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# Negative Campaigns and Their Influence on Voter Attitudes

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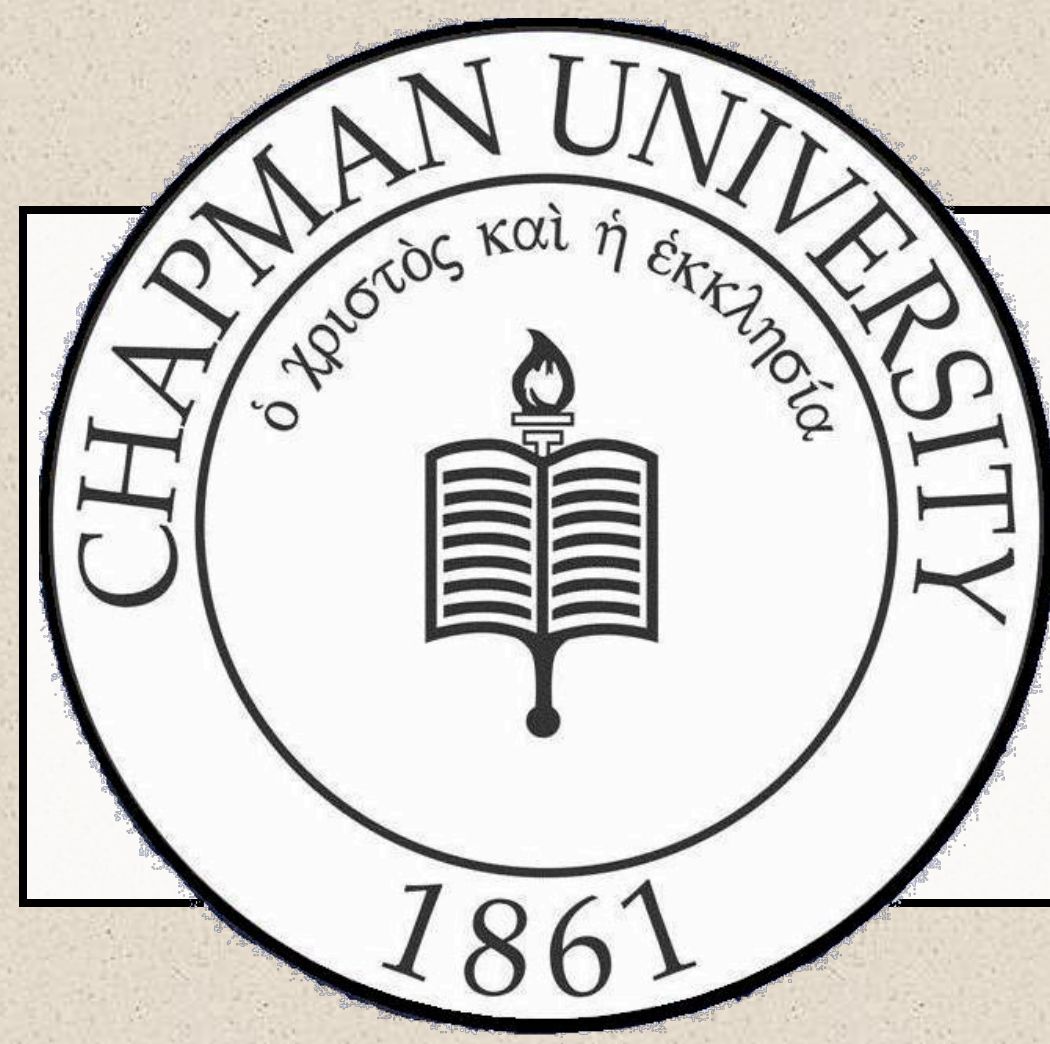
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# Negative Campaigns and Their Influence on Voter Attitudes

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## Introduction to Research

- This study examines the effects of negative campaigns on voter attitudes within the context of the 2012 U.S. presidential election.
- The ongoing trend that elections have become increasingly more negative combined with continuously low voter turnout rates has lead scholars to study the effects of negative campaigns on voter participation.
- While some studies suggest negative campaigns depress turnout by overwhelming voters and causing them to denounce the legitimacy of the electoral process, others offer conflicting results that such campaigns in fact mobilize voters, as voters perceive such information as informative and consequently stimulates their participation.
- Considering the results of different studies have thus far been inconclusive, more recent studies have focused on how negative campaigns affect the behavior and attitude of the electorate.
- Psychological evaluations have overwhelmingly shown that individuals respond stronger to negative stimuli, however in a political context, findings demonstrate individuals differentiate between different forms of negativity. Negative campaigns that include personal attacks of opponents showed to promote cynicism and lower voter intentions. Those that included attacks of the opponent's policies generated a sense of anxiety about the results of an election.

