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## The Influence and Evolution of Negative Political Advertising

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**The Influence and Evolution of Negative Political Advertising**

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Bachelor of Integrated Studies — Communications, Murray State University

BIS 437-02: Senior Project

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April 14, 2021

**FIELD OF STUDY  
PROJECT APPROVAL**

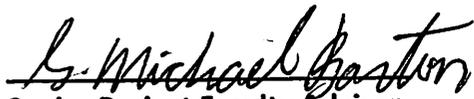
I hereby recommend that the project prepared under my supervision by

Kelley L. Johnson ,

entitled The Influence and Evolution of Negative Political Advertising , be

accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Integrated Studies — Communications .

  
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### **Abstract**

Coming out of 2020 was traumatizing — in one way, or another to most people forced to live in the COVID-19 pandemic stricken world. While the world-at-large was attempting to wage war against a microscopic enemy, the United States of America was involved in an additional skirmish.

Then presidential hopeful Joe Biden called the 2020 election, “The battle for the soul of America,” and the political advertising from both sides showcased exactly how well the negative messaging was working to rally each party’s base. When asked about election season, most people will say that they cannot stand all the negative advertising on their screens or in their mailbox, but several field studies have showed that while voters may not “like” it, they do respond to it. This paper will start with the first examples of negative political advertising, explain the types of negative advertising and provide a psychological analysis of the ways humans’ process negative information. I will then compare and review five field studies/focus groups/experiments conducted by research groups between the years 1999-2018.

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## Introduction

"Usually when people are sad, they don't do anything. They just cry over their condition. But when they get angry, they bring about a change." (Lowell, J. R. 2001).

Many times in elections, voters find themselves voting against one candidate instead of voting for one; this isn't accidental; frequently, it is by design. It is much easier to get people to dislike someone else than to convince people to like them. For years political candidates have spent millions of dollars hoping to mount a campaign that can get the majority of voters to elect them. It is a rare occasion that earns impassioned truth as opposed to carefully crafted speeches to be spoken by our countries loudest and most broadcast mouthpieces.

We are a society that has moved far away from the old adage about "sticks and stones." Words have the power to destroy any politician, no matter how high their soapbox. The advertising and research communities have been attempting to measure the effectiveness of "going negative" for years, but consistently, conclusive facts are far from reach. They have, however, pinpointed certain tactics that are certain winners and bad-practice.

Negative political advertising is special because it is one of the few — if not the only — types of advertising that isn't trying to get you to like, be in favor of, or buy something. In fact, its sole purpose is the opposite; to get you to dislike one person enough to vote for "anyone else." But, when measuring the success, or failure of such a tactic, it is important to lend equal weight to several variables: the person on the receiving end of the message; the presentation of the message; the 'source' the message is claiming

to come from; and if the candidate is willing/able to put their name on the negative message about their opposition.

## **Historical, Physiological & Psychological Information**

### **Historic Negative Political Advertising**

The first 'negative political ad' utilizing television was a commercial made for the 1964 presidential race by Lyndon Johnson's campaign. "The commercial featured a small girl counting as she plucked petals from a daisy. An older voice took over the counting which culminated in an atomic explosion. A voiceover warned: 'We must either love each other or we must die.'" (The World: Boston, 2008.)

The advertisement is considered "one of the most important political ads in American history." (Wheaton. Advertising Age. 2014.) "Daisy" — as the commercial is affectionately called — was a television advertisement that only ran once on September 7, 1964. One showing was all it took. Between the unprecedented imagery and high impact messaging the commercial made national news on networks including ABC and CBS — all the while, the campaign only paid for the commercial to run on NBC — talk about 'bang for your buck.' This commercial is said to have set the bar for television advertising for political campaigns for decades, understandably so.

### **The Human Processing of Negative Information**

#### ***The Physiology of Recall***

While the purpose of this research paper is to inform on/compile information about the effectiveness of negative political advertising and its most effective usages, it is important to take the human processing the information into account on at least a basic level.

While the number of studies into negative political advertising may be growing on what feels like a weekly basis, the studies into the human brain truly are. New medical studies are being published daily, and several studies are specifically geared toward how the brain processes types of information. According to Kensinger and Schacter, "Emotional information often is remembered more accurately and persistently than non-emotional information." (Kensinger E.A., Schacter D.L., 2006, p. 2564). One of the primary objectives of this study was to determine if the amygdala (the collection of cells at the base of the brain) is better at processing/retrieving either positive or negative information. The study concluded with three main determinations; one was that they found no evidence that negative information was being recalled at a higher rate than positive. Although the study also concludes that the recall of information is more effective with emotional information. (p. 2565)

### ***The Psychology of Recall***

A study published in 2019 by Stephen N. Goggin looked specifically into providing data from two experiments constructed to show the impact of information's positivity, order, and content on memory and a candidate evaluation. This study cites numerous examples making it clear that those working in politics — and consultants — know exactly what they are doing in terms of timing and message when attempting to influence voters. (Goggin S. N., 2019)

"While more recent information is often found to be most important in decision making, other studies have argued that powerful preceding information may be more important, anchoring evaluations." (p. 126)

In Goggin's study, he cites John R. Zaller from the University of California, Los Angeles (The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion, 1992) as saying, "...the most accessible considerations should drive evaluation." An argument posed in favor of 'recency' — the trend plotted by the Wisconsin Ads Project/Campaign Media Analysis Group about Campaign T.V. advertisements airing (by date) in the 2008 U.S. House and Senate races clearly shows as election day draws nearer the amount of televised political advertisements increases with the most notable jumps happening at 99 days out (about 10,000 [frequency of the advertisements]) and the day before election day (about 78,000 [frequency of the advertisements]). So, while this doesn't necessarily prove that recency is more important or meaningful, it does show that campaigns certainly believe that it is. (p. 127)

Several studies are addressing the importance of time when releasing election materials. However, the rather substantial data in favor of recency effects in political information, there are still a number of applicable debates in contrasting favor of primacy effects. (p. 126)

As far as the processing specifically regarding the type of information, Groggin (p. 128) cites a study by Margaret Matlin and David Stang (The Pollyanna Principle: Selectivity in Language, Memory, and Thought, 1978) in which they showcase evidence from several psychological studies, noting a present/notable bias in favor of positivity in language, memory and thought. When evaluating others, they offer explanations of numerous studies citing a tendency to give people — even politicians — a more positive evaluation than expected due to the underlying information. Yet, they also note the bias is less understood when a subject is presented with conflicting information.

