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Negativity, Information, and Candidate Position-Taking

JOHN G. GEER and LYNN VAVRECK

The purpose of this paper is to advance our understanding of how negativity affects voters' assessments of the positions candidates take on issues. We argue that the inferences people make about candidates' positions on issues differ depending on whether the information they encounter comes from attack or self-promotional statements. Specifically, we posit that attacks offer two pieces of information to voters—insight into the positions of the target and the sponsor—whereas, positive information only affects perceptions of the sponsor. Further, we contend that attacks offer important correctives to candidates' often misleading self-promotional claims. By drawing attention to the differences between the informational content of negative and positive appeals, we offer new insights into the inferences voters make about candidates' positions on issues. We support these claims using data from an internet-based experiment employing a nationally representative sample of nearly 4,000 people. The paper concludes by teasing out a series of implications that arise from these insights.

Keywords advertising, elections

During the 1972 presidential campaign, voters perceived George McGovern as much more liberal than the statements he made during the campaign (Page, 1978, p. 55). With this finding in hand, Page (1978) concluded that citizens misjudged McGovern's policy views. During a time when political scientists mainly believed voters were uninterested in politics and uninformed about policy (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Converse, 1964), this result made sense. Yet that conclusion about the public's inability to detect a candidate's views on issues may be both hasty and incorrect, since it missed an important part of that, and any, presidential campaign.

Specifically, this conclusion failed to consider what Nixon was saying about McGovern. Nixon, no surprise, painted McGovern as an out of touch liberal. In one attack ad, Nixon claimed that McGovern favored cutting the Marines and Air Force by one-third and sought to eliminate 50% of the Navy fleet.¹ McGovern did favor scaling back the military, but Nixon was overstating McGovern's opposition to national defense. Observers have criticized such exaggerations by Nixon (e.g., Jamieson, 1992), but what about McGovern's exaggerations about his own record? McGovern was describing himself as more moderate

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on defense policy than his record would warrant. Should he not be held equally accountable for his overstatements? In a sense, Nixon was helping forge (some) accountability by questioning McGovern's commitment to national defense.

In short, promotional advertisements can mislead just as easily as attack advertisements. That means voters, as they learned about claims from both sides, secured valuable insight into McGovern's positions. In fact, the public perception that the South Dakota senator was more liberal than his campaign statements indicated may *not* be a demonstration of the inability of citizens to attend to political discourse, but *precisely the opposite*: the result of people's attention to the *total* information environment reflecting two streams of information, one from each side. That is, McGovern was neither the moderate he claimed to be nor the left-wing extremist Nixon wanted voters to believe.

The McGovern story leads us to ask some new questions about the workings of attack politics. For example, how do voters react to competing streams of information that place a candidate at different positions on an issue? Do they consider both pieces of information? What effect, if any, do negative claims about candidates' policy preferences have on voters' placements of the candidates? By considering that attacks may contain useful information, we advance a different explanation for the public's assessment of candidates' positions on policy—one that offers a less pessimistic view of citizens' capabilities. In addition, we demonstrate how attack politics, in general, can play an important, and previously underappreciated, role in informing the electorate during campaigns. We bring two important literatures together to make this argument. The first is a long-standing literature on perceived placements of candidates' positions; the second is a new, but growing, literature on the role of attack advertising. We investigate our claims using a survey experiment on a nationally representative sample of 4,000 people. The findings confirm that attacks play an important role in shaping perceptions of competing candidates in ways that call for rethinking many of our standard assumptions about negativity, information, citizen competence, and candidate position-taking.

Negativity and Perceived Placements of Candidates

Negativity is a part and parcel of competitive elections. Candidates, in their quest for votes, offer only the most optimistic account of their own record, requiring the opposition to "set the record straight." Further, the party out of power has to provide reasons for why those in power need to be replaced. Those reasons (along with attempts to "set the record straight") usually come in the form of attacks. Those in power need also to raise doubts about the opposition. This back and forth is a defining feature of elections. With this as motivation, scholars have accumulated a good deal of information about negativity, especially over the last two decades. We know, for example, negativity is more common in campaigns today than 30 years ago (Geer, 2012; West, 2013), and scholars have debated whether attacks lessen turnout in elections or pique interest (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Brooks, 2006; Clinton & Lapinski, 2004; Finkel & Geer, 1998; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Lau & Pomper, 2004). In addition, scholars have also collected some compelling data about how attacks can influence public opinion (e.g., Brader, 2006; Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, & Ridout, 2007; Franz & Ridout, 2007; Kahn & Kenney, 2004).

Alongside these empirical undertakings, observers have offered normative assessments about the merits of negativity; with many believing it undermines the workings of our electoral system (Buchanan, 2004; Jamieson, 1992; Kamber, 1997; Mark, 2007). But there are also notable defenders of negativity (e.g., Franz et al., 2007; Geer, 2006; Lau & Pomper, 2004; Mayer, 1996), making for a robust debate.

Surprisingly, there have been few efforts to develop theoretically the role of attacks in campaigns. Spatial theories of voting, for instance, tend to ignore the source or tone of information, because of the informational assumptions embedded in the models. Consider that Downs's (1957) theory of party competition offers no explicit role for attacks, even when uncertainty over perceived party positions is allowed to enter the argument. A lot, of course, has been written on spatial models since Downs. Polborn and Yi (2006) and Mattes (2008) have most recently extended the spatial model to offer a few theoretical insights into negative campaigning, but in so doing they expose the paucity of work in this vein, relying on just two previous papers by Skaperdas and Grofman (1995) and Harrington and Hess (1996). In fact, Harrington and Hess (1996, p. 210) start their essay by noting that "competition, whether in economic or political markets, has traditionally been modeled in a positive manner." That observation continues to be true for the most part, the notable efforts of Polborn and Yi (2006) and Mattes (2008) notwithstanding.

