

# **The Effects of Negative Political Advertising on Young College-Educated Voters**

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Senior Capstone Project  
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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the effectiveness of negative and positive political advertisements among voters in college. The study builds on past research exploring negative political advertising and demobilization and mobilization theories. Additionally, potential backlash against sponsoring candidates of negative policy-based attack ads is looked at as is whether those who regularly follow politics are affected differently by ads than those who do not. Fifty-three college students participated in an experiment in which they rated two candidates based on any prior knowledge and political party, assessing favorability and the likelihood of voting for each candidate. Students then watched a ten minute newscast with either a positive or negative ad sponsored by the same candidate embedded during the commercial break. They were asked again to assess their favorability and likelihood of voting for each candidate. No results were found in support of either mobilization or demobilization theories. Results did not show backlash after viewing the negative ad. The positive ad, however, proved more effective in increasing both the sponsoring candidate's favorability and participants' reported likelihood of voting for him. Additionally, these findings do not support past research claiming differences in effects between those who regularly follow politics and those who do not.

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

Negative campaigning has been a feature of American politics for centuries. As far back as 1828, when President John Quincy Adams' supporters distributed flyers accusing his opponent Andrew Jackson of executing 13 militiamen without cause 15 years earlier, attacking the opposition has become a popular strategy. While going negative as a campaign strategy is a frequently debated tactic among academics and the media, politicians still see it as an effective way of gaining an edge over an opponent, and over the last ten years the use of negative advertising has continued to increase as a percentage of the total ads run (An Uptick in Negativity, 2010). The 2010 elections featured some of the most negative campaigning in history.

The January 2010 Supreme Court Case *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission* further opened the door for corporations, unions and other outside organizations to spend unlimited money on advertising during campaigns, and during the 2010 elections around 89% of ads run by outside groups were negative (AP, 2010). Politicians did not let outside groups handle all the attacking as they contributed some of the most vicious attack ads of the election themselves. Overall, approximately two out of every three ads run during the campaign were negative (An Uptick in Negativity, 2010). Outside groups can mask their contributors and true sponsors of the ads and thereby face minimal backlash, but politicians can be held accountable by voters when they run the ads and thus need to be more selective about what to run.

The effects of negative advertising have often been studied, but little consensus exists among researchers on two key issues. Researchers have disagreed as to whether an ad's negative impact on an opposing candidate outweighs the backlash to the sponsoring candidates. Additionally, there is no clear agreement as to whether negative ads have a demobilizing or stimulating effect on voter turnout. Much of the problem with measuring impact is because negative advertising can be run for different reasons. Some politicians use it to get their base motivated to vote or contribute, others use it to turn independents away from their opponents, and some use it to discourage voters from turning out at all. Not always knowing the motivations behind an ad makes it especially difficult to judge its effectiveness. Many studies

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come to inconclusive results or found their results cannot be generalized to all people. Some studies have looked at effects on different demographic groups and found more conclusive results.

One demographic group of current interest to politicians is young voters, a group that has voted largely in favor of Democrats over the past decade. In recent elections the youth vote - voters aged 18 to 29 - has been key, with midterm election youth turnout hovering between 20-26 percent of eligible voters, down significantly from 30 years ago when it peaked at 32 percent (Youth Turnout About 20%, Comparable to Recent Midterm Years, 2010). In 2010, youth turnout, at 20 percent was one of the lowest yet. Youth voters as a percentage of all who voted also dropped significantly in the last two years, having made up a reported 18 percent of voters in 2008 and only nine percent in 2010 (Exit Poll: Lower Turnout Among Youth and Black Voters, 2010). The downward trend does not have to continue. The 2006 midterms saw a four percent increase in young voter turnout as a percent of the total youth population over the prior midterms, and the 2008 Presidential election saw the largest young voter turnout since 1992 with at least a two percent increase over 2004, the only age group to show such an increase (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Kirby, 2009). Additionally, these studies have shown young citizens with some college experience are around twice as likely to vote as those that have never attended college. Since college enrollment is at its highest ever rate at over 70 percent of high school graduates, this is another indication that youth turnout can be increased (Rampell, 2010). These signs suggest that if candidates can find an effective method to engage young voters they can make a significant difference in an election.

With negative advertising a constantly increasingly used technique, and youth voter turnout becoming a key to winning or losing a close election, this study asks if there is a relationship between the two. Rather than attempting to find general trends among all voters, this study looks solely at a specific demographic: young voters with some college education.

Additionally, instead of looking at the combined effects of all ads run in a campaign, this study will focus in on one negative ad compared to a positive ad by the same candidate, Russ Feingold on the same theme: jobs. Feingold based many of his ads on the issue of jobs trying to motivate supporters. His negative ad also contained a bit of contrast, including one of his

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own views, acting to differentiate his opponent from himself and mobilize voters with a clear choice. This study focuses on candidate sponsored negative ads, where viewers are clear about the sponsorship and the ad can potentially lead to backlash against the sponsoring candidate. The study looks at how an ad affects the favorability rating of both candidates and self-reported likelihood of future turnout from potential voters.

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### **PAST RESEARCH**

The effects of negative political advertising have long been studied not only in the United States, but across the globe. Effects have been found to differ depending on the type of ad and the region or people targeted. Some studies have found no generalizations can be made on the effects of negative advertising, while among those that have come to conclusions there is little agreement. This review of past research will look at studies covering four topics related to negative advertising: their effects on mobilization, their effects on both candidates' favorability ratings, their effects on cynicism, and their perceived effects by campaign managers.