"We should expect that, if information is persuasive, positive information should increase evaluations of a candidate, while negative information should decrease evaluations. Yet its relative impact over time is less clear." (p. 128-129)

Groggin then cites a study by S. E. Taylor (*Asymmetrical Effects of Positive and Negative Events: The Mobilization-Minimization Hypothesis*, 1991), in which Groggin states that Taylor describes the "mobilization-minimization hypotheses," which claims people mobilize faster to negative information (minimizing any long-term effect). This information lines up with the easily observable fact that campaigns tend to go negative only in the final weeks of an election. (p. 129)

Groggin's study at large boasts the favorability of both recent and primary information. The magical formula seems to be 'hitting' the public early with some background/applicable information about the candidate and their overall stance/campaign platform, then ending with a high frequency of ads that differ in over aesthetic (both positive and negative) the final quarter of a campaign cycle. (p. 130)

### **Going Negative vs. Attack Ads**

Going negative does not have to mean mud-slinging, and usually, it doesn't. No candidate wants to be perceived as throwing the first punch in a campaign.

Most consumers simply find character attacks or attacks on young or seemingly fairly removed family members in poor taste, and while Super PACs had given candidates a great place to hide when launching any unseemly attack ads, they do not offer the refuge they did ten years ago. People (mostly) have become aware of the Super PAC agenda. Even without the "I'm (\*candidate's name here\*) and I approved this

message, line at the end of suspect mailers or other advertisements, most consumers know whom the propaganda came from.

Anyone seeking a more 'base' knowledge of how political campaigns operate in the land of the 'grey' need only watch the 1995 movie "The American President."

...I've known Bob Rumson for years, and I've been operating under the assumption that the reason Bob devotes so much time and energy to shouting at the rain was that he simply didn't get it. Well, I was wrong. Bob's problem isn't that he doesn't get it. Bob's problem is that he can't sell it! We have serious problems to solve, and we need serious people to solve them. And whatever your particular problem is, I promise you, Bob Rumson is not the least bit interested in solving it. He is interested in two things and two things only: making you afraid of it and telling you who's to blame for it. That, ladies and gentlemen, is how you win elections.  
(Reiner, 1995, 1:40:12-1:42:15)

So, if all that is personal attack territory, what is 'going negative'? Well, going negative — very simply put — is abandoning the self-promotion generally associated with running for political office, for at least a series of either T.V., radio, or print/Direct Mail ads. That series of advertisements will essentially become a free-standing, separate campaign. This separate campaign will have a different objective; instead of asking citizens to vote for the campaign's candidate, it will be highlighting all the reasons they CANNOT vote for the opposition.

With a big election cycle happening just several months ago, I started a "collection" of all the political advertisements I received in the mail, the trend I noticed

on the Direct Mailers was that a lot of them didn't spotlight the candidate they were attempting to garner votes for, but rather naming candidates running I shouldn't want to vote for. The emotion being triggered by oversimplified statements (most without context) was powerful.

Not only were the advertisements providing the candidate anger should be directed at, but it also did so in a way that doesn't put their candidate in the 'line of fire,' linked to the angry feeling. With the two-party system in the United States right now, this is truly brilliant. Then on Election Day, if those are the only campaign materials I have been paying attention to, instead of voting FOR any candidate, people go to the polls for the purpose of voting AGAINST one specific candidate, voting for their desired candidate by default.

The political climate seems to be growing more divisive by the day — that really feels like an understatement. Candidates from all over the political map seem ready to draw blood from their opposition if it will earn them their desired seat.

But, all candidates, at least, claim to want this one thing: Voters to show up. So, what are ways politicians and their respective campaigns can give voters the disappointingly necessary shove to make for the polls? Previous studies have gone as far as to say that negative campaigning evoked an equally negative trend for voter turnout. But a field study performed in 2005 seems to show that may not be the case.

### **Field Experiments, Studies, and Analysis**

#### **Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, & Valentino**

This study, published in 1994, is often cited, challenged, and is among the first of its' kind. The abstract of this study states the researchers investigated how voter turnout

was impacted by negative political campaign advertising. “The results show that negative political advertising cause as many as 5% of voters to discard their intentions of voting. In addition, voters exposed to negative political advertising develop a cynical attitude regarding the responsiveness of politicians and the election process in general.”

(Ansolabehere et al., 1994, p. 1-9)

The researchers rely the previously held beliefs from their predecessors Lazarsfeld, Berelson, McPhee, and Gaudet in 1948 and 1954, respectively, who said campaign interactions in elections “enables parties and candidates to mobilize their likely constituents and ‘recharge’ their partisan sentiments. Voter turnout is thus considered to increase directly with ‘the level of political stimulation to which the electorate is subjected.’” (p. 1)

Ansolabehere et al. argue that political campaigns are not inherently “stimulating,” and that they have changed a lot since with 1950s. They also assert that it is a widely accepted belief that T.V. has eroded the value of political party groups, as it has allowed communication to happen directly between voters and candidates. The researchers posit that political campaigns can either mobilize or demobilize, depending on the messaging. (p. 1)

When discussing the experiments design, they criticize previous attempts to collect data due to variables in advertising design and imagery, reliance on surveys and a lack of real candidates, or random participants. They state that to “overcome the limitations” they established a design of their own in or order to assess the data they collected. (p. 2)

The experimental advertisements to be viewed by the participants were “professionally produced” and “unobtrusive,” as they were presented as an actual commercial in a previously recorded news broadcast. The elections Ansolabehere et al. were conducting their studies on were the 1992 California Senate elections, and the 1993 Los Angeles election for mayor. (p. 2)

The positive advertisement contained only messaging about the sponsoring candidate, including qualifications, examples of moral fiber and public actions previously taken that would qualify them for the office they are seeking. Ending with the line “California needs Dianne Feinstein in the U.S. Senate.” (p. 2)

The negative advertisements, in contrast, contained negative messaging about the sponsoring candidates’ opposition, making assertions of disqualifying traits, poor judgments or decisions made prior to the election cycle. Ending with the line “California can’t afford a politician like Gray Davis in the U.S. Senate.” (p. 2)

The video imagery aspect of both advertisements was the same, as was the speaker used, to reduce the variables. (p. 2)

Ansolabehere et al. utilized the same advertisement design for each of the elections they were observing, in respect to using the same imagery for the positive and negative advertisements, though the imagery and message varied depending on the election. (p. 2)