Given the increasing frequency of attacks in campaigns, the lack of theoretical work discussing the role of negativity in elections has potential costs, as we saw with the potentially hasty judgment of Page concerning the inability of voters to figure out where candidates stand on issues.

Perceptions of Candidates' Positions on Issues

How do voters develop perceptions of candidates' positions on issues? In Downs's (1957) initial approach, voters know where candidates stand on issues with certainty. Downs's "perfect information" assumption renders questions about how voters learn about candidates' positions irrelevant. Of course, this assumption is a simplifying one, and in practice, there is a lot to be learned about how voters form perceptions of candidates' positions. Recognizing this, Enelow and Hinich (1984) provide a much-needed extension of Downs, relaxing the assumption of perfect information and allowing voters to be uncertain about candidates' actual positions. This extension gives rise to the theoretical possibility that the information candidates deliver during campaigns might affect voters' assessments of candidates' positions.

Moving from theory to measurement, though, scholars working on elections mainly rely on the immediate information conveyed through the candidate's own campaign rhetoric when they assess how well voters know where candidates stand—ignoring information from opponents' attacks (Alvarez, 1997; Fishel, 1985; Page, 1978; Pomper, 1980; Sides, 2006; Tomz & Van Houweling, 2008; Vavreck, 2009). Most recently, Tomz and Van Houweling (2008) provide a thoughtful and exhaustive examination of "candidate positioning," making use of 50 previous studies that address the relationship between candidates' views on issues and the public's reaction to them. Yet in no instance is negativity part of that past research on candidate position-taking. The ingrained assumption is that candidates' positions are simply what they say they are in campaigns—an assumption that holds for the theoretical literature as well (Harrington & Hess, 1996).

Downs's model and its extensions rest on a foundation of voters' *perceived* placements of candidates' positions, yet no one has explicitly extended the theory or measurement to incorporate the total information environment, including candidate-driven promotional messages *and* attacks. We argue that by attacking the opposition over claimed positions, negative information should be important to voters' perceptions of candidates' positions and may become especially valuable as candidates seek to *appear* more moderate in pursuit of victory than their past record would actually suggest. In other words, we expect that voters update their beliefs about candidates' positions after being exposed to *any* kind of

campaign messaging, not just promotional messages. We further argue, in keeping with the assumptions of the spatial model, that the increase in total information provided by attacks may reduce voters' uncertainty about where candidates stand on issues.

The recognition that negativity plays an important role, theoretically and empirically, in how voters perceive candidates on issues leads us to a series of new observations about campaigns and the role of negativity. First, it provides an explanation for the frequent incongruence between where candidates place themselves on issues and where the public perceives the candidates. The basic idea is that there may not be much incongruence, and perhaps even congruence, once we factor in attacks. In other words, attacks move voters' placements of candidates on important issues away from where the target of the ad wants to be placed by voters.

Second, we hypothesize that negative messages not only affect placements of the target of the attacks, but they somewhat unexpectedly define the sponsor as well. At first blush, some may think this observation is not new. That is, we know from Geer (2006), for example, that negative information can be informative—more informative than positive information. In addition, work by Kahn and Kenney (2004) shows that attacks can alter how much the public *likes* both candidates. But we are pushing things in a different direction than just a general discussion that attack ads could have “blow back.” Our argument is not about voters' feelings about the candidates or about the campaign; rather, we are interested in how attacks shape the information voters have about candidates' positions on issues.

By giving explicit consideration to negative messages, we draw attention to a previously unnoticed difference between the informational content of attacks and self-promotional appeals. Specifically, we posit that voters receive two pieces of information in attack messages, but only one in promotional ads. If a candidate claims to support withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, few inferences can be made about the opponent's view on that issue. However, if a candidate attacks an opponent for not supporting a troop withdrawal in Afghanistan, it suggests that the candidate issuing the attack *does* support a pull back; otherwise, why would that candidate attack the opposition on that dimension? This means that attacks have the potential to define the opposition, but also to define the candidate issuing the attack.² Attacks, therefore, have real and previously unanticipated costs to the sponsor: Negative messages move placements of the sponsor in the opposite direction of the attack.

In other words, we are contending that there is an asymmetry between the informational content of positive and negative messages. We are hardly the first to identify such an asymmetry. Campbell and colleagues (1960) did so when talking about how the public rewards and punishes candidates (see also Kernell, 1977). Lau (1982) pointed out that citizens are more likely to remember negative information than positive information. Most recently, Geer (2006) argued that the asymmetry between the demands of attacks and self-promotion leads to the former being more substantive than the latter. In some sense, we are building off Geer's insight, but doing so differently, in that our focus is what the public glean explicitly from positive and negative statements by candidates.

Finally, given that negativity offers in effect two pieces of information, we believe (following Enelow & Hinich, 1984) that, contrary to the common notion that competing messages confuse voters, the addition of attack ads to the information environment may decrease people's uncertainty about where to place the candidates on issues.³ In short, we contend that negative campaigning affects perceived placements of *both* candidates while increasing the total amount of information people bring to bear on candidate placements, and thus its absence from previous work on citizen competence and candidate positioning has real drawbacks.⁴

Our Data

In the sections that follow, we test these hypotheses with an Internet-based, randomized survey experiment with roughly 4,000 respondents who represent the national electorate. We designed an experiment that varies the combinations of different campaign advertisements so as to assess the impact of negative and positive messages on the public.