Many studies have looked at two dominant political advertising theories: the demobilization and stimulation hypotheses. While the demobilization hypothesis claims negative advertising decreases turnout, the stimulation hypothesis argues the opposite. One frequently cited study looking at that issue was conducted during the 1990 California gubernatorial race, 1992 California Senate races, and 1993 Los Angeles mayoral race (Ansolabehere S., Iyengar, Simon, & Valentino, Dec. 1994). The researchers created advertisements that were identical in all aspects but tone (the basic content was the same, but one ad spoke positively about a candidate and the other attacked the opposition on the same issues) and were impossible to distinguish from ads candidates would typically run. These ads were created for all three elections which featured distinct circumstances ranging from the typical two party races to the non-partisan mayoral race. These were then embedded in a 15 minute newscast. Three groups existed in each study: one in which the newscasts viewed contained a negative political ad, one that contained a positive ad, and a third that contained a product ad in place of any political ad. Participants, who were paid and recruited with newspaper and employee newsletter ads, flyers, and phone calls to people on voter registration lists, were given a basic pre-test to determine background information such as media viewing habits and political interest. After viewing the 15 minute newscast complete with the ad, the participants were given a lengthy posttest survey about beliefs on campaign issues, voting intentions, and level of involvement in the campaign. The researchers then grouped voters into categories of likelihood of voting, basing their judgment on self-reported likelihood to vote and whether the participants were actually registered and eligible to vote. Their study found that among those

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who saw a positive ad, 64 percent were likely to vote, among those who saw a product ad, 61 percent were likely to vote, and among those who saw a negative ad 58 percent were likely to vote. The 6 percent gap was statistically significant. They also found in their research that turnout in the 1992 senate elections was significantly reduced in states that had a relatively negative campaign. Their results lend support to the authors' belief in the demobilization theory.

A study conducted during the 1996 Presidential election used a different method to analyze the effects of negative advertising and found results that questioned the demobilization theory (Goldstein & Freedman, August 2002). The researchers did not trust the evidence supporting the demobilization theory, and instead believed they could support the stimulation theory. Using information from the Campaign Media Analysis group, they were able to determine how frequently specific ads were run and when and where they were run. They coded every ad as negative or positive. Negative ads were further coded as contrast spots (those containing some positive statements about the sponsor) or pure negative ads. They then looked at local and national television viewing habits to create a television viewing scale. From that they created a measure of ad exposure which was multiplied by the total number and type of ads aired by or on behalf of each candidate in each market to create a measure for each respondent. This was then compared to American National Election Studies survey data of self reported turnout. They also analyzed individual measures of exposure to negative or contrast ads based on respondents' TV viewing habits. They found both negative and contrast ads appeared to mobilize the electorate, while positive advertising had no significant effect on turnout all other variables being equal. Additionally, while looking at specific groups, the research discovered no evidence of any kind to support the demobilization theory for citizens who are less politically engaged, and found no significant difference in effects from those who were more politically engaged. While this study used sound statistical measures, its results may be different than those of studies conducted on midterm elections. Candidates in Presidential elections often have much greater exposure beyond just advertising, and as such negative ads may not have the same effect on candidates for Congress.



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A study published in 1999 also questioned the demobilization theory (Wattenberg & Briens, Dec. 1999). Using the American National Election Studies survey data, the researchers found that in 1992, 18 percent of respondents remarked there was too much negative advertisement. However, despite the assumption that this group would be expected to be demobilized, this group's reported turnout was six percentage points higher than those who did not have this viewpoint. In 1996, only five percent thought there was too much negative advertisement and their turnout was one percent below the rest of the sample. Those who recalled either positive or negative ads were more likely to vote, and there was no significant difference between groups. Demographic groups that often do not vote - those without a high school diploma, pure independents, independent leaners, and young people - also saw double digit increases in voter turnout among those who recalled an ad, positive or negative, over those who did not. Additionally, those with low political efficacy, the belief that one actually can have influence on an election, a group often theorized by academics to be demobilized by negative ads, were actually more likely to vote if they recalled an ad, regardless of whether it was positive or negative, than if they were unable to recall one. Turnout among voters who had not voted in the previous election also saw an increase among those who recalled either kind of advertising. Interestingly, one of the few groups to go against this trend was college graduates, who saw a slight decrease among those who recalled negative ads most strongly. The study also found political efficacy was higher among those who recalled negative ads in 1992 and no significant difference existed in 1996. Even when the data are controlled to rule out factors such as following politics in newspapers or TV, there were no data to support demobilization theories. There were some questions about the methods used in this study, however, and these issues were addressed in the following article in the same journal.

That article once again defended the demobilization theory with a different analysis of the same NES data (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, & Simon, Dec. 1999). The researchers disagree that recall is an adequate substitute for measuring exposure, and argue that recall itself may be caused by turnout. Having found in their own experiments that just thirty minutes after watching a campaign ad only half the viewers actually could recall having seen one, the three researchers argued that using recall was an unacceptable method of measuring who actually viewed ads. The researchers then did their own analysis of the data. Instead of recall, they

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used Combined Gross Ratings Points of the presidential ad buys in each state to calculate the likelihood that a randomly selected individual is exposed to political ads in general, and negative ads in particular. Since negative advertising generally increases as Election Day draws nearer, that was also factored into their equation. They made four groups based on whether participants were in a high ad buy state or low ad buy state and when they were interviewed, since those interviewed closer to the election were likely to have seen more ads. Their analysis found that exposure to negative advertising actually lowers reported intention to vote, while exposure to positive advertising showed no significant effects. They also found greater turnout in races featuring mostly positive ads over races featuring a mix or mostly negative ads. Based on their findings and their review of experimental, survey and aggregate data, the researchers found strong support for the demobilization theory.