The participants were not entirely random (the researchers found them by placing ads in newspapers, passing out fliers, “calling names found on voter registration lists” and other methods) and participants were paid, \$15 for their involvement. But, even though they were not random the overall makeup of the group were a good

representation of Los Angeles in regard to gender, race, age, education and political affiliation. (p. 3)

For the experiment, participants chose from a list of times to show up at one of two locations where they would take a “pretest questionnaire” to allow for a more in-depth analysis of their socioeconomic background, media exposure, and political involvement levels. Participants were then shown to a room where they watched a 15-minute video (positive or negative advertisement depending on the group they were assigned to). After the video was over, they then completed a “posttest questionnaire” with regard to what they viewed, and asked them about their intention to vote. (p. 3)

One of the qualifiers the researchers used for participants was that they were registered to vote, and utilizing a post-test questionnaire they were also able to target voters that claimed they were likely to vote. Ansolabehere et al. decided to limit their interpretations to whether or not political campaigns’ use of negative advertising had an effect on voter turnout. (p. 3)

Once the experiment concluded, the researchers pooled the data collected from both the Senate and Governor election, Ansolabehere et al. validate this by stating the sole interest of the research team is the “average effect, if any, of advertising valence.” (p. 3)

The demobilization hypothesis predicts that exposure to negative advertising will lower the percentage of likely voters. Among those who watched a positive advertisement, 64% intended to vote. Among participants who saw a product advertisement instead of a political one, 61% intended to vote. Among participants who were exposed to the

negative versions of the campaign advertisement, only 58 % were likely to vote. A one-way analysis of variance yielded an F-statistic<sup>1</sup> of 2.2, significant at the .11 level. (p. 4)

The research team used logistic regressions to account for other factors that can contribute to a registered voters' decision to (not to) vote. Answers that factored into the regression included voting history, whether or not they "followed public affairs," gender, political party affiliation, education, race, and age. Using this, the researchers were able to make estimations to account for conditions that could impact a person's likelihood to vote that fell outside their experiment with negative campaign motivations. (p. 4)

Citing the data, and the logistical information/inferences, Ansolabehere et al. state "that exposure to negative (as opposed to positive) advertising depresses intention to vote by 5%." (p. 4)

The researchers also claim that due to the to manipulation performed being seemingly minimal, the data was astonishing. Though, they do admit that the design of the experiment could have amplified the effect. (p. 4)

Ansolabehere et al. went on to replicate the experiment in all 34 of the states with a Senate seat up for election in 1992. Using databases the researchers analyzed the advertising in each of those states and classified them. "Based on a reading of the news coverage, campaigns were classified into one of three categories: generally positive in tone (scored 1); mixed (scored 0); and generally negative in tone (scored -1)." (p. 4)

To determine the turnout, the researchers calculated the votes cast for the Senate race and divided that by the voting-age populace of the state. Additionally, Ansolabehere

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<sup>1</sup> "An 'F Test' is a catch-all term for any test that uses the F-distribution. In most cases, when people talk about the F-Test, what they are actually talking about is The F-Test to Compare Two Variances. However, the f-statistic is used in a variety of tests." (Glenn. 2021)

et al. also assessed the roll-off (roll-off is the difference between the number of votes in a presidential election versus Senate votes). Then researchers docked the number of ballots cast in the Senate election from the number of votes cast for president, then, divided that number by “the latter”. (p. 4)

Ansolabehere et al. state that the roll-off indicator presents two advantages to the research team. One, it is specific to the campaign, thus would provide insight into what voters were motivated to vote in the presidential election, but not in the Senate election. Two, the presidential vote provides a baseline across the states helping to equalize the states many variances. (p. 4)

The research team cites several variables they took into account that could effect voter turnout in a Senate election. Some of those “include the competitiveness of the race, the volume (or “decibel level”) of the campaign, and the electorate’s sense of civic duty.” (p. 4) Other factors considered were income, education, geography, and the rate at which they returned their census form. (p. 5)

Again, citing the data, and the logistical information/inferences, Ansolabehere et al. make the following statement.

The use of both experimental and nonexperimental methods to measure the very same naturally occurring phenomena is highly unusual in the social sciences. It is even more unusual if both methods yield equivalent results. In our study, the aggregate-level analysis of turnout and roll-out [rolloff] in the 1992 Senate elections and the experimental studies of negative advertising converge: negative campaigns tend to demobilize the electorate. (p. 5)

Ansolabehere et al. then dissect the psychological foundation of their hypothesis, which is, “attack advertisements discourage people from voting.” One workable thought is that a voter belonging to a political party helps mitigate the effect. “It is generally thought that campaign messages resonate especially strongly among supporters or proponents of the source of the message.” Therefore, a political campaign acts to fortify party loyalty. By extension, it would mean that the use of political attack advertisements would serve the opposite purpose. Which means “voting intention should be weakened among supporters of the candidate who is attacked, since the message provides these partisans with reasons not to vote for their candidate.” (p. 5)

A second possible reason for the effect is that political attack advertising creates indiscriminant pessimism toward both the candidate being attacked, and the candidate sponsoring the advertisement. Ansolabehere et al. call this the “plague-on-both-your-houses” explanation, stating the given probable outcome of voter backlash. (p. 5)

Yet, as the researchers observed in their experiment (by way of reexamining the questionnaires filled out by the participants, neither of these seems to be the answer, so Ansolabehere et al. begin to examine a third. “Negative advertising may affect voting intent by conveying cues not about the candidates but about the nature of political campaigns and the political influence of ordinary citizens. Perhaps the act of attacking another candidate in a 30-second advertisement denigrates the entire process.” (p. 5)

After investigating the participants and their sense of “political efficacy” or, their overall faith in elected officials, and government as a whole, Ansolabehere et al. decided there were three explanation that warranted consideration. “Partisan demobilization, a

plague-on-both-houses effect, and general cynicism,” but the collected evidence points more specifically to general cynicism. (p. 5)

“As campaigns become more negative and cynical, so does the electorate.” (p. 6)

Ansolabehere et al. believe that taking into account both studies, they have shown that political attack advertising denigrates election participation. “Voter withdrawal in response to negative advertising also raises questions concerning the legitimate and fair uses of broadcast advertising.” (p. 6)

### **Niven Field Experiment**

A field experiment conducted by David Niven in 2005 strives to analyze the real world effects of negative campaign advertising (via mail) on voter participation; on a smaller more controlled level. (Niven D., 2006, p. 203-210)

Niven introduces his field study data, and analysis by stating that years of research have yielded no conclusive evidence able to state — one way or the other — if negative campaign advertising has a negative/positive, or any affect on the electorate showing up at the polls on Election Day. (p. 203)