We sought to examine our propositions under the simplest of conditions. Our experiment, as a result, involves unknown candidates who have no partisan labels. Such a setting provides us a direct opportunity to assess the merits of these hypotheses. In a sense, we want to control for a candidate's partisanship, and this approach allows us to do so. Many elections in this country are conducted under comparable conditions. Kam and Zechmeister (2013), for example, report that over 75% of elections in this country are similar to this hypothetical contest. Further, these results offer insights into primary elections where partisanship does not come into play and contenders are often not well known. In short, this simple design and subsequent results speak to more elections than one might initially think given the ubiquity of party and partisanship in American politics.

Further, we chose to manipulate negative and positive radio advertisements of hypothetical candidates in this controlled setting. The use of radio allows us to focus on the statements made by the candidates, eliminating any potentially confounding effects from visuals. For many local races, radio is an important medium of communication (e.g., Geer & Geer, 2003). Thus, our choice also has some substantive advantages.⁵

Our Internet experiment employs a nationally representative sample of 3,989 people and was conducted by the research firm YouGov.⁶ It was embedded in a survey about the media and contemporary issues. About halfway through a 10-minute online survey, respondents were shown a radio player on the screen and told to click 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 could only play the ads once and after they played them, a pop-up window asked them to confirm that the ad(s) played and they were able to hear them.⁷ We assigned respondents to one of five conditions. To be clear, every respondent heard some kind of radio ad. The experimental group varied by the combination of ads for our two hypothetical congressional candidates, Rob Smith and Joe Brown. Although the candidates were not real, the advertisements were based on real scripts of ads aired during the 2006 congressional elections.

We produced three radio advertisements⁸ and randomly assigned respondents to one of five conditions.⁹ The five treatment conditions included exposure to either a positive ad or one of two attack ads, and then two conditions in which respondents heard two ads—the positive ad and one of the attack spots. In those conditions with two ads, we randomized the order of the ads so as to eliminate the possibility that what respondents heard first (or last) matters most. Each condition contains roughly 800 respondents, giving us substantial statistical power to detect effects from these advertisements.

The candidate we focus on is Rob Smith. The first ad we produced is a promotional ad for Smith. One-fifth of the respondents heard this ad. The ad is typical of most promotional ads in statewide races. It introduces the candidate and describes some issues and where the candidate stands on them. The script for this ad appears below. We used a former equity actor to help record these scripts.¹⁰ The positive Smith ad introduces the congressman and has a pleasing piano track playing in the background. It was based on a positive ad aired by Congressman Rob Simmons, whose wife Heidi made a similar ad in 2006 when he ran in Connecticut's Second District.¹¹

Positive Smith Ad: “Susan”¹²

Susan Smith: I’m a 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 every day, I’m his wife, 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.” The other took exactly the opposite position—and attacked Smith for being “too conservative.” The attack on Smith’s being liberal was based on an RNC ad aired in the Ohio Senate race on September 18, 2006, titled “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 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 letdown.

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 against Rob Simmons for the House race in Connecticut’s Second District. The ad, named “Number 1,” aired on September 15, 2006. Our modified version of 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 six 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 little about the general framework of the attack ads, but did change the issues mentioned in Smith’s promotional ad to match those mentioned in the attack ads.

We wanted to have a realistic manipulation that gave us control over the relevant variables, namely, positions on issues. Each version of the ads we made covers the same issues, so we can assess how the information and tone in the ad affect people’s ideological placement of both candidates.

There is a critical caveat we need to make as we consider the effects of these ideological attacks on the public. For those who follow campaigns, the claim that a candidate is “too liberal” is common. It is a staple in the diet of conservative politicians who seek to push their opposition far from the median position. By contrast, attacking a candidate as “too conservative” is rare and perhaps even non-existent (note the use of “too extreme” instead of “too conservative” in the ad above).¹³ Because of this asymmetry in the framing of ideological positions, we need to modify one of our hypotheses. Specifically, we expect the “too liberal” attack to be the key test of our hypothesis about ideological positioning. The “too extreme” attack will speak less directly to these claims since it does not contain a direct ideological appeal.

In our final two conditions, we coupled the attack ads (separately) with the promotional ad. Consequently, one fifth of the sample heard the Smith promotional ad and Brown’s attack saying Smith was too liberal (in random order). The final fifth heard the Smith positive ad and Brown’s other (he is too conservative) attack (in random order). Figure 1 presents the experimental design.

To test the effect of the advertisements, we asked respondents to place candidates, themselves, and two well-known politicians on a liberal-conservative dimension ranging from 0 to 100. As evidence of construct validity, respondents placed themselves, on average, at 54.¹⁴ They placed John McCain at 62.5 and Hillary Clinton at 29.3.

We also use the ideological placements of the candidates to shed light on the amount of uncertainty voters have about these candidates. We assume that individuals who cannot even place the candidates on the left-right ideological scale have higher levels of uncertainty than those who can place the candidates on this scale. This simple measure of uncertainty draws from Bartels (1988). John McCain and Hillary Clinton are, for example, well-known political figures and as such, only 20% and 25% of respondents, respectively, refused to place them on these scales. Respondents with higher levels of uncertainty will be even less likely to place the candidates on the scale. We expect people’s level of uncertainty to decrease as they hear more information about candidates’ positions in the advertisements. Of course, if respondents hear conflicting information about candidates, we predict the level of uncertainty to be unchanged or possibly even increase.