A 2004 study conducted by Joshua D. Clinton of Princeton University and John S. Lapinski of Yale University also looked at the demobilization and stimulation hypotheses. They also explored whether independents are affected differently than partisans. Over 10,400, respondents were placed in five different groups and presented with either a single positive or a single negative ad from Democratic Presidential candidate Al Gore, a positive and negative ad from Gore, or a Gore negative and Republican Presidential candidate George W. Bush positive or negative ad. Participants were then surveyed. No statistically significant evidence was found to reject the null hypothesis that the probability of voting is unrelated to exposure to negative advertising. However, when testing against the stimulation hypothesis, the researchers found a slight increase in self-reported future voter turnout among those who had seen either a positive or a negative ad over those who had seen no ad. Nonetheless, they found no significant difference in self-reported turnout between those who had seen a positive ad and those who had seen a negative ad.

The researchers also found that ads were more likely to get voters to turnout if they were about an issue that had direct effects on the viewer. Contrary to a frequently held belief by academics, they found independents were not affected by the negative advertisements differently than were Republicans and Democrats. Additionally, challenging another commonly held belief, respondents who paid a great deal of attention to campaigns were

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actually found to be less likely to vote after being exposed negative advertisements, though this was not the case for other voters. Again, however, since this study looked at a Presidential election, results may differ from a midterm election in which candidate exposure by means other than advertising is often lessened.

Studies looking at the demobilization theory and stimulation theory have shown mixed results. Even studies looking at the same data through different means of analysis have come to different conclusions. Self-reported recall of ad viewership, as used in the 1999 Wattenberg and Briens study, is clearly a poor measure of actual viewership. Not only does the evidence in Ansolabehere's research disprove recall as an adequate measure of viewership, but also it seems likely that those who take an interest in the election are more likely to recall ads and vote than those who do not. The two studies providing the most solid evidence against demobilization, Clinton and Lipinski (2004) and Goldstein and Freedman (2002), were conducted on Presidential elections and thus may have come up with different results based on voters seeing the ads already having more knowledge of the candidates. Those based on congressional elections and other less publicized contests generally supported demobilization theory whether the study was based on NES survey data, actual results compared to the tone of the campaign or their own controlled experiment.

Other studies looked at how candidate favorability was affected by negative ads. Rather than conducting an experiment, a 1984 study by Sharyne Merritt of California Polytechnic University uses a survey in a California district during an election. Merritt interviewed 314 people about the California State Assembly race between Democrat Tom Hayden and Republican Bill Hawkins. Hawkins advertised largely with negative billboards attacking Hayden's positions, and not a single respondent had a positive response when asked how they felt about the billboards. Fifty-one percent who recalled Hawkins' billboards expressed negative feelings towards him, while only 36 percent expressed negative feelings towards Hayden, the ads' target. Hayden's campaign spent much of its money on TV advertising, with some of it directed towards ads discrediting Hawkins and his billboards. Of those who recalled Hayden's negative spot, 13 percent expressed negative views of Hawkins in response, but just as many also responded with negative views of Hayden. Merritt argued

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both these results led credence to her hypothesis that negative advertising produces negative responses to both the target and the sponsor. Of additional interest, Merritt also found that most Republicans could not correctly identify the sponsors of Hawkins' billboards, often believing they were views Hayden was actively promoting, while a majority of Democrats and independents were able to identify Hawkins as the sponsor. Unsurprisingly, Republicans were likely to respond with anger towards Hayden, while Democrats were more likely to respond with anger towards Hawkins, and independents were evenly split. Similarly, only Democrats responded negatively towards Hawkins after viewing Hayden's ads about his billboards. These findings and others contributed support to her second hypothesis that partisanship mediates media effects.

A study conducted during the 1993 Canadian federal election looked at the effects of an attack ad on attitudes towards the two candidates (Haddock & Zanna, June 1997). During the election, the Progressive Conservative party ran two ads focusing on the facial paralysis of opposition candidate Jean Chretien. The two researchers ran an experiment with 110 volunteer subjects, having them complete measures of attitudes, affective responses, and cognitive responses concerning Conservative leader Kim Campbell and liberal leader Jean Chretien. One group answered the questions before viewing the advertisements and another filled out the survey after viewing them. Those who filled out the survey after were found more likely to list positive feelings and attributes towards Chretien and negative feelings about Campbell than those who filled out the survey before viewing the ads, showing a potential for negative ads to have a backlash against the candidate or party that runs them.

A psychological study in 1996 looked at campaigns as pairs rather than individually (Houston & Doan, 1996). Instead of focusing on how a single candidate's negative ads affected views and turnout, this research compared elections in which both candidates focused on their own positives with elections in which both candidates focused on attacking the opposition. Participants who volunteered for the study read basic information on two Senate candidates consisting of positive and negative characteristics pre-tested to be approximately equivalent. Positions on five issues, were reported with one taking the liberal viewpoint and the other the conservative. Participants were classified as liberal or conservative based on self-report.

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Participants were then randomly placed in four groups, either exposed to positive campaign ads from both candidates, negative ads from both candidates, a positive ad from the liberal candidate and a negative ad from the conservative, or a negative ad from the liberal candidate and a positive ad from the conservative. Post-test results showed that a positive-positive campaign produced higher rating for both candidates as well as greater self-reported likelihood of voting than a negative-negative campaign. Interestingly enough, the research also found that the assessments of a shared ideology candidate (e.g. a liberal participant rating a liberal politician) was downgraded for running a negative campaign only when their opposition was also running a negative campaign, while assessments of opposing ideology candidate running a positive campaign were only upgraded when the shared ideology candidate was also using a positive campaign.