He goes on to cite two studies, specifically, that claim to have definitive data that Niven feels are far from “qualifying their results.” Those two studies are Ansolabehere and Iyengar in 1995, and Green and Gerber in 2004 (p. 203)

The field experiment focused on a mayoral race in 2003, and was conducted by exposing random samplings of voters to negative campaign advertising utilizing direct mail as the vehicle. (p. 203)

Niven feels that when analyzing the data and conducting a field experiment it is vital to note that there is a big difference between a campaign "going negative" and

personal attack ads. In similar studies conducted in 1984, 1991, 1994, 1999 (Garramone, Merritt; Basil, Schooler, and Reeves; Roese and Sande; Lemert, Wanta, and Lee), "Researchers found evidence that negative political advertising negatively affects recipients' feelings not only toward the target of the attack but also toward its sponsor." (p. 203, 204)

But, Niven states there are crucial restrictions for studies that rely on subjective, laboratory studies. He states that the study conducted by Ansolabehere et al. simply showed advertisements that they created, and then asked the participants about their intent with regard to voting in the election in question, meaning the experiments lack real-world, measurable results. Niven also states "political scientists have regularly documented the propensity of Americans to mislead researchers when they are asked about their voting habits." Therefore, regardless of the researchers, their intentions and the precision of their experiments' design, the claim that a laboratory experiment reflects real-world behaviors is unfounded. (p. 204)

Niven goes on to present research from other groups claiming the opposite effect. "Finkel and Geer (1998), for example, argue that negative ads stimulate turnout because they provide highly relevant information." In fact, Niven cites 1977 research from Samuel Kernell who stories a situation where negative advertising has even stimulated voter turnout. (p. 204)

For example, some scholars conclude that one source of the typical midterm loss, in which the president's party generally loses House seats in elections without the presidency on the ballot, is that voters who are

critical of the president have a higher motivation to participate than voters who are positively inclined toward the president. (p. 204)

And more recent research data advocates for the acceptance of negative political advertising can contribute to an a positive feeling in voters with regard to their feeling of civic duty. Niven cites a 1996 study by Brians and Wattenberg, in which surveyed peoples that reported seeing negative political advertising in the 1992 election more accurately recalled the candidates' positions on specific issues. (p. 204)

The field experiment sought to study the impact of negative political ads, it goes one step further and splits the sample of "test subjects" into four sub-categories (testing for separate levels of exposure): 1. Control (no ads) 2. A Group: received a single ad the day before the election 3. B Group: received two ads the two days leading up to the election, and 4. C Group: received three ads the three days leading up to the election. Only one advertisement per day, and while the study didn't specifically emphasize the design of the three ads, it did provide context of the content (including limited layout information and photo/graphics details). The description of each of the three advertisements pointed to them being three very different, standalone products — each with a completely different, albeit negative, message as for the why you couldn't vote for "X" candidate. (p. 205, 206)

Results found in a study by Ansolabehere and Iyengar conducted in 1995 found that negative campaigning was a threat to overall voter turnout yet, a study by Green and Gerber in 2004 said that negativity has little relevance to the cumulative poll numbers. (p. 205)

Niven notes the differences in the overall approach, first being that Ansolabehere and Iyengar utilized television advertising as their advertising vehicle while Green and Gerber used mail. Second, Ansolabehere and Iyengar had a purely theoretical approach, which means it was little more than a model that could be used down the road, if successful. Third, Green and Gerber had a more diverse and random group of participants from several towns. (p. 205)

But the things that both of those studies had in common that differ from Niven is that they were conducted in a laboratory setting as opposed to in the field, and the candidates were asked about their intention to vote, as opposed to being observed going to the polls. (p. 205)

The results of the study, while still small and at this point — in 2005 — not repeated, showed a direct correlation in respect to the groups receiving the ads and going to vote. The sample of people was random. They ranged in age, gender and for the proceeding two years, they voted 25% of the time, reportedly. The final analysis showed that in the control group receiving no advertising material from the research group, the participants were 26.6% at the polls. As for groups A, B, and C, collectively, they participated at a rate of 32.4%, with the repeated exposure in Group C (which received ads A, B, and C) earning a participation rate of 36%. (p. 206)

On a scale of 1-100%, the difference of nearly 6% may not seem that promising; but, it really is, especially when you consider the very little groundwork needed to illicit the response/change.

Niven also conducted a survey the week after the election in an effort to measure the over reception of the negative messaging and to gain insights into any consequences.

“All respondents were asked if they knew anything about the candidates, and if they cared who won the mayor’s race.” They were then asked if they had seen advertisements about the race, if they answered in the affirmative, researchers then asked if the participants had gotten any mail advertisements, and if they had seen negative campaign advertisements. Again, if they answered yes, the researchers asked if any of the advertisements had made them angry, and/or if they viewed the negative advertisements as fair. (p. 207, 208)

The researchers survey answers were similar to the results of the field experiment, “among those in the treatment group who said they had seen negative ads, however, most rated the ads fair (62 percent).” (p. 208)

While Niven admits that “results of one study in one Florida city election can hardly be deemed exhaustive... The field experiment offers access to real people, making decisions in the midst of a real campaign.” (p. 208)

He also states that his field experiment offers an example of the “exaggerated laboratory effect in response to the ads because they were received in the context of participants’ regular lives.” (p. 208)

Niven concludes with making note of three findings in regard to the data that he found pertinent. One, in opposition to Ansolabehere and Iyengar’s 1995 findings it is evident the reception of negative campaign advertising “did not have a negative effect on turnout.” Two, in contrast to Green and Gerber in 2004, it appears negative campaign advertising “can have a positive effect on turnout.” And third, “not all the specific negative ads appeared to have an effect, revealing a modest effect in the bivariate

comparison failing to have a statistically significant effect in the logistic regression model.” (p. 209)

### **Stevens, Sullivan, Allen & Alger Field Experiment**

A study done in 2008 by Daniel Stevens took a look into potential voter bases' interpretation of legitimacy and fairness in regard to political advertising. (Stevens D. et al., 2008, p. 527-541). The research group made use of an original survey (nationwide) and focus groups to gather information on voter opinions about the 2000 elections, making use of the 2004 national survey. They utilized the gathered data to classify political ads based on the voters' perception. (p. 527)

This group claims, "Our research offers new evidence about how voters characterize "negative" or "attack" ads and, in light of these characterizations, how negative ads affect electoral participation, polarization, and composition. We demonstrate that voters' partisanship substantially colors perceptions of legitimate negativity in advertising and that these characterizations in turn affect who goes to the polls." (p. 527)