Finally, we asked respondents to place the candidates on some of the issues that are discussed in the advertisements. The most prominently discussed topic—and the topic that displays the most consistent information across our positive and attack ads—is taxes. We expect respondents to learn about the candidates’ positions on increasing taxes as information is revealed in the advertisements. Similar to ideology, when conflicting information

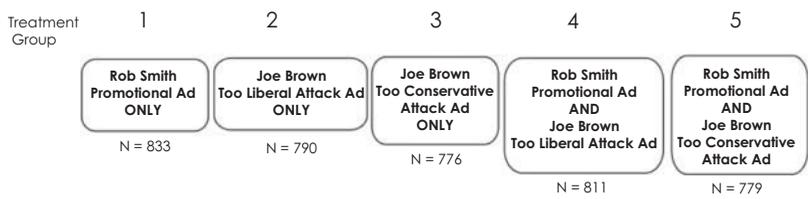


Figure 1. Experimental design.

is presented in promotional and attack advertisements, we expect respondents to use both pieces of information to form a judgment about the candidates' positions—and to possibly have higher levels of uncertainty about the candidates' positions.

To summarize, our expectations for ideological placements, uncertainty, and learning about Smith's position on taxes are as follows.

No information: Absent any information about a candidate (placements of Brown in the condition in which a respondent hears only a Smith promotional ad), most respondents will have difficulty making a placement and those who do make a placement will place Brown, we expect, near the midpoint. Our claim is that voters will assume a candidate is a moderate and will adjust ratings once information becomes available. Ratings of Brown in the positive only condition are the only ratings for which respondents literally never hear a single thing about that candidate.

Positive information only: With only positive, promotional information about a candidate (placements of Smith in the condition in which a respondent hears only the Smith promotional ad), respondents will place Smith near the midpoint. We expect more people to be able to place Smith than can place Brown in this condition (since they have heard no information about Brown at all). Finally, conditional on being able to place Smith and absent any countervailing information from Brown, we expect Smith's messages to get through to voters.

Liberal/conservative attack only: The attacks contain explicit information about the subject of the attack (Smith), but not about the sponsor of the ad (Brown). We expect the Brown ad that accuses Smith of being too liberal to drive placements of Smith to the left, but to simultaneously shift placements of Brown to the right (relative to the placements of Brown in the positive only condition). The reverse should be true for respondents who hear the Brown ad attacking Smith for being too conservative. In this way, negative advertising should do "twice the work" that positive advertising does—it provides information about both candidates' positions, not just one. We further expect a sizable reduction in uncertainty for placements of Brown on the left-right ideological scale compared to uncertainty ratings in the positive only condition (in which respondents knew nothing about him). In terms of Smith's positions on raising or lowering taxes, we expect to find respondents in the "too liberal" condition believing Smith will increase their taxes and respondents in the "too conservative" condition to think the opposite.

Liberal/conservative attacks and positive ad: Finally, when respondents hear both the Smith promotional ad and one of the Brown attack ads, we expect their final placements of Smith and Brown to be between the baseline (positive only) placements and the attack only placements. On the ideological scale, we expect more people to be able to place Brown and Smith on the left-right scale the more advertising they hear; therefore, we expect reductions in ideological-placement uncertainty in these conditions. We also, as noted earlier, have differential expectations for attacks from the left and from the right: We expect the "too liberal" attack to work better in moving the public than the "too extreme" attack. For Smith's position on taxes, we anticipate, again, to see a hybrid of the information in the positive and the negative ads.

Results

In what follows, we examine the willingness to rate candidates, the ideological placement of candidates, and respondents' knowledge of tax policy positions of candidates when the respondents hear different combinations of radio advertisements about Smith. To the extent that placements change as we vary the total message environment, we conclude that the

Table 1
Placement and non-placement on 100-point ideology scale by treatment condition

	Smith	Brown	% don't place Smith	% don't place Brown	<i>N</i>
1. Positive	57	49	40	84	833
2. Too liberal	34	64	47	50	790
3. Too conservative	63	36	40	47	776
4. Positive and too liberal	47	61	39	45	811
5. Positive and too conservative	64	36	33	40	779

Note. Treatment conditions are in the rows. Cell entries for first two columns are average placements on 100-point scale and are percent of respondents in next two columns. All differences in ideological placements are statistically significant except for condition 3 to 5 for Smith and 2 to 4 for Brown. For non-placements, all differences are statistically significant except 1 to 3 and 1 to 4 for Smith. Identical entries are not statistically different.

changes derive from the content of the messages.¹⁵ We present placements on ideology and levels of uncertainty in [Table 1](#) and placements on tax policy in [Table 2](#).

Smith Positive Ad Only

Respondents who only heard the Smith promotional ad placed Smith at 57 and Brown at 49 on the 100-point liberal-conservative scale. As anticipated, in the absence of any information about other candidates, like Brown in this case, the public collectively does appear to assume the candidate is moderate. When we control for the respondents' own self-placement on ideology, there are only minor effects on placements of Brown. For example, a respondent 40 points more conservative than another will adjust Brown's ratings about 7 points in the more liberal direction.¹⁶ Although not substantively large, this finding does suggest that the more conservative a respondent is, the less conservative he or she thinks Brown is, and vice versa. This result is of some interest, since it indicates that people have a slight tendency to assume candidates are not like them, until proven otherwise. By contrast, there is no relationship between respondents' ideology and their placement of Smith, about whom they heard plenty of policy information in the positive ad.

Table 2
Smith's perceived position on taxes by treatment condition

	Lower	Increase	Don't know	Refused	<i>N</i>
1. Positive	52	5	43	18	833
2. Too liberal	9	51	40	17	790
3. Too conservative	29	19	52	18	776
4. Positive and too liberal	31	22	47	14	811
5. Positive and too conservative	49	12	39	15	779

Note. Cell entries are percentages. All differences are statistically significant except for condition 1 to 5.

Information trumps any assumptions people might make about a candidate's ideological placement.

