when they hear the liberal attack ad alone or in combination with the positive Smith ad. The too liberal ad works in a way that the too conservative attack does not – again, we suspect this is because the Smith positive ad may cue people into placing Smith slightly to the right already.

Implications and Discussion

There is a lot of concern about the ill-effects of attack politics on elections, especially since it appears to be on the rise since 1960 (e.g. West 2006). Some worry that it debases the political process and leads to manipulation of voters. There are lots of reasons to believe that these claims are overstated and that negativity has real pay offs for the political process (Geer 2006; Franz et al 2008). It even appears that this distaste for negativity has spilled over into our attempts to model how candidates compete with each other. The spill-over has not yielded criticism of negativity, but rather just a tendency to ignore it.

In this paper we show there are a number of interesting empirical and theoretical payoffs from including attacks in our models of campaigns. Consider that now we should start to think about candidate's positions on issues to be some weighted average of what contenders say and the opposition says. This gives a central role to the real battle

that unfolds between candidates. It also recasts our judgments about whether voters can accurately gauge candidates' positions on issues. Page (1976) showed that the public misperceived McGovern as more liberal than he was. That finding casts doubts on the public's ability to vote effectively in elections, since they do not even appear to understand the candidates' views on issues. But our story suggests a different interpretation. That is, perhaps Nixon's efforts to paint McGovern as an extremist led the public to judge McGovern as less moderate than he claimed. Hence, the public's judgment about McGovern being liberal reflected the full array of information they came across. If so, then perhaps the concerns about the inability of the public to learn the candidates' views on issues should be recast. Candidates have just as much incentive to misrepresent their positions, as they do have to misrepresent the oppositions—an observation that has drawn little attention from scholars. Perhaps the public understands this fact and judges candidates somewhere in between.

This conclusion is important. But we need to gather more data, because, while the attack ads were important in defining how the public judged Smith, the effect was not consistent. In one condition with both a positive and negative, the former moderated the public's perception of the candidate. In the other condition, the positive ad did not alter the respondents' judgments about Smith. This finding gives negativity a huge role in defining the public's perception of a candidate's view, turning in some sense the assumption of Page and others on its head. These different findings could, however, be due to the quirks in the manipulations or it could be just luck. So by collecting more data, we can learn if positive ads do have a moderation effect or if they just do not hold up well against negative ads. It would be an important to know if positive ads just do not carry much weight with the public.

Further, we have shown that the public learns more from attacks than previously assume. Specifically, voters make inferences about the attackers from the negative ads. In other words, attacking an opponent is an implicit way of offering your own position on the issue and voters appear to realize it. This finding points to potential informational payoffs of negativity that have largely gone unnoticed by most scholars and observers. These results also hint that negativity may be important in forging accountability. Not only do voters learn about the problems associated with the targets of attacks, but they

develop expectations about the attackers. So, if candidate wins office by only criticizing the opposition on some pressing issue, the public may form expectations about that candidate. And if the candidate does not meet them, it may be easier for the opposition at the next election to point this problem out.

The final implication involves conceptualizing a candidate's positions on issues. The assumption has been that what the candidate says about the issue constitutes their position. But is it? Candidates have an incentive to exaggerate and to align themselves as close as possible to the median voter. Further, do we really know any candidate's "true" position? Political life, as Max Weber reminded us, is filled with moral ambiguity.¹¹ When Obama adopts a position on an issue does he do it because he believes that or because it is politically expedient? We cannot be sure and his distracters will certainly have a different answer than his supporters. It is risky just to accept the candidates' own statements, nor should we trust the opposition to define them. We talked earlier about a "weighted average" being a reasonable way to think about it. But that notion really fudges the issue. Why even assume a candidate's position is fixed? The campaign may shape the position as candidates refine their views during the weeks and month prior to the election. Such refinement may reflect shifts in polls or that the candidate's thinking has changed as contenders' ideas clash. The bottom line is that we need to be careful when deciding a candidate's position on an issue.

With a political system that is more and more prone to attack, we need to forge better empirical and theoretical understandings of negative. This paper offers some insights on this front. We also need to develop a greater appreciation of the normative implications of attack politics. Negativity plays an important role in advancing democratic politics. It is, for example, the out-party's responsibility to question, probe, and criticize those in power. Rush Limbaugh does not strike us as a very sympathetic figure at this point. But he is putting pressure on the Obama administration and drawing the lines of battle. We all too often lose sight of these simple facts. It may be more pleasant to have "positive" campaigns, but it is not necessarily better for the public or for the political system.

¹¹ See "Politics as a Vocation," by Max Weber, Kelley (1998)

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