First, the studies theory defines what it classifies as a "partisan" — a person who exhibits an anticipated bias in the way they process/manage information. The overall design of the research was multi-stage. Stage one consisted of seven 2-hour focus groups, with a size between 6-12 people. The overall guidance for the groups had arrangements already in place to deal with media coverage of the election, with special considerations for T.V. ads. The questions that were posed including prompts for the participants to discuss any political advertising that they thought of as "negative or oppositional, positive or advocacy, and contrast/comparative ads." (p. 529)

The data collected in the focus group provided an invaluable base for the creation of the national survey. (p. 529)

One of the more notable comments provided by a focus group participant regarding the U.S. Senate race in Minnesota:

"And you know, I think there's a difference between criticizing someone's record, which I think is perfectly legitimate, and then saying what you yourself would do instead...; that's legitimate and to me, it's not negative, it's simply scrutinizing the situation. What I resent here is this implication that Mark Dayton is untrustworthy, that there's something flawed about his character. That's when criticizing someone's record becomes negative in a sinister sort of way, and that's when you really attack the person's integrity, honesty..." (p. 530)

After gathering the data and being able to pinpoint patterns in the deliberations of the focus group subjects, the research team moved onto the second stage: processing the comments and lingo used by the participants to form-focused, specific questions for the national survey. (p. 530)

The main survey was directed by phone started March 9, 2002 through June 22, 2002 on a random sampling of more than 700 voting age United States citizens nationwide — the study does note the sample would "like most telephone surveys" underrepresent younger/less-educated individuals. (p. 530)

The survey consisted mostly of two sections: One, gauging respondents' overall thoughts and sentiments regarding political advertising, including open-ended questions formatted to gather information in the subjects' own words. The goal "...was to assess the

role of partisanship in responses to political advertising while controlling for broader perceptions and attitudes toward campaign ads. To the extent that these perceptions and attitudes are themselves influenced by partisanship, our analysis is a conservative gauge of the totality of partisan effects." Section two looked at the appearance of partisanship and fairness, and this started with replicating questions used in 2000 by researchers Freedman and Lawton. In order to maintain the active attention of the respondents, the research team restricted questions to five topics appearing in random order as opposed to the 12 used by Freedman and Lawton. (p. 530)

To move beyond hypotheticals, the research team posed specific questions about negative campaign ads that ran during the 2000 presidential election cycle. When asked about "criticizing an opponent for taking contributions from special interests," most subjects stated that was fair to bring up in political ads. Yet, when asked specifically about an advertisement the Gore campaign ran criticizing George W. Bush's connections to big oil, subjects said that was unfair. (p. 530)

The research group was left to the conclusion that partisanship played a key role in a subjects' ability to consider information. In order to test that theory, the research group ran a series of models to compare the variables that affected perceptions of the specific examples the group provided to the participants. (p. 531)

The conclusions drawn from the data consisted of six leading groups of variables:

1. Control for the general attitude toward political advertising;
2. Checks for indicators of "views of government";
3. The differences in an individuals' expertise about politics;
4. A means of measuring the overall uses of media, with special considerations for newspaper readers';
5. Key demographic and psychological variables as it relates to political

perceptions (the individuals' approval of the current president, sex, race, etc.); and 6. Dummy variables aimed at political affiliation (Republican, Democrat, and Independents). (p. 532)

One theory was that an individuals' identifying with a party would lead to a higher tolerance for what is considered relevant, legitimate, and/or fair criticism in political advertising. If that statement is true, that should mean that identified Independents should exhibit a lower tolerance to criticism (both in the abstract and specifically). (p. 534)

While all of the variables showed some impact, the variable regarding the relationship between partisanship and opinions on fairness proved to be strong and dependent on the party affiliation of the candidate. In fact, the only criticism that seemed to cross the "party-line" was the criticism of a candidates' family. (p. 535)

The study states that the overall effects of negative advertising when based only on perceptions of fairness — in regard to abstract scenarios — needs to be reconsidered. The data collected about the criticisms against a hypothetical candidate do not shift into standards that can be applied universally to named candidates. (p. 536)

Therefore, showing consistent with the theory of "motivated processing," the perceptions of fairness — in regard to partisans' opinions — are contingent on the party that a candidate represents. (p. 538)

The study concludes by saying, "...our findings raise questions about the sources of information on which evaluations of an ad's legitimacy may be based. Our data show(s) how negative ads against a partisan's initially preferred candidate that are perceived to be fair may raise demobilizing doubts, resulting in a change in the composition of the voting electorate." (p. 540)

### **Yoon, Pinkleton, and Ko Experiment**

The general thoughts of this experiment seem to be fairly simple — if voters continually state they do not "like" negative political advertising, then why do the campaigns still use it, and why does it seem to be working? (Yoon K. et al., 2005)

"Individuals complain about the negativity of campaigns, while journalists and scholars express concerns that negative advertisements result in public cynicism and apathy." (p. 95)

The researchers go on to point out that scholars have gone so far as to single out the television media sources for allowing "'horse race'-oriented" coverage focused on the win/lose aspect of the campaigns instead of discussing candidates in a matter-of-fact manner that focuses solely on their issues, policies and other information that would be truly pertinent and informative to the public. While other academics suggest worrying about repeated exposure to negative campaigning can lead to voters becoming apathetic and cynical thus, unwilling to participate in any political processes, even voting. (p. 96)

Additional observations cite the increasing downward trend in the United States of America regarding an individuals' confidence in their government and voter turnout. One of the most observable variables that would likely ease the effects and perceptions of negative campaigning would be the candidates' overall credibility. A large selection of other advertising research has led to the accepted conclusion that a highly credible source can help build consumer confidence (thus the inarguable success of celebrity product endorsements). So, should the same be accepted when it comes to politics and/or negative campaigning? (p. 96)

For the purposes of this article, they state that "Political candidates use negative campaign tactics to draw attention to an opposing candidate's weaknesses such as character flaws, public misstatements, and broken promises." And that these tactics are designed to disparage the character of the target. And what a booming business attack advertising is — it is estimated that in the USA, almost half of a campaign's war chest is allocated for negative advertising. Even other countries are coming state-side to study the tactics and approaches of political campaigns in an attempt to utilize them abroad for their own national campaigns. (p. 97)

"Despite the public's general dislike of political campaigns dominated by attack advertising, the negative campaign strategies developed in the USA have influenced political marketing around the world. In many countries, political candidates and their parties are more and more commonly using marketing plans based on the negative strategies and tactics that dominate election campaigns in the USA." (p. 98)