It does appear that the information in that promotional ad suggests to respondents that Smith is slightly right of center ideologically. What constitutes a "moderate" on our scale is not entirely clear. Might it be 45 to 55? 47 to 53? 43 to 57? That is an open question, but we can reject the null hypothesis that Smith's rating is 50 with a good deal of certainty. Viewing Smith as a slight conservative is in retrospect not a surprise. The spot that served as the basis of this promotional ad was from a Republican candidate, suggesting that subtle partisan signals remain despite our morphing. But given that the overall sample scores a 54 on this scale, the rating of 57 is still a number we take, at least, some comfort in.

With respect to uncertainty—that is, one's ability to rate the candidates—most people (84%) refused to rate Brown. That is no surprise. By contrast, nearly 60% of respondents placed Smith on the scale—more than three times as many people than rated Brown. It is clear that this simple ad gave many voters enough information to be willing to rate Smith. Figure 2 displays these placements, which are significantly different from one another at the .001 level.

Finally, to determine whether respondents learned about Smith's policy positions from his positive ad, we asked people whether they thought Smith would try to increase or decrease their taxes if he were elected. We also offered "I don't know" as an outcome choice. The ad explicitly says that Smith voted to lower 33 times since he has been in Washington. Did respondents recall this information only a few minutes later? We present these data in Table 2.

Fifty-two percent of respondents in this condition reported that they thought Smith would try to lower their taxes if elected. Only 5% thought he would try to raise them. This leaves 43% who said they did not know what Smith might try to do. Despite the plain and explicit language in the ad, heard only minutes before the question was asked, nearly half the respondents could not recall that Smith voted to lower taxes 33 times already. At the same time, only a handful of people got the facts wrong, thinking Smith would raise taxes.

Brown's "Too Conservative" Attack on Smith Only

We turn now to the first attack ad: Brown's attack on Smith for being too conservative. As hypothesized, respondents who heard only this ad 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 spot. More importantly, however, hearing Brown's attack on Smith also moved people's placements of Brown—to the left. The only information respondents have about Brown is that he is attacking Smith for siding with Bush on a number of policies; thus, they infer from this that Brown himself must be liberal. Respondents in this group placed Brown at 36, a 13-point shift compared to the 49 he received from the voters who had never heard of him at all. In spatial terms, differences like this nearly 30-point gap are important in helping voters make choices among candidates. Brown's attack ad made people think Smith was more conservative in comparison to those who heard Smith's positive ad only. The attack moved Smith to the right, fulfilling its intended purpose. More interestingly, the attack defines Brown as a liberal, moving him as far left as Hillary Clinton, which most attack ads probably are not meant to do. Bear in mind, Brown has said *nothing* about his own positions on issues at any time; rather, *voters are making inferences about Brown's positions based upon what he says in his advertising about Smith's positions.*

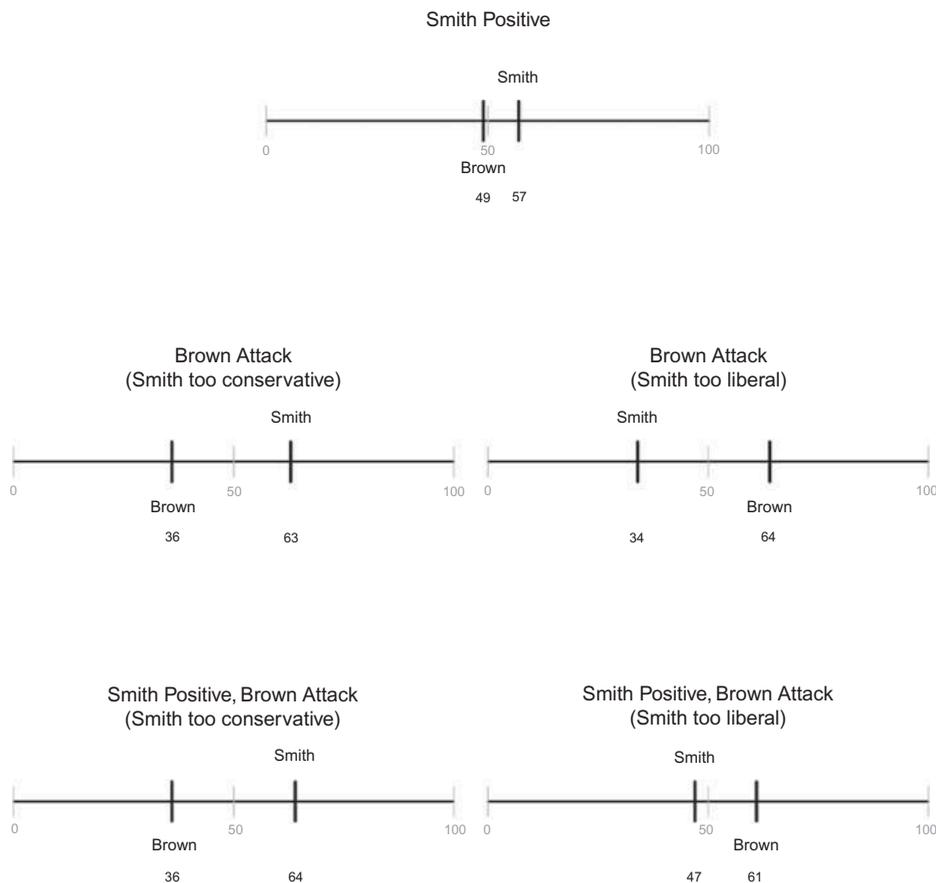


Figure 2. Ideological placement of candidates by experimental condition.