## CBS News/NY Times National Poll

- The opinion poll asks respondents on their attitudes towards the 2012 presidential election.
- The independent variable in this study is the public's perception of negativity with respect to the 2012 elections. This variable is gathered from the question that asks respondents to compare how negative (or positive) they feel about this election compared to past ones.
- The dependent variable gages the respondents' attitudes by measuring their level of enthusiasm about the election.
- An additional questions from the poll was used as a control variable. This question measures respondents' level of attention to the election. This allows for an examination of the effects of negative campaigns on voter attitudes after distinguishing respondents by their attention to media.

## Hypothesis:

Individuals who perceive that campaigns are becoming more negative will be less enthusiastic

### Data – Frequencies Negative Campaigns and Enthusiasm

- “Compared to past presidential campaigns, do you think the campaign this year has been more positive, more negative, or about the same as past campaigns?”
  - More Positive: 50 (5.6%)
  - About the Same: 335 (37.3%)
  - More Negative: 397 (44.2%)
  - Total: 782
- “Thinking about November’s presidential election, overall, would you say you are very enthusiastic, somewhat enthusiastic, or not enthusiastic?”
  - Very Enthusiastic: 491 (54.7%)
  - Somewhat Enthusiastic: 182 (20.3%)
  - Not Enthusiastic: 110 (12.2%)
  - Total: 783

### Cross Tabulation Results:

#### Enthusiasm About the Campaign by Perceptions of Negativity

	Very Enthusiastic	Somewhat Enthusiastic	Not Enthusiastic
More Positive	6.2%	8.9%	3.7%
About the Same	40.0%	48.6%	45.8%
More Negative	53.7%	42.5%	50.5%
Total (n=768)	482	179	107

### Data – Attention Negative Campaigns and Enthusiasm with Attention as Control Variable

- “How much attention have you been able to pay to the 2012 Presidential campaign?”
  - A lot of Attention: 563 (73.7%)
  - Not so much Attention: 201 (26.3%)

### Cross Tabulation Results:

#### Enthusiasm About the Campaign by Perceptions of Negativity with Attention as Control Variable

##### High Attention table

	Very Enthusiastic	Somewhat Enthusiastic	Not Enthusiastic
More Positive	5.7%	7.9%	4.5%
About the Same	39.2%	43.6%	43.2%
More Negative	55.0%	48.5%	52.3%
Total (n=563)	418	101	44

##### Low Attention Table

	Very Enthusiastic	Somewhat Enthusiastic	Not Enthusiastic
More Positive	9.7%	10.3%	3.3%
About the Same	45.2%	55.1%	47.5%
More Negative	45.2%	34.6%	49.2%
Total (n=201)	62	78	61

## Findings

H: Negative Campaigns and Enthusiasm

- After running the two variables through a cross tab the results demonstrated that the hypothesis was not supported.
- 53.7% of respondents who answered that they were very enthusiastic about the campaign had perceived the elections as negative.
- Only 6.2% of respondents who said they were very enthusiastic perceived the campaign as positive.
- This evidence suggest that negativity does not depress voter enthusiasm but in fact stimulates it.
- However, symmetric measures demonstrated that these findings were not statistically significant (Approx. Sig. = .277<sup>c</sup>)

H: Negative Campaigns and Enthusiasm with Control Variable

- When dividing the respondents between those who paid high attention and those who paid low attention the results differed.
- Among those in high attention category:
  - 55% of respondents who were very enthusiastic had perceived the campaign as negative.
- Among those in the low attention category:
  - 45.2% of respondents who were very enthusiastic had perceived the campaign as negative.
- This evidence suggests that perception of negativity among this category actually diminished the amount of those who felt very enthusiastic.

## Conclusions

- While different methods of analyzing demonstrate conflicting results, it seems that in this case such campaigning may in fact stimulate voters.
- However, it is important to recognize the effects that negative campaigning may have on the electorate considering the extremely low voter participation in the U.S.
- Continuing the discussion on this topic is important if we want to realize a healthy functioning electoral process.

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