Another study looking at potential backlash was conducted by University of Minnesota Professor Patrick C. Meirick in 2005. Using an experiment with 107 volunteers from communication classes, Meirick split the students into four groups, showing a Democrat or Republican negative ad sponsored by a corresponding candidate or a corresponding political party. The ads were embedded in a 15 minute game show and were real ads that had similar themes. Participants were then given a post-test evaluating their views of the candidates. Meirick's experiment yielded surprising results. Meirick found that attacking candidates were evaluated more favorably when participants saw candidate-sponsored attacks rather than party-funded attacks. This was unexpected since candidate-sponsored attack ads must be approved by the candidate and can directly be attributed to them, while party-sponsored attack ads are not always approved by the candidate. The experiment also found that those with greater political knowledge were better able to identify who sponsored an ad. While these findings provide interesting results, taking subjects only from communication classes may lead to more media literate participants who view ads differently which could skew results.

Past studies show clearly that negative ads can have a backlash effect. Whether that backlash is worse than the negative effects on the opposition appears to vary greatly depending on the type of campaign being run by both candidates and the ad's sponsor (politician vs. party sponsored). Beyond that, some results, such as Meirick's, have led to counter-intuitive

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conclusions. While people may better relate personally to ads attacking a candidate's character, it seems that the specific content of the ad would also likely play a role on whether the backlash is worse than from an ad attacking policy. That party sponsored ads lead to more negative backlash against a candidate than candidate sponsored ads could also be a result of the content itself, since that could not be fully controlled in the experiment using real ads (Meirick, Summer 2005). Some of these studies also have inherently skewed groups of participants that could lead to differing results.

Another topic of interest was whether negative ads were educative (helped to increase voters knowledge about the candidates) or if they caused cynicism (made voters distrust the political process), often with a focus on the issue of whether or not political sophisticates are affected differently. Adding questions to the belief that negative advertisements cause cynicism are the findings of research conducted in 1999 (Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, & Babbitt, Dec. 1999). This meta-analysis of 52 different studies came to three conclusions. First, it found no statistically significant evidence to suggest negative ads are liked less than positive ads. Its second finding was that there is no evidence to support the contention that negative ads are more effective than positive ads. Finally, it found little evidence to support the claim that the increasing use of negative ads is hurting electoral participation.

Another study looking at negative ads' potential effects on cynicism was done in 2002 (Pinkleton, Nam-Hyun, & Austin, Spring 2002). This experiment had 246 participants randomly assigned to one of two groups: a treatment or a control group. Those in the treatment group received fictional statements about candidates for a state senate seat in Georgia. Participants read each candidate's bio and then completed a series of pretest scales. They were then given three different advertisements: a positive ad, a contrast ad, and a negative ad in print form. The control group simply read an essay about Georgia. The more negative the advertisement was the more negativism participants reported towards political campaigns. Additionally, participants also found the positive ads more useful towards their knowledge than either the negative or contrast ads. However, there was no difference in reported apathy towards politics after viewing any of the three advertisements, and the study puts in doubt whether negative ads lead to cynicism.

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Providing evidence that political sophisticates are influenced differently was a 2005 study done by Daniel Stevens of Hartwick College. Stevens created an experiment with four conditions: control, one negative ad, and repetition of negative ads towards a Democrat or negative ads towards a Republican. Ads were embedded in a 15 minute news broadcast. Each group contained over 40 subjects who were recruited from introductory political science classes. All subjects were measured on their level of political sophistication based on factual knowledge about the government. Stevens' results showed that low political sophisticates exhibit few information gains or even less information about the candidates after a single exposure to a negative ad than those who did not see any political advertising. High sophisticates showed slight information gains under the same condition. Their ability to place candidates relative to each other on specific issues increased, while low sophisticates' ability to do the same decreased. These results show that if negative ads are educative, it is not the case for all individuals. Even with repeated exposure to the same ad, the low sophisticates did not seem to gain information. Additionally, the study showed high sophisticates, while increasing the numbering of likes and dislikes of candidate characteristics and policy views after one ad, actually showed less likes and dislikes after seeing the same ad multiple times. His study also found that exposure to multiple negative ads or the same negative ad multiple times prompted more thoughts about the messages of the advertising, with most being negative, and more resentment, regardless of political sophistication. This study, however, should be questioned for its external validity since students from a political science class are likely to have a higher average level of political sophistication than the general public.

A 2008 study looked at character-based negative ads' effects on cynicism and self-efficacy, the belief an individual can have an effect on politics, differed from policy based negative ads (Dardis, Shen, & Edwards, Winter 2008). The experiment had 129 undergraduate student participants from a large university and used a completely crossed 2 (political ad type: issue versus character)  $\times$  3 (message exposures: one, three, or five ads) between-subjects design. Post-tests found that viewers of policy based attack ads reported higher political cynicism than those who were exposed to character based attack ads. Viewers of character based ads were found to have higher levels of perceived self-efficacy. Unlike past research that generalized negative ads, this study showed a distinction between the effects of policy and

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character based attack ads and actually found ads attacking character produced more positive gains in self-efficacy and decrease in cynicism.

The studies explored here show little evidence to support the claim that negative political ads cause cynicism. However, some of these studies do show a distinction among high and low political sophisticates as high political sophisticates are able to gain some knowledge from low exposure to negative ads, while that may not be the case for low political sophisticates.