In terms of willingness to place the candidates, there were no differences in the readiness of respondents to rate Smith in either the positive or attack only condition. As mentioned above, 59% of those who heard the positive ad placed Smith on the ideological scale. Here, 60% placed Smith. In this case, the negative and positive ads produced the same amount of uncertainty. Slightly fewer people placed Brown on the scale relative to Smith, but still 53% did so just based on his attack on Smith. Recall that in this condition respondents do not hear Brown say anything about his positions on issues. But just his attack on Smith leads to a 37-point decrease in uncertainty about his ideological position (compared to Brown's uncertainty levels in the Smith positive ad condition).

Interestingly, in regard to Smith's position on taxes, we can see evidence of both the effect of information and the effect of confounding cues. While the language in this attack ad is slightly complicated, we wanted it to be faithful to the wording of the actual ad that ran in 2006. The voice-over says the following.

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.

This information is meant to say that Smith is so conservative he lowered taxes on the wealthy while other people were struggling. But the ad does actually demonstrate that Smith lowered taxes—just on a very special segment of the population. What do voters do with this information?

Much as one might expect, some of the respondents pick up on the nuance and the association with George Bush, while others apparently do not. In the positive only condition, 52% of respondents thought Smith would lower taxes if elected. In this condition, that percentage drops to 29. Similarly, the share of people who think Smith will raise taxes goes up from 5% (in the positive only condition) to 19% here.

The attack in this ad is not as clear on this issue as it is in the “too liberal” attack, which explicitly states that Smith misrepresented his record on taxes and counters that information directly. The attack here is much more subtle, yet some voters still manage to make the inference that Smith is likely to lower taxes, generally. Thus, the attack ad successfully moves people’s perceived position of Smith on this issue by a substantial amount.

Brown’s “Too Liberal” Attack on Smith Only

Nearly the 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 flipped 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. 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 conservatively than they rated John McCain (at 61) after hearing the attack on Smith. Again, it is important to remember that Brown has said nothing about himself in this ad (see Figure 2).

The share of respondents who were willing to venture a guess about the candidates’ positions also parallels the results above. In this condition, 53% of respondents rated Smith on the liberal-conservative scale and 50% rated Brown. The proportion that placed Brown increased three times from the share that placed him in the positive only condition.

What did voters learn about Smith’s positions on taxes from this attack ad? These data are in row 2 of [Table 1](#). Basically, we see a complete reversal of the marginals from the positive ad condition. When people hear Brown say that Smith lied about lowering taxes, they believe Brown. Fifty-one percent of respondents report that they think Smith will increase their taxes if elected, an increase of 46 points relative to the promotional control. Further, only 9% of the respondents think Smith will lower their taxes, down from the 52% who thought this when they heard Smith talk about his record. Roughly the same number of respondents reported that they did not know what Smith would do. Attack advertising, in this very simplified contest, successfully reset voters’ perceived placements of the candidates on an important issue and on ideology more generally.

These data demonstrate that promotional ads about candidates who are previously unknown seem to work exactly as one would anticipate. Voters learn some things about the candidate; specifically, they learn the things the candidate tells them. In the absence of this promotional information, however, for candidates who are previously unknown, an attack ad can have adverse effects. Respondents in our experiment changed their placements of Smith by dozens of points and, more importantly, crossed over the midpoint, depending on whether they heard only Smith’s portrayal of his positions or Brown’s portrayal

of Smith. Equally as interesting and important, when Brown attacked Smith, respondents moved placements of him by the same amount and also across the midpoint (depending on which way the attack was aimed). In a very basic sense, we have demonstrated that the information candidates send in campaigns, both positive and negative, can be taken seriously by voters in terms of perceived placements on issue positions. The messages matter, and in ways we typically overlook: What a candidate says about his opponent helps voters define him. Attackers beware. Many observers speculate about the power of *negative* campaigning (Geer, 2006; Jamieson, 1992; Lau et al., 2007). But we offer a new explanation for the critical importance of *positive* campaigning. Candidates need positive spots to get their positions out, but they also need those positive spots to inoculate themselves from the damage they do *to their own campaigns* when they attack their opponents. Driving the opponent to the extremes pushes the sponsor of the attack to the other extreme. We turn now to a demonstration of how promotional ads bring this back to the midpoint.

Smith Positive and Brown “Too Liberal” Attack

The effects of seeing the Smith positive ad in addition to the Brown too liberal attack demonstrate the power of advertising—both positive and negative. Respondents are affected by Smith’s self-promotion and by the attack: They changed their rating by moving Smith from his liberal rating of 34 (in the liberal attack only condition) back 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 47.¹⁷ This is not literally the average of the two solo ad placements, but it is close. All of the information matters to voters—not just the attacks and not just the self-promotional.

The share of people willing to place Smith after hearing both of these ads was not much different than when respondents heard only one of the ads. For the positive and “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. Of course, ability to place Brown does not change from the attack only condition because no new information about him is presented in the positive ad.

While the shifting placements of Smith on ideology are interesting, it is on learning about Smith’s policy position on taxes where we see some of the power of advertising. We present these data in row 4 of Table 2. Recall that in the positive condition, 52% thought Smith would lower taxes, then in the too liberal attack, only 9% thought this. In the mixed condition, we see something similar to what we saw on ideology: 31% of respondents who saw both ads thought Smith would lower their taxes if elected, somewhere between 9% and 52%. The same is true for the percentage who thought he would *increase* their taxes: 5% in the positive only condition, 51% in the too liberal attack condition, and 22% in the mixed condition.

