Attack Politics
Negativity in Presidential Campaigns since 1960
by Emmett H. Buell, Jr. and Lee Sigelman

The study of several dimensions of presidential campaigns
   Degree of negativity
   Topics of campaign
   Who delivered the campaign message
   The methods of attacks
   Attack propensities and targets

13 elections, 26 major party campaigns: from Labor Day to Election Day

Content Analysis of The New York Times

18,364 campaign statements (about 1,400 per election)
The Agendas of Campaigns

Campaign Topics

Ownership or Convergence?

Do the Candidates Campaign on the Issues that Favor Them (issue ownership, selective-emphasis) or on the Same Issues (presumably the issues that the public and/or media consider the most important)?

Generally a High Degree of Convergence (not of positions, but of agendas).

There are a large number of perennial issues.
Negativity in Campaign

**Attack Propensity Score** =
Attack statements/Total Campaign Statements

Possible Range of 0 to 1.0
Actual Range of .42 to .71
Mean = .54.

The Skaperdas-Grofman Model (p.21-24)
(very similar to the conventional wisdom)
“the front-runner should wage a more positive and less negative campaign than the runner-up”
and
“negativity on the part of the runner-up against the front-runner should fall off once defeat appears certain.”

and as in Milton Rakove’s Study of the Cook County Political Machine--
“Don’t Make No Waves, Don’t Back No Losers”
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“Don’t Make No Waves, Don’t Back No Losers”
The Front-runner's Strategy
“A front-runner who enjoys an initially sufficient lead over the trailing candidate will not engage in negative campaigning.” (P.23)

Safely positive campaigns work to the advantage of the status quo— the frontrunner.

The Trailing Candidate’s Strategy
“If a candidate’s initial support is sufficiently low, that candidate may put all of his or her effort into negative campaigning.” (P.23)

Risky negative campaigns have the possibility of shaking things up to the advantage of the trailing candidate
The Difference

“If both candidates engage in positive as well as negative campaigning, the initial leader engages in more positive and less negative campaigning than the trailer.”
1. Who were the most and least negative major party campaigns?

The Most Negative Campaigns Since 1960

1. John Kennedy (D) 1960
2. George McGovern (D) 1972
4. Walter Mondale (D) 1984
5. Barry Goldwater (R) 1964
The Most Positive Campaigns Since 1960

1. Barack Obama (D) 2008
2. Gerald Ford (R) 1976
3. Ronald Reagan (R) 1984
4. Bill Clinton (D) 1996
5. John McCain (R) 2008
2. Is there an over time trend? Are campaigns getting more negative?

No.

Dep Var: TOTNEGATIVE   N: 13   Multiple R: 0.3285   Squared multiple R: 0.1079
Adjusted squared multiple R: 0.0268   Standard error of estimate: 0.1394

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Analysis of Variance

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*** WARNING ***

Case 3 is an outlier (Studentized Residual = -2.6605)

Durbin-Watson D Statistic 2.2939
First Order Autocorrelation -0.1982
3. Is Negative Campaigning Reactive? If one candidate is very negative, does that cause the opposition to “go negative” in response?

No. Not Significant.

Correlations of Negativity of Democratic and Republican Candidates = .22
Winning and Losing Candidates = .19
4. Is there a party difference?

No.

Median Party Negativity
Mean Democratic candidate .60
Mean Republican candidate .51

Democrat more Negative than the Republican in 6 of 13 elections
Republican more Negative than the Democrat in 7 of 13 elections

Dep Var: NEGATIVITY   N: 26   Multiple R: 0.2360   Squared multiple R: 0.0557
Adjusted squared multiple R: 0.0164   Standard error of estimate: 0.0911

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Durbin-Watson D Statistic         2.1309
First Order Autocorrelation       -0.1309
5. Are incumbents less negative than challengers?

Yes (at least based on the 8 incumbents who ran)

**Median Party Negativity**

Incumbent Candidates  
Challenger Candidate

Incumbent more Negative than Challenger in 1 of 8 elections  
Challenger more Negative than Incumbent in 7 of 8 elections

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**Dep Var: NEGATIVITY**  
N: 16  Multiplie R: 0.5834  Squared multiple R: 0.3403  
Adjusted squared multiple R: 0.2932  Standard error of estimate: 0.0700

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Durbin-Watson D Statistic 2.1383  
First Order Autocorrelation -0.1231
6. Do Close Campaigns Generate MORE Negativity Overall?

No significant difference.

Median Total Negativity in Dead Heat elections  0.95  
Median Total Negativity in Competitive elections  1.10  
Median Total Negativity in Landslides  1.19  

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Durbin-Watson D Statistic  1.6305
First Order Autocorrelation  -0.0250
7. Are Trailing Candidates MORE Negative than Frontrunners?

Setting Aside the Dead Heats (1960, 1968, 1976, and 2000) since trailers and frontrunners are unclear in dead heats.

Yes

Median Party Negativity
Median Frontrunning candidate .49
Median Trailing candidate .64

Frontrunner more Negative 1 of 9 elections
Trailer more Negative 8 of 9 elections

Dep Var: NEGATIVITY  N: 18  Multiple R: 0.5733  Squared multiple R: 0.3287  Adjusted squared multiple R: 0.2868  Standard error of estimate: 0.0724

Effect         Coefficient    Std Error     Std Coef Tolerance     t   P(2 Tail)
CONSTANT            0.6080       0.0241       0.0000     .      25.1874   0.0000
FRONTRUNNER        -0.0956       0.0341      -0.5733    1.0000  -2.7991   0.0129

Analysis of Variance
Source             Sum-of-Squares   df  Mean-Square     F-ratio       P
Regression                0.0411     1       0.0411      7.8350      0.0129
Residual                  0.0839    16       0.0052

Durbin-Watson D Statistic         2.0050
First Order Autocorrelation       -0.1702
Of 9 Clear Frontrunners

8 were LESS Negative than the Trailing Candidate

Only 1, Jimmy Carter, was MORE Negative than the Trailing Candidate
8. Are More Negative Campaigns Generally More (or Less) Successful?

Can’t really say since the Decision to Go Negative partly reflects the prospects of winning. Do they lose because they have gone negative or have they gone negative because it looked like they were going to lose – probably the latter.
Many ways to understand elections –

Democrats vs. Republicans

Liberals vs. Conservatives

Incumbents vs. Challengers

In-Party vs. Out-Party

But both *The American Campaign* and *Attack Politics* demonstrate that there is also insight from:

Frontrunners vs. Trailing Candidates