When researching the growing concern that negative information has on voters, procedures indicate that people have a tendency to give more weight to negative information while judging social situations and the overall likeability of any candidate. Other researchers provided supportive data about the negative effects in perception and behavior, including increased poll numbers due to negative candidate sentiments. (p. 98)

"When negative advertising contains explicit candidate comparisons, research indicates that it produces a greater negative change in individuals' evaluations of the attacked candidate than other types of less-negative advertising. This is true even though the negative advertising suffers from lower credibility than standard, positive advertising." Yet, voter backlash remains a front and center concern for campaigns, and

backlash occurs when an advertisement results in an increase in the support for the attacked candidate. (p. 98)

A voters' view on a candidate's credibility— how any voter views the overall image of a candidate/their trustworthiness — will heavily affect the success of any negative campaigning. Yoon et al. go on to state the receivers' general perceptions magnify the extreme importance of variables that could affect the opinions voters make regarding the credibility of a message's sources and the candidate. (p. 98)

When a candidate with low credibility utilizes attack-style negative advertising, then the voters could be less likely to back them. The voters could even think the candidate in question is only using negative political advertisements because of their own deficiencies or limitations. In contrast, a candidate with high credibility can use negative advertising tactics without losing overall support. (p. 99)

The receiver's involvement level is another important consideration — "Involvement was proposed to be an individual psychological trait reflected in individuals' concern about a particular election outcome associated with a sense of political efficacy and public duty." (p. 99)

Yet, there is no general consensus among academics about the best ways to measure to consistently gauge a voters' involvement so, a lot of the studies seem to contradict each other. Consider this: there is research that indicates less-involved voters actually gain more from political advertising, but conflicting research says that the ability to recall that same information relies on the receivers' interest. (p. 99)

To bring a sense of harmony to the overall analysis of this data, a researcher named Zaichkowsky decided we should have different categories of involvement — that

essentially break down into two general columns, long-term (enduring) and short-term (situational) involvement. (p. 99) In regard to the voting intentions of an individual, research in 1993 indicated that both enduring and situation involvement increases the effects of negative campaigning. (p. 100)

Yet another important consideration when attempting to measure the receptiveness of a receiver is the way they are processing the information they are receiving. Two researchers cited in this experiment, Petty and Cacioppo, suggest that there are two types of root processing, peripheral and central. Central root processing is when the information alone is what is being taken into consideration by the receiver. In contrast, a person using peripheral route processing tends to pay attention to other things that do not have much (if anything) to do with the information they should be processing. Things like the overall attractiveness or other characteristics of the person delivering the message. (p. 100)

Another factor this research team suspects weigh on voter turnout is cynicism. Online, Oxford Languages defines cynicism as a tendency to believe that any individual is motivated by self-interest. (p. 100)

In terms of what cynicism means for the world of elections — voters feel so overwhelmed by the barrage of negative political advertising they start to feel like every politician running is only out for themselves. Generally, this results in that voter not wanting to participate in elections, because they feel like no matter whom they vote for, that person will still be selfish and disinterested in helping the constituents. As with most other variables, people reach cynicism on different levels. (p. 101)

The hypothesis being explored in this experiment is one about thresholds for cynicism. "Participants who are high in involvement will experience greater cynicism when a high-credibility candidate uses negative political advertising than when a low-credibility candidate uses negative political advertising." Which then poses the question, "Will the cynicism of participants who are low in involvement be affected by a candidate's level of credibility when the candidate uses negative political advertising?" (p. 102)

The method used for their experiment was a 2 x 2 factorial design. "The 2 x 2 factorial design calls for randomizing each participant to treatment A or B to address one question and further assignment at random within each group to treatment C or D to examine a second issue, permitting the simultaneous test of two different hypotheses." (Stampfer J. M. et al., 1985)

The experiment is to probe the diminishing role of involvement and a source's credibility as it relates to negative political advertising and the individual voters' intentions and perspective. Factor one was about situational involvement at two levels, high and low, with the second factor being two levels of credibility, also high and low. (Yoon K. et al., 2005, p. 102)

This particular experiment made use of a "convenience sample" of undergraduate students but concedes that the use of this type of sample when it comes to the study of political communication isn't a perfect sampling. The reason is that students are generally younger and also more educated than the general public, with a tendency to be less engaged in politics than older individuals. (p. 102)

As for the procedure, the students participating were provided with a candidate biography. The research group then used those biographies to manipulate the credibility of the candidate to meet both low and high credibility, then influenced the relevancy of the election in question to make high- and low-involvement conditions. (p. 102)

The researchers utilized mail advertisements to manipulate the involvement and source credibility. The advertisement was a strongly worded, single-sided assault on the candidate, containing negative information. Copy points brought special attention to the candidate being charged with drunk driving and making accusations about the candidate continuing this behavior. The ad also contained an image of the "attacking candidate" and asking that the participant vote for them. Once the participant received this mail advertisement, they were asked to review it and then answer a ten-question survey. (p. 103)

The findings of the experiment seem to support the hypothesis, and the data also implies that "...the voters who are low in involvement are not influenced by candidate credibility in their development of cynicism." (p. 106)

The research group was able to deduce several conclusions from the data they collected.

Among them was one, that in spite of the intention to vote for the high-credibility candidate, the information collected from this study suggests that individuals considered involved can develop greater cynicism towards a candidate when a candidate high in credibility utilizes negative campaign advertising. And two, when people are low in political involvement (situational) that their level of cynicism doesn't appear to grow when a candidate high in credibility uses negative advertising. (p. 108)

### **Wattenberg and Brians Analysis**

This article actively seeks to change the way people look at the mobilization possibilities of negative political campaigning (specifically regarding television advertising). (Wattenberg M. P. Brians C., 1999, p. 891-899)

Wattenberg and Brians, both academics, are opposed to the conclusions drawn by Ansolabehere and others in 1994 and 1995. This analysis states that the experiments and studies performed in earlier years are proved false by simply looking at voter turnout. (p. 891)

They argue an age-old point — people don't always do what they claim they are going to do. The studies conducted by Ansolabehere and his colleagues hinged on the participants following through with the actions they told the researchers they would take, as opposed to the researchers observing them — either showing up to the polls or failing to cast their vote. Wattenberg also says that in 1995, Ansolabehere et al. state, "attack ads can be and are used strategically for demobilization." They go further to suggest that campaigns use them intentionally for the sole purpose of demobilizing certain sections of the electorate. (p. 891)