Smith Positive and Brown “Too Conservative” Attack

Similar to the results above, but not as dramatic, respondents who saw both the Smith positive ad and Brown’s attack on him for being “too conservative” show some signs of being moved by both ads. We do not see it as dramatically in the ideological placements as we did in the condition above. Here, voters do not move their rating of Smith back

toward the midpoint once they hear both his positive ad and the attack ad. Instead, their ratings of Smith remain to the right of the midpoint by a significant degree. We also see a more dramatic reduction in uncertainty about these placements than we have seen in other conditions: Only 33% of the respondents were unwilling to place Smith on the scale after hearing these two ads. Something about hearing the “too conservative” attack along with Smith’s promotional ad made voters more certain that they knew where to place Smith—and they placed him at exactly the same spot that the attack only respondents placed him. One interpretation of this is that the positive ad actually served to reinforce the message in the attack ad that the candidate is right of center. And since we know that placements of Smith in the positive only condition were to the right of center, this logic is appealing.

Where we do see signs of the moderating effect of countervailing information in this condition, however, is on Smith’s position on tax policy. In the positive only group, 52% said Smith would lower taxes; in the attack only group, that number dropped to 29%. But in the mixed condition, it goes back up to 49%. Thus, after the subtle attack about “lowering taxes on the wealthiest families while the rest of us struggled to make ends meet,” the plainspoken cue “he voted to lower taxes 33 times since he’s been in Washington” is enough to convince a good deal more people that Smith will bring about lower taxes. Similarly, the percentage of people who think Smith will raise taxes drops from the 19% in the attack condition to 12%.

Just as we did in the ideological placements, on the issue of taxes we see a similar decline in the percentage of people who say they “do not know” where to place Smith on this issue. The decrease in uncertainty on tax policy positions is 13 points relative to the attack only condition and 4 points relative to the positive only condition, which suggests that it is really that “too conservative” attack ad that is driving the increased levels of uncertainty on both ideology and tax policy.

Implications and Discussion

This article yields a number of interesting theoretical and empirical payoffs from explicitly considering both negative and positive information flows in campaigns. First, it suggests that when assessing whether voters can accurately gauge candidates’ positions on issues, we need to do more than just compare candidates’ expressed positions and the public’s perception of candidates’ positions. Candidates have an incentive to misrepresent their own, not just their opponents’ positions. By realizing exaggeration cuts both ways, we offer a new way to think about assessing the public’s perceptions of candidates on issues. This new interpretation offers the prospect of a more optimistic assessment of the public’s ability to make reasonable judgments about where candidates fall on the issues.

Second, we have shown that the public learns more from attacks than previously assumed. Specifically, voters make inferences about the sponsors of the attacks from the negative ads. In other words, attacking an opponent is an implicit way of offering your own position on the issue, and voters seem to pick up on this. This finding points to potential informational payoffs of negativity that have started to draw attention by a growing number of scholars and observers (Franz et al., 2007; Geer, 2006; Lau & Pomper, 2004; Lau et al., 2007). These results also hint how negativity can 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 a candidate wins office by only criticizing the opposition on some pressing issue, the public may still form expectations about that candidate on that very issue. It also suggests reasons why candidates would not profit from engaging in an entirely negative campaign. The attacks might well weaken the opposition

by pushing that contender to the extremes, but in attacking the sponsoring candidate may be pushed to the other side of the ideological spectrum.

Third, we need to think more carefully about candidate position-taking. The typical assumption is that what candidates say about issues reflects their position. But candidates have an incentive to exaggerate and to align themselves as close as possible to the median voter. It is risky just to accept the candidates' own statements as valid indicators of their preferences. Of course, we should not trust the opposition to define them either. We need, therefore, to be vigilant when assessing candidates' positions on an issue and how voters perceive them. We need, in other words, to do much more than just consider what candidates say is their position on an issue. It would be useful, therefore, to revisit our past efforts that measure candidates' position-taking (e.g., Fishel, 1985; Page, 1978; Pomper, 1980; Tomz & Van Houweling, 2008).

The explicit inclusion of attacks into our thinking about perceived issue placements also offers some new ways to think about the workings of negativity in our political system. One of the most important aspects of our current politics is that the parties are "polarized" at the elite level (see, e.g., Abramowitz, 2010; Hetherington, 2009; McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006, 2013). Polarization adds an important twist on the impact of negativity and perceived placements. If we accept the premise that candidates have an incentive to place themselves near the median position on issues, we should expect more exaggeration, on average, by "polarized" candidates (than non-polarized) when making such claims. That is, nominees in a polarized system will tend to have positions in the tail of the ideological or issue distribution.¹⁸ Yet during a general election campaign, these candidates will need to move further (i.e., engage in more exaggeration) to reclaim the median so as to maximize their chance of winning the election. Candidates selected by non-polarized political parties, by contrast, will not face the same challenges, since they will, on average, be closer to the median position to start with.

With *more* exaggeration by candidates during the general election in a polarized political system, negativity becomes *more* valuable. The response by the opposition will point out this exaggeration, seeking to push, through attacks, the scrambling candidate back toward his or her non-median position. This process not only gives an important policing function to negativity, but it also suggests that there will need to be additional attacks to accomplish this corrective mechanism than would occur in a less polarized arena. If so, our argument offers a new explanation for why polarized systems seem to have more negativity than less polarized systems. Both Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) and Geer (2006), for example, have noted that polarization and negativity have a strong statistical relationship. But the exact causal mechanism behind this correlation has not been well specified by these past studies. If attacks move more extreme candidates away from the median (where they want to be perceived) and back to the tail of the distribution (where they really belong), then negativity plays a valuable, and previously unrecognized, role in a polarized political system.