A study conducted by four researchers at the University of Maryland focused on the 1998 congressional election took a different approach opting to get data from campaign managers instead of voters (Abbe, Herrnson, Magleby, & Patterson, Feb 2000). The study found that campaigns run by professionals as opposed to those run by people with little political experience were more likely to go negative as were those campaigns in close elections or facing incumbents. They also found that outside organizations running negative ads in a race encouraged the candidates themselves to go negative. Consultants often believe going on the attack is the most effective strategy to neutralize attacks from opponents and outside groups. They found, however, that despite experienced campaign managers' beliefs, negative advertising is not statistically related to the percent of votes that candidates receive. Even focusing on competitive challengers and open-seat races, negative ads did not improve electoral performance. They did find a few specific cases in which negative ads helped candidates; however, they also found some in which a misleading negative ad hurt the candidate running it more than helping him or her. Overall the study found candidates waging negative campaigns do not receive significantly more votes than those who run positive campaigns. They found a positive correlation between the amount of money candidates spend on campaign communication and voter share.

While several methods have been used to examine and question the effectiveness of negative ads, it is clear experienced campaign managers believe they have their use and are an important part of an overall campaign strategy. Studies such as Houston and Doan's 1996 psychological study lend some credence that negative advertising may be an effective counter to an opponent's negative ads. However, the belief among campaign managers that spending



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money on negative ads increases their share of the vote appears to be nothing more than a myth.

Past research leads to very few clear conclusions; however, effects often appear more concrete when studying specific demographic groups. Additionally, those who are more politically informed appear to take more information out of negative ads than those who are less politically informed. Negative ads also seem to have a relatively demobilizing effect in non-Presidential elections. Not many studies have made the distinction among character- and policy-based attack ads, but one found-policy based attack ads led to more backlash and cynicism than character-based attack ads (Dardis, Shen, & Edwards, Winter 2008). These effects and more will be explored among a relatively unstudied and growing demographic group: young voters with some college education.

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**RATIONALE AND HYPOTHESES**

In an attempt to avoid the methodological and sampling errors of past research, this experiment drew participants from a medium-sized university to get a sample of young potential voters with some college education. Past studies that have attempted to use nationwide survey data have run into problems justifying recall or other similar methods as actual measures of exposure. While experiments have their own potential flaws in external validity, they generally have reached more concrete conclusions. Additionally, researchers who have attempted to study all potential voters have struggled to reach solid conclusions and have found differences between demographic groups. Instead of focusing on all American voters, this study will look at a group of rising political power in the United States, young voters with some college education. This study also differentiates participants based on time spent following politics. This will help differentiate people who actively follow politics, including those who take American politics classes, from those who do not. Time spent following politics will be used instead of political sophistication scales since political sophistication scales measure knowledge of the government, but not necessarily who is in tune with current politics and candidates. This study will examine if there is a difference in the effects of negative ads between those who spend at least 30 minutes a week following American politics (a small enough time to include those taking American political classes) and those who do not. This study will focus on policy-based attack ads since they are more easily comparable in theme to positive ads and are received less critically in the media. Additionally, the focus will be on candidate-sponsored ads since the backlash for these can be directly and accurately assessed on the candidate.

Past studies have shown political sophisticates gain more knowledge from negative ads than do non-sophisticates and also increase their numbering of likes and dislikes of candidate characteristics and policy views after viewing a negative ad. As such, those who actively follow politics also would seem likely to increase their feelings, one way or another, about a candidate after viewing a negative ad. Therefore,

H1: Among those who spend at least half an hour a week following politics, watching negative policy based political advertising will strengthen any opinion they already

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have about the likelihood of voting for a particular candidate, regardless of who the ad is about.

Since those with low political sophistication have shown no gain or even have less accurate knowledge about a candidate after viewing a negative ad, it seems likely that those who do not actively follow politics would gain uncertainty about any preexisting leaning toward a candidate after viewing a negative ad. Backlash will cause them to be uncertain about picking either candidate. Therefore,

H2: Among those who spend less than half an hour a week following politics, watching negative policy based political advertising will weaken any opinion they already have about the likelihood of voting for a particular candidate, regardless of who the ad is about.

A few studies have shown that negative ads led to increased negative views of both candidates. Therefore,

H3: Among all voters, favorability ratings will decrease for both candidates after participants view the negative policy based political ad.

Additionally, studies have shown negative ads can have a negative backlash on the sponsoring candidate, often greater than their effect on the targeted candidate. Positive ads rarely have the same backlash effect. Therefore,

H4: Among all voters, increase in favorability ratings of the sponsoring candidate will be greater among those who view the positive political ad than those who view the negative policy based ad.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used an experiment with a pre-test post-test equivalent group design. Fifty-three students were recruited through campus-wide e-mails and with the help of professors. The participants were introduced to the study and told to imagine that they are in the midst of a midterm election year and the race in their state for Senate is between Democrat Russ Feingold and Republican Ron Johnson. Every participant was given a pre-test that assessed their likelihood of voting, likelihood of voting for each candidate, and their favorability rating of each candidate all on 7 option Likert-type scales. They were also asked for party affiliation and to assess their political leanings on a 7 option Likert-type scale ranging from conservative to liberal. They were asked if they spend at least 30 minutes a week following politics and what their primary source of current political information is.

Participants who volunteered for the experiment were then randomly assigned to two groups. Both groups watched a 10 minute clip of a local Wisconsin television broadcast. In one group, the news clip had Russ Feingold's commercial "Homegrown" in which he talks about what he has done and will do to bring jobs to the state embedded in a commercial break. The other group viewed the same news clip, but with Feingold's commercial "Creative Destruction" in which he talks about opponent Ron Johnson supporting bills that he claims cost the state jobs.

The participants of those two groups were then given a post-test. The post-test again assessed their likelihood of voting, their likelihood of voting for each candidate, and their favorability rating of each candidate.