While in contrast, this analysis asserts that the purpose of attack ads is the gain votes by shifting the big-picture focus to one centering on the attacking candidate's credibility and the opposition's perceived weakness. The researchers re-analysis polls by studying the variables — where and how the information and data were collected. They also claim "a broader cut at the data involves examining the turnout rate for respondents who made a comment about negative ads, either in general or in particular." (p. 892)

They also state that those same studies suffer from a lack of "clear evidence for the demobilization theory" and that the increase in cynicism doesn't have an independent influence on voter turnout. Their data suggests that so long as the negative information is regarding information or issues that are of concern to people, then most voters will infer that the candidate cares about the same types of issues that they (the voters) do. Similarly, by bringing special attention to specific issues, the prominence of those usually is different from one politician (or campaign) to another, with the potential to mobilize otherwise unengaged voters. (p. 894)

This research also states that a multivariate analysis should be required as a means to rule out any other factors that could be affecting the data and then provided one. Wattenberg and Briens conclude that once all variables are considered, that even then, "the recall of negative political advertising is significantly associated with turning out to vote for president in 1992." (p. 894)

Wattenberg and Briens decided to attempt to replicate the participation data collected by Ansolabehere et al. and then institute applicable control variables. The duo's first look at the official elections stats showed an evident difference regarding the pattern of turnout and roll off. Table 1, which can be seen on Appendix A, shows the substantial difference in the results for Ansolabehere et al. and finalized official election results. (p. 895)

The researchers decided to reach out to Ansolabehere and asked where he (Ansolabehere) thought the differences in their data came from; it was then revealed that Ansolabehere et al. didn't take absentee ballots into consideration. Ansolabehere explained this by stating, "these votes were cast before the last-minute advertising

barrage." But, Wattenberg and Briens believe this line of thinking — which Ansolabehere et al. fail to disclose in their studies' data — is suspect. The researchers say in states like California have a very sizable portion of the voting population voting via absentee ballot, and Wattenberg and Briens believe the advertising starts early enough that to exclude this group of voters would skew any results. (p. 895)

Upon the discovery of the absentee ballots not being considered in the Ansolabehere et al. analysis, Wattenberg and Briens requested and were given copies of the raw data they used in their research. "The comparison revealed a series of errors with the raw data they analyzed."

Three examples of those errors are as follows. One, Ohio — which Ansolabehere et al. categorized as a negative Senate race — showed a 9.4% rolloff, while official analysis shows only 2.8%. Two, Alaska — which Ansolabehere et al. categorized as a positive Senate race — showed 200,458 ballots cast for president and 201,128 ballots cast for Senate, official election results have those numbers as 258,506 and 239,714, respectively. And, three, Kansas — where it was observed that Bob Dole easily won the state with no negative political advertising — Ansolabehere et al. claims an 8.1% rolloff, while official election results show only 2.7% rolloff. (p. 895)

Speculations for these discrepancies provided by Wattenberg and Briens are, in Ohio, a failure to include the numbers for the non-major party voters accounting for a 7.4% deviation. In Alaska, no variable, or combination of now known variables, can account for the all the ballots not used by Ansolabehere et al. In Kansas, Wattenberg and Briens find that the failure to count the minor candidate ballots accounts for a 6.7% deviation. (p. 895)

The examples provided by Wattenberg and Briens, they claim, account for a lot of the erroneous numbers. They also state the most frequent fallacy seems to be an overall exclusion of ballots that were cast for minor candidates, though this does not appear to be a consistent occurrence, as there were several states where those numbers were included. It also doesn't explain the inconsistency in those deviations in ballot inclusion.

Wattenberg and Briens go as far to say, "Overall, the direction of the errors in the Ansolabehere et al. data set favors their theory..." (p. 896)

Wattenberg and Briens conclude their analysis by stating that going negative in political advertising can be very similar to simply raising issues to garner votes. They say that their analysis of NES and FEC data shows that Ansolabehere et al. have no evidentiary support for the demobilization theory — though they will not condemn it entirely. The researchers are more questioning how it is possible that negative campaign advertising very clearly mobilized voters in 1992, but not in 1996. They finalize by stating politicians enjoy placing the blame for low voter participation on negative campaigning. "Clearly, the intention is to discourage negative ads. Those who wish to do so should consider the beneficial aspects of negative advertising presented here. In the face of our evidence, it becomes quite difficult to maintain that an awareness of negative advertisements demobilizes voters in the real world." (p. 897)

### **The Tri-Mediation Model of Persuasion**

In 2008, an article was published about a study that not only explored the attitudes developed by voters exposed to different types of political advertising but also developed a new Mediation Model. (Coulter K. S., 2008, p. 853-883)

The "Tri-Mediation Model" — developed by Keith S. Coulter — Coulter shows "That a peripheral cue (attitude towards the ad) can have an impact on the central route to persuasion by nurturing message acceptance not only in regard to the sponsor of the advertisement but also in regard to a competitor." (p. 853) Coulter posits that the model he produced allows deeper insights into how exposure to negative political advertising is processed cognitively.

This research reads like some of the most in-depth and influential data collected in the hopes of drawing some conclusive answers about tactics/formulas that do and do not work with respect to going negative in a political advertisement. (p. 853)

While introducing his data and observations, Coulter states that one of the most debated facets in the November 2006 U.S. election campaigns — congressional races — was the rampant utilization of negative political advertising. He points to the race in Connecticut as an example. Coulter says the media war-chests for the seated Senator Joe Lieberman and his challenger, democrat Ned Lamont hit the "tens of millions of dollars," with the percentage being spent on negative advertising estimated at more than 80 percent. (p. 853)

An analysis of the advertising used (in politics) utilized in three national United States elections shows that almost half of advertisements named both candidates (the sponsor of the advertisement and his/her opponent) with more than 22 percent of the advertisements containing comparisons of the candidates in an attempt to cast the opposition in a negative way. Coulter also cites a report from 1996, which states that in the 1992 Presidential Election, almost 70 percent of Bill Clinton's political advertisements were negative. (p. 854)

Coulter is quick to point out an issue with measuring/estimating the usage of negative political advertising — the lingo. Coulter states that researchers do not have specific, concrete terminology for classifying campaign advertisements. "Some scholars classify any ad that contains disapproving statements about an opponent as 'negative,' whereas others differentiate among negative ads, attack ads, and negative comparison ads" (p. 854)

Coulter goes on to cite a 1984 paper in which a scholar (Merritt) says that in order to consider a comparison ad negative, the focus of that advertisement must be denigrating the opposition, not just supporting the sponsoring candidate. (p. 854)