This argument also suggests that negativity in a polarized system helps generate *more* accurate public perceptions of the candidates' actual positions on issues. Attack politics serve as way to set the record straight. This implication is not only important but ironic given all of the claims that negativity forges dishonesty into the electoral process. Of course, the flip side of this argument is that in a non-polarized system, negativity may generate misinformation as attackers seek to paint moderate candidates as more extreme. So when candidates are near the median, the attacks no longer clarify matters. Instead, attacks yield confusion and misinformation. Perhaps under such arrangements, the frequency of attack would decline, and so the costs of this pushing might be lower than one might initially think.

But even so, it seems that negativity may be more disruptive to a non-polarized system than a polarized system.

It is clear that negativity has some benefits—and certainly more than many of its early detractors suggested (e.g., Buchanan, 2004; Jamieson, 1992). But this article is more than an effort to mount a positive campaign on the behalf of negative campaigning. Our main objective was to show that we need to pay much more attention to negative campaigning when thinking about candidate position-taking. Attacks are often a critical part of democratic politics. The Tea Party is an organization, for example, that is based on unhappiness with President Obama. They have attacked him and raised doubts in many quarters about his policies. Those undertakings, whether one likes their views or not, are democratic. But their success rests upon negativity. Such an undertaking often paves the way for real and important political change. For example, the Anti-Federalists launched a highly negative campaign against the Constitution (Riker, 1996). One of the consequences of those attacks was the Bill of Rights—a whole new set of positions on issues of long-standing importance. We need, in short, to think more carefully about how to include attacks into our thinking about elections. And as our politics continue to polarize and become increasingly negative, these reminders may become more timely and important.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the publisher's website at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2013.828140>

Notes

1. See the Museum of the Moving Image for the ad run by the Nixon campaign, called “McGovern Defense” (<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1972>).

2. Some self-promotional claims could serve as implicit attacks and therefore also contain two pieces of information under some conditions. But these instances arise when the candidates are well known. Our point about attacks is much more general and does not rest upon knowing the candidates.

3. Some people may question this belief, but the result that more information decreases uncertainty is directly derived from Enelow and Hinich's (1984) interpretation of the spatial model. As previously stated, the authors do not distinguish between promotional or attack-based information, and in so doing, their result may not hold. Lacking a theoretical reason to believe the contrary, however, we stick with Enelow and Hinich's prediction, even as we recognize its limitations.

4. It is worth noting that our argument suggests that past efforts to measure candidate placements through roll calls avoid this problem by including all votes, rather than selectively sampling those votes that make candidates look good (as candidates do in campaigns). In fact, one can think of our argument in the following terms. Assume a member of Congress decides to run for president. That candidate will identify congressional votes that put her in the best light. The opposition will identify those votes that are least favorable to that candidate. The campaign is a battle of these competing and somewhat misleading stories. Roll call votes, as a measure, avoid this struggle by using all of the (important) votes, yielding one summary indicator. While roll call votes have well-known problems, they, according to our logic, do offer one previously unnoted advantage when assessing candidates' positions on issues.

5. We also conducted the experiment in an off year election (2007) so as to gather data in a setting not confounded by the flurry of activities that often accompany midterm and presidential elections.

6. For detailed information on the construction of the YouGov panel and how samples are made to be representative of the population, see Vavreck and Rivers (2008).

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

8. While there are three unique scripts, we recorded each script with a male voice and a female voice. We hypothesized that 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 we mention it only in passing.

9. Radio ads are available from the authors.

10. We thank Bret Nighman, who appeared in *Quincy, M.E.* and Jeff Lewis for recording various parts of the advertisements.

11. This ad, called “Heidi,” was aired on September 15, 2006.

12. We did have a version of this ad with a male voice and substituted “David” for “Susan,” with David being the candidate’s brother. As noted earlier, the voice of the narrator yielded no differences in the responses of subjects to Rob Smith.

13. See Globetti (2002), Geer (2006), Vavreck (2009), and Kahn and Kenney (1999). These scholars all conducted content analyses of ads at various levels: presidential, senatorial, and gubernatorial. We asked them via e-mail if they had seen or heard any ad offering the claim that the opposition is “too conservative.” They confirmed that they have never come across such a message.

14. In other general population surveys, like the American National Election Study, for example, the average self-placement is also right of the midpoint. In presidential elections, the mean ANES self-placement is 4.25 on a 7-point scale. The skew to the right in ANES is .18 of a standard deviation. In our data, the skew to the right is nearly identical—.15 of a standard deviation.

15. One alternative explanation is that people are figuring out the party of the candidates, and that drives their ideological rating. What can we say about how much of the effect of ads is working through people’s knowledge of the party of the candidate? To begin, only in one experimental condition are people (barely) able to correctly place the candidate in a party with a probability better than random guessing (57% of those who hear an attack on Smith for being too conservative and also receive his positive ad correctly guess that he is a Republican candidate). For those respondents who correctly guess the party of the candidate, the effects of the information in the ads are inflated, but since this test requires subjects to make judgments about party and ideology simultaneously, we cannot sort out whether party is conditioning the effect of information, replacing it, or having no effect on it. What we can say is that identifying Smith as a Republican increases ideological placements of him by 15 points on average. Identifying him as a Democrat decreases placements by 9 points. There are no differences in placements across respondents’ party identifications.

16. These results arise from a simple regression of Brown placements onto self-placements and produce a constant of 59 ($SE = 3.89$) and a coefficient on self-placements of $-.18$ (.06).

17. Hearing the Smith positive ad does not change voters’ placements of Brown. After hearing the “too liberal attack” and then the promotional ad (in any order), Brown’s placements stay above 60. This is as we expect since no information is conveyed about Brown in the Smith positive ad.

18. One could assume that parties are smart and they will seek to nominate more moderate candidates. That may well be true. But across a large number of offices, that goal will be difficult to meet.

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