Results were inputted into SPSS software for analysis. Each group's pre-test ratings were compared to post-test ratings to look for a statistically significant difference in likelihood of voting and voting for a particular candidate from both before and after the treatment. Within each group, results were divided between those who spend more than 30 minutes a week viewing politics and those who do not to see if there is a statistically significant difference in their likelihood to vote assessments. Analyses also were run to see if there was a statistical difference in the changes between the group that saw the negative ad and the group that saw the positive ad.

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**RESULTS**

Hypothesis 1 predicted that among those who spend at least half an hour a week following politics, watching negative policy based political advertising would strengthen any opinion they already held about the likelihood of voting for a particular candidate, regardless of who the ad is about. Unfortunately, only 12 respondents fit this category and significant data was not able to be obtained. However, among those who did fit the qualifiers for this case, eight of 12 indicated no difference in their likelihood of voting for Feingold after watching the negative ad, while seven of 12 indicated no difference in their likelihood of voting for Johnson after their viewing of the commercial. Additionally, while some participants moved from may or may not vote for each candidate towards leaning towards voting for a particular candidate and others saw participants go from leaning one way to back to neutral, no participants actually indicated a strengthening in any previously reported likelihood of voting for either candidate.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that among those who spend less than half an hour a week following politics, watching negative policy based political advertising will weaken any opinion they already held about the likelihood of voting for a particular candidate, regardless of who the ad is about. Similarly to hypothesis one, only 16 cases fit the qualifiers for this hypothesis. Likewise, eight of 16 indicated no change in their likelihood of voting for Feingold, while 11 of 16 indicated no change in their likelihood of voting for Johnson. Three participants indicated a weakening in the likelihood of voting for Feingold and three indicated a weakening in the likelihood of voting for Johnson. Additionally, only one participant indicated an overall decrease in likelihood of voting in the election, while six indicated an increase and nine remained the same. Overall likelihood of voting did not change significantly when reported likelihood of voting in the election was asked before ( $M = 4.00, SD = 1.211$ ) and after ( $M = 4.31, SD = 1.448$ ) watching the video.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that among all voters, favorability ratings will decrease among both candidates after participants view the negative policy based political ad. This time 28 cases fit the required conditions. Feingold's average favorability before viewing the negative ad ( $M = 3.96, SD = 1.071$ ) was not statistically significantly different from his favorability after

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viewing the negative ad ( $M = 4.21, SD = 1.166$ ) at a level of  $p < .05$ , however it was at a level of  $p < .10$ . The change in mean actually showed Feingold's favorability increased after viewing the negative ad. For Johnson, the difference in average favorability before viewing the negative ad ( $M = 4.00, SD = 0.903$ ) did not approach statistical significance from his favorability after viewing the negative ad ( $M = 3.89, SD = 1.100$ ).

**Paired Samples Statistics**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Feingold Favorability After Video	4.21	28	1.166	.220
	Feingold Favorability Before Video	3.96	28	1.071	.202
Pair 2	Johnson Favorability After Video	3.89	28	1.100	.208
	Johnson Favorability Before Video	4.00	28	.903	.171

**Paired Samples Test**

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	Feingold Favorability After Video - Feingold Favorability Before Video	.250	.752	.142	-.041	.541	1.760	27	.090
	Johnson Favorability After Video - Johnson Favorability Before Video	-.107	.875	.165	-.446	.232	-.648	27	.523

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Hypothesis 4 predicted that among all voters, increase in favorability ratings of the sponsoring candidate will be greater among those who view the positive political ad ( $N = 25$ ) than among those who view the negative policy based ad ( $N = 28$ ). While the difference in the increase of favorability ratings for Feingold, the sponsoring candidate of each ad, between those who watched the positive ad ( $M = 0.64$ ,  $SD = 1.036$ ) and those who watched the negative ad ( $M = 0.25$ ,  $SD = 0.752$ ) was not significant, some other evidence supporting this hypothesis was found. While the means prior to watching the positive ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 0.879$ ) and negative ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.071$ ) ads did not show a statistically significant difference, the means after for the two randomly assigned groups showed a statistically significant [ $p < .05$ ] higher favorability among those who viewed the positive ad ( $M = 4.88$ ,  $SD = 1.092$ ) than those who viewed the negative ad ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 1.166$ ).

**Group Statistics**

Ad Watched		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Feingold Favorability Before Video	Positive	25	4.24	.879	.176
	Negative	28	3.96	1.071	.202
Feingold Favorability After Video	Positive	25	4.88	1.092	.218
	Negative	28	4.21	1.166	.220

**Independent Samples Test**

		t-test for Equality of Means						
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Feingold Favorability Before Video	Equal variances assumed	1.017	51	.314	.276	.271	-.269	.820
	Equal variances not assumed	1.028	50.670	.309	.276	.268	-.263	.814

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Feingold Favorability After Video	Equal variances assumed	2.137	51	.037	.666	.311	.040	1.291
	Equal variances not assumed	2.145	50.871	.037	.666	.310	.043	1.289

Though not directly related to the hypothesis, even stronger statistics were found over likelihood of voting. The average change in likelihood of voting for Feingold after watching the positive ad ( $M = 0.72$ ,  $SD = 1.100$ ) was significantly higher [ $p < .05$ ] than the average change in likelihood of voting for Feingold after watching the negative ad ( $M = 0.00$ ,  $SD = 0.981$ ). Additionally while there was no significant difference in likelihood of voting for Feingold before watching the positive video ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.274$ ) and negative video ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.201$ ), there was a statistically significant [ $p < .05$ ] higher likelihood of voting for Feingold after watching the positive video ( $M = 4.68$ ,  $SD = 1.180$ ) than after watching the negative video ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.290$ ). There was no significant change in the favorability or likelihood of voting for Johnson after watching either ad, nor was there a significant difference in the favorability or likelihood of voting for Johnson between the positive and negative ad groups after viewing the ad.

**Group Statistics**

Ad Watched		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likelihood of Voting Feingold Change	Positive	25	.72	1.100	.220
	Negative	28	.00	.981	.185
Likelihood of Voting Johnson Change	Positive	25	-.16	1.028	.206
	Negative	28	-.04	.999	.189



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**Independent Samples Test**

		t-test for Equality of Means						
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Likelihood of Voting Feingold Change	Equal variances assumed	2.519	51	.015	.720	.286	.146	1.294
Likelihood of Voting Feingold Change	Equal variances not assumed	2.502	48.471	.016	.720	.288	.142	1.298
Likelihood of Voting Johnson Change	Equal variances assumed	-.446	51	.658	-.124	.279	-.684	.435
Likelihood of Voting Johnson Change	Equal variances not assumed	-.445	49.967	.658	-.124	.279	-.685	.436

**Group Statistics**

Ad Watched		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Likelihood of Voting Feingold Before Video	Positive	25	3.96	1.274	.255
Likelihood of Voting Feingold Before Video	Negative	28	3.96	1.201	.227
Likelihood of Voting Johnson Before Video	Positive	25	3.80	1.190	.238
Likelihood of Voting Johnson Before Video	Negative	28	4.07	1.184	.224
Likelihood of Voting Feingold After Video	Positive	25	4.68	1.180	.236
Likelihood of Voting Feingold After Video	Negative	28	3.96	1.290	.244
Likelihood of Voting Johnson After Video	Positive	25	3.64	1.075	.215
Likelihood of Voting Johnson After Video	Negative	28	4.04	1.347	.254

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**Independent Samples Test**

		t-test for Equality of Means						
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Likelihood of Voting Feingold Before Video	Equal variances assumed	- .013	51	.990	-.004	.340	-.687	.679
Likelihood of Voting Feingold Before Video	Equal variances not assumed	- .013	49.499	.990	-.004	.341	-.690	.681
Likelihood of Voting Johnson Before Video	Equal variances assumed	-.831	51	.410	-.271	.327	-.927	.384
Likelihood of Voting Johnson Before Video	Equal variances not assumed	-.831	50.267	.410	-.271	.327	-.928	.385
Likelihood of Voting Feingold After Video	Equal variances assumed	2.098	51	.041	.716	.341	.031	1.401
Likelihood of Voting Feingold After Video	Equal variances not assumed	2.109	50.965	.040	.716	.339	.034	1.397
Likelihood of Voting Johnson After Video	Equal variances assumed	- 1.172	51	.246	-.396	.337	-1.073	.282
Likelihood of Voting Johnson After Video	Equal variances not assumed	- 1.188	50.412	.241	-.396	.333	-1.065	.273

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**DISCUSSION**

Through an experiment using pre-test post-test equivalent group design, four hypotheses were tested examining the relative effectiveness of negative and positive political advertisements. Unfortunately a lack of turnout to the six scheduled experiment sessions hurt chances of finding significant results for several of the four hypotheses. The first hypothesis predicted that those who spend at least half an hour a week following politics would find any opinion they had about voting for a particular candidate strengthened by watching a negative ad. While the limited number of participants didn't permit finding significant results, not a single case would have supported the hypothesis. While one cannot refute past findings based on this limited data, the data shows no support that past studies indicating the politically informed will strengthen their opinions or increase their likelihood of voting for a political candidate after watching a negative ad applies to young college educated voters (Stevens, Sept. 2005). This is clearly an area where more research to show whether negative ads do in fact have an effect on strengthening the beliefs of and mobilizing voters, especially young college educated voters, could be of interest.

The second hypothesis predicted that those who spend less than half an hour a week following politics would find their likelihood of voting for a particular candidate weakened after watching the negative ad, regardless of who the ad was about. Again, the small number of participants limited findings in this category. The data collected showed no significant changes in the before and after evaluations of those who did not spend at least half an hour a week following politics and watched the negative ad. Additionally, the data showed no decrease in overall likelihood of voting after watching the video. The sample size was not significantly large enough to draw conclusions, but it suggests that more research into whether the demobilization theory, even among those who don't spend much time following politics and especially among young college educated voters, could provide more useful results.

The third hypothesis predicted that among all voters, favorability ratings would decrease among both candidates after participants viewed the negative policy based political ad. With 28 participants fitting into this category, this hypothesis had a better basis for drawing

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conclusions. Johnson's favorability rating did not show a significant difference after participants viewed the negative ad. Though the change in Feingold's favorability rating was not significant at the  $p < .05$  level, it was at the  $p < .10$ . Feingold's favorability rating actually showed an increase among participants after they had watched the negative ad. This study brings into question research that has shown policy based attack ads are most likely to lead to backlash for the sponsoring candidate (Meirick, Summer 2005). Among young college educated voters, these results suggest there is no reason to believe a negative ad attacking an opponent's views on policy will lead to backlash for the sponsoring candidate. Certainly this may vary based on the particular ad, but suggestions that a negative ad sponsored by a candidate guarantees backlash appear unfounded, at least among this demographic. These results again question demobilization theories as participants' results did not show general disgust towards the candidates after viewing the ad. Again, whether these conclusions apply only to college age students or the general population would require more research. Attack ads have earned a bad reputation among the media for their supposed negative effects on public discourse and voter turnout, but these results offer a different conclusion. Looking at what characteristics, if any, in negative ads do cause backlash and hurt voter turnout would be an interesting topic to study in the future.

The final hypothesis predicted that among all voters, increase in favorability ratings of the sponsoring candidate will be greater among those who view the positive political ad than those who view the negative. This hypothesis was meant to test whether a positive or a negative ad would prove a more effective method for a candidate looking to gain support from the college-educated, young voter demographic. This hypothesis provided the most fruitful results. Feingold's favorability ratings proved significantly higher after viewers watched the positive ad than after viewers watched the negative ad. The likelihood of voting for Feingold was also significantly higher after watching the positive ad than the negative ad, as was the change in the likelihood of voting from after watching the positive ad compared to watching the negative ad.

Perhaps just as important, there was no significant change in Johnson's favorability rating after watching either ad. If the negative ad attacking Johnson on policy issues was designed to

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bring down his favorability and turn voters away from him, it was not very effective. In fact there was no significant change in the likelihood of voting for Johnson after viewing either ad. Feingold's negative ad failed to sway voters away from Johnson, while his positive ad proved more productive in solidifying votes for himself among the demographic of college aged voters.

While a larger group of participants could have provided better results in supporting or refuting all four hypotheses, these results do provide some potential insight into what ads are better at effectively targeting college age voters. The positive and negative ads essentially discuss the same issue: the positive ad explains how Feingold was against unfair trade agreements that cost Wisconsin jobs; the negative explains how Johnson was in favor of those same agreements. However, the negative ad Feingold ran did not have a significant effect either on the favorability or the likelihood of voting for either candidate. The ad may not have hurt Feingold as some past studies may have suggested. In fact, research on the negative ad failed to support any effect on mobilizing or demobilizing viewers to vote. However, the positive ad provided a significant boost to viewers' likelihood of voting for Feingold, while also increasing his favorability rating to a level higher than the negative ad did. All these findings suggest spending money on a positive ad may be the more effective way to get the support of young college educated voters.

The limitations of this study and its conclusions must be noted. The study's participants were all college students, and thus its findings may not apply to all young voters, but rather just college voters. Additionally, the study was conducted at a university in New England and may be representative of students in that area, but not all students throughout the country. Future research conducted countrywide that focuses on both college students and those who do not attend college that fall into the young voter demographic (age 18-29) could provide more helpful data to politicians looking to spend their money more effectively to attract that important voting bloc.

This study also suffers from the same limitations of any lab based study on negative political ads: no ad is ever shown in isolation. While the study attempted to mimic reality as much as possible by placing the ad in a newscast, viewers very rarely will see one ad by itself. During

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campaigns both candidates run ads, often back-to-back, and ads often address one another. Candidates will often have several different ads running during the same period as well. Newscasts will also feature reports about the campaigns and even sometimes stories about the ads, neither of which was featured in the newscasts participants in this study watched. Additionally, people will often discuss candidates and their ads with friends, families and peers before voting. All of these factors would likely impact each individual ad's effectiveness.

While it is hard to draw too many conclusions from the results of this study, the results suggesting a positive ad is more effective than a negative one among young voters should help direct future research on a larger scale to see if positive campaigning is in fact more productive for politicians looking to gain the youth vote. Finally, the first two hypotheses warrant further research on a larger scale to truly prove if theories suggesting political advertising affect those who take the time to stay knowledgeable on current politics differently than those who do not.

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**APPENDICES**







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Appendix B – (Post-Video Survey)

Based on party affiliation and any knowledge about the candidate, how would you rate your opinion of Democrat Russ Feingold on a scale of 1 (extremely negative) to 7 (extremely positive)? (Circle one)

Extremely Negative	Neutral	Extremely Positive
1	4	7
2	5	6
3		

Based on party affiliation and any knowledge about the candidate, how would you rate your opinion of Republican Ron Johnson on a scale of 1 (extremely negative) to 7 (extremely positive)? (Circle one)

Extremely Negative	Neutral	Extremely Positive
1	4	7
2	5	6
3		

If there was an upcoming election for a U.S. Senate seat between these two candidates in your state, how likely would you be to vote on a scale of 1 (definitely wouldn't vote) to 7 (definitely would vote)? (Circle one)

Definitely wouldn't Vote	May or may not Vote	Definitely would vote
1	4	7
2	5	6
3		

How likely would you be to vote for Democrat Russ Feingold on a scale of 1 (Definitely wouldn't vote for Feingold) to 7 (Definitely would vote for Feingold)? (Circle one)

Definitely wouldn't Vote	Unsure	Definitely would vote
1	4	7
2	5	6
3		

How likely would you be to vote for Republican Ron Johnson on a scale of 1 (Definitely wouldn't vote for Johnson) to 7 (Definitely would vote for Johnson)? (Circle one)

Definitely wouldn't Vote	Unsure	Definitely would vote
1	4	7
2	5	6
3		

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Appendix C – (Newscast)

VIDEO STARTS

0:00 – 1:50 – NEWS OPEN AND TOP STORY –POLICE STAKEOUT TO FIND SHOOTER

1:51 - 4:14 – NEWSTORY: SEMI CRASH

4:15 – 4:41 – NEWSTORY: WOMEN ATTACKS HUSBAND

4:42 – 5:03 - NEWSTORY: SKI LODGE FIRE

5:04 – 5:12 – ADVERTISEMENT: STATION’S WEBSITE

5:13 – 5:28 – ADVERTISEMENT: LOCAL YMCA

5:29 – 5:59 - ADVERTISEMENT: FEINGOLD’S “HOMEGROWN” (POSITIVE) OR CREATIVE DESTRUCTION (NEGATIVE)

6:00 – 6:14 – ADVERTISEMENT: UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – PARKSIDE

6:15 – 8:14 - NEWSTORY: SNOWBULANCE

8:14 – 10:04 - NEWSTORY: BEARS FAN PRIEST

10:04 – 10:12 - ADVERTISEMENT: STATION’S WEBSITE

VIDEO ENDS

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