

Rationale and Implications of Negative Campaigns

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What gave rise to negative campaigns and why are they used?

- Political communication in relation to elections adapts to sociological and technological changes
- **TV** emerged as a mass medium in the mid-Twentieth Century and **introduced substantial changes in election campaigns**: in the rhetoric, behavior, and appearance of the candidates **and, above all, in strategies for attracting the electorate's attention, interest, and votes**
- As a result: ***strategies are deployed to prompt voter decisions that appeal not just to arguments and rational analysis but, first and foremost, emotions.***
- One successful strategy for tapping into the electorate's emotions is the "negative campaign"



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What is a negative campaign?

Definition

- *It is a political communication strategy that, rather than highlighting the virtues of a candidate or party, opts to underscore an opponent's defects and all the negative aspects of what he or she stands for*



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What are the hallmarks of a negative campaign?

- **Simplification** of arguments
- Misrepresentation and "**half truths**"
- "Cold" data are eschewed in favor of "**hot**" or emotional data
- Emphasis on the "**visual**"
- **Identification of enemies**, to ensure that the political spectacle arouses passions, fears, and hopes



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Why does negative campaigning work?

Two psychological reasons:

- **1) The negativity effect:** Evolutionary trend whereby negative information has more of an impact than positive information on our assessments and memories (Lau, 1982)
- **2) Simplification of information into dyadic categories or other very simple groupings (Laponce, 1981)** Heroes and villains or any other simple narrative that the electorate is familiar with because it is rooted in popular culture



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Why purpose does negative campaigning serve?

By positing a dilemma or conflict, a negative campaign stirs emotions, which triggers:

- **dramatism**, so that citizens pay more attention to certain issues
- increased **interest** in the election campaign under way
- **forces the competitor to spend time and divert resources** to defend himself/herself or to counter-attack, rather than expounding her/his proposals
- **simplifies** the electoral decision a voter has to make, because polarization reduces the complexity of political scenarios



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What tactics are most frequently employed in this communication strategy?

- **Appeals to the emotions**, to gut instincts, in an attempt to arouse fears and anxiety among voters
- **Identification** of the adversary with symbols, policies, or individuals that citizens consider negative
- **Comparison**, enabling a candidate to present himself or herself as synonymous with everything good, while depicting the rival as the exact opposite of those values
- **Association**, or invention of a connection between unconnected images or ideas, which induces an audience to make a (negative) inference, despite the lack of legitimate evidence of a connection



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What tactics are most frequently employed in this communication strategy?

- ***One-sided interviews (with anonymous or well-know figures)***, in which another politician, or public figure, or anonymous person questions and/or elicits replies from a candidate
- The use of ***enthymemes*** or shortened syllogisms (with an unstated premise that the audience is invited to infer)
- ***Refocusing***, or the process whereby the meaning attached to a situation is altered by changing the context or framework in which it is presented and experienced
- The use of ***ostensibly humorous language to ridicule, mock, or parody an opponent***



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What are the main potentially harmful effects of negative campaigns?

- **Boomerang effect:** An unwanted "rebound" effect, whereby more negative sentiments are aroused against the attacker than against the person attacked. The possible existence of a saturation point at which voters tire of malicious tactics and, instead of heeding the message, turn against the candidate running the negative campaign (Strother, 1999)
- **Victim syndrome:** if voters perceive an attack to be unfair or dishonest, that may trigger positive feelings about, and empathy toward, the candidate under attack (Garramone, 1985)
- **Double impairment:** this occurs when a negative campaign harms both the candidate attacked and his/her attacker (Meritt, 1984)



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What are the main potentially beneficial effects of negative campaigns?

- ***Positive publicity is sometimes more deceptive than negative publicity*** because it reveals only the candidate's most favorable traits
- ***Negative publicity may provide more information*** for voters (above all if it is comparative) than positive publicity and stimulate public debate
- ***How candidates respond to a negative campaign may be regarded as an indicator of how they will perform in office***: in a democratic society, holders of public office must be willing to accept considerable criticism, even if much of it is unfair.



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A few final thoughts...

- There is a difference between a negative campaign used to refocus a problem or lay out a comparison and one that consists merely of a personal attack
- One criterion or parameter that might be used to control and regulate negative campaigns: consider them unacceptable if they just constitute provocation or a personal vendetta, are deceptive, are used to discredit, libel, or slander, or if they contain inaccuracies. Consider them acceptable, however, if they are comparative, provide information, enrich public deliberation, and contribute to democratic debate



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