While, in contrast, researchers in 2001 posit that "a continuous measure of tone indicates the degree of negativity." The statements made in this paper suggest there are three levels of negative campaign advertisements. One, a direct attack; two, direct comparison; and three, an implied comparison. (p. 854)

With consideration for past trends, the utilization of negative comparative political advertising seems to be on the rise, though there is not much definitive data available with respect to the impact on the voters or the elections at large. While negative campaign advertising is a growing industry and trend, it is also worth noting that there are countries where negative political advertising is illegal. (p. 855)

Center stage of voters' revulsion for the modern political campaign poses the question of the morality of the political candidates being marketed. The ethical questions notwithstanding, the continued use of negative campaigning spotlights the fact that going negative works. In the least, the resulting consequences are the desired outcome. Several other studies that have been conducted support that statement and also seemingly point to

a notable level of negative emotions about a candidate could actually increase a voters' intent to head to the polls on Election Day. "From a rhetorical perspective, these advertisements may 'serve a positive societal function by creating alternative rhetorical visions that can contribute to the marketplace of ideas." Coulter goes on to state that his data finds that, in certain circumstances, negative advertising could lead to an increase in the poll numbers for the sponsoring candidate. (p. 855, 856)

Most of the studies conducted around negative advertising have looked more specifically at the impact of a campaign message, as opposed to the appeal. Generally, the most frequent finding about the advantageous impact of negative campaign advertising is that it is catchy. Some scholars argue that the reasoning behind the bias is that negative information is jarring/surprising; hence, making it stand out, leading to the levels of increased recall. (p. 856)

Some researchers have found that negative ads can be seen as more informative/useful than their positive counterpart — due to the negativity bias, negative information is generally weighted heavier when drawing conclusions about social stimuli. (p. 856)

The fundamental disadvantage connected to negative advertising is that it can lead to a perception of unfairness, thus, resulting in a backlash effect against the sponsor. A study in 2008 explored the psychophysiological response to negative campaign advertising and showed that negative communications trigger the automatic activation of the aversive motivational system to its viewers. This means, studies on the responses, overall, are mixed — at best. (p. 853)

One of the more simplistic explanations for the studies ending in varied conclusions is that some of the research groups utilized political advertisements that were more negative than their counterparts in the other studies. The degree of negativity has been proven to matter, as does the basis and/or subject matter being presented. Research has posited that both negative and positive political issues advertisements result in an overall approving attitude from the people on the receiving end of the message toward both the sponsoring candidate and the advertisement. The conclusions that can be drawn from this information are that, while an advertisement may be negative in its messaging, pertinent issues are generally viewed by the public-at-large as being fair, in contrast to negative personal ads that run the highest risk of eliciting voter backlash. (p. 858)

Another reason specific to political advertising seems to be strictly semantics. "Negative political ads, on the other hand, frequently employ attributes involving a semantic differential. For example, rather than conveying the fact that an opponent favors gun control to a greater or lesser degree, a political candidate might emphasize the fact that he/she voted for gun control on a particular piece of legislation, while his/her opponent voted against it. The polarizing nature of these attributes means that if a viewer is favorably disposed towards one anchor of the semantic differential, he/she is likely to be unfavorably disposed towards the other, and therefore both positive and negative thoughts about the sponsor (brand) as well as the opponent (competitive brand) are likely to be generated. All these types of thoughts, in turn, will have an impact upon the sponsoring candidate's evaluations." (p. 858)

To understand the Tri-Mediation Method, one must first know the specifics about the Dual Mediation Model (DMM), see Appendix B, that it was built from. Coulter states

the DMM is based on the 1983 notion of "elaboration likelihood" (the probability that, when exposed to a particular stimulus, you can elicit thoughts). The extent of elaboration dictates the corresponding power of DMM paths — specifically, what thoughts are the most likely to prevail in a given situation. (p. 859)

Coulter states that when forming the specifics of the Tri-Mediation Method, see Appendix C, the first move was to exclude both ad cognitions and purchase intention from the DMM. He reasons that "because cognitive responses to a political advertisement can be directed towards either the sponsor or the opponent, and because these constructs may act independently in terms of their influence on brand (sponsor) attitudes, we refine the brand cognitions construct to include both sponsor and competitor/opponent components." (p. 861)

As is clearly observed in the figures provided, while the Tri-Mediation Model makes good use of a lot of the processes and perimeters created in the Dual Mediation Model, the Tri-Mediation Model is much more in-depth and specific.

The hypotheses Coulter is investigating are two-fold, strong argument and weak argument. The first four are strong argument hypotheses; the final two are weak arguments. Hypothesis one, "the mean level of (negative) CbOp will be greater for direct attack ads than for negative comparison ads." Hypothesis two, "the mean level of (positive) CbSpon will be greater for negative comparison ads than for direct attack ads." Hypothesis three, "the strength of the CbSpon → Ab path relationship will be greater (more positive) for negative comparison ads than for direct attack ads." Hypothesis four, "mean Ab will be greater for negative comparison ads than for direct attack ads." Hypothesis five, "The strength of the CbOp → Ab path relationship will be greater for

negative comparison ads than for direct attack ads." Hypothesis six, "mean Ab will be greater for direct attack ads than for negative comparison ads." (p. 864)

Differing versions of a print political advertisement were utilized for the purposes of the experiment. The ads were for a fictitious candidate, Florence McGrath, allegedly a Democrat candidate for the 2008 U.S. Congressional race. Potential voters (the study's subjects) were told that McGrath was a local candidate seeking a congressional seat against Rebecca Shwartz (also fictitious). The print ads used negative direct comparative tactics, negative direct attack tactics, and the positive ads simply a collection of McGrath's positions on several hot button issues. (p. 865)

The subject pool consisted of 359 undergrad students (liberal arts majors) from "a major US university." Participants earned extra credit for their contributions to the study. All participants reported to the location of the study and were then randomly separated into one of six argument strength/ad type groups. After acquiring instructions and being exposed to their target ad, the subjects answered a written questionnaire to assess reactions to the ads. (p. 867)

The indicators to evaluate the CbOp and CbSpon variables were attained from a protocol (verbal) in which the subjects were prompted to write down the thoughts that transpired during their exposure to the advertisement. (p. 867)

Participants specified the strength of the messaging arguments on two, seven-point "semantic differential scale items anchored by 'believable/not believable' and convincing/not convincing.'" (p. 868)

The results and showed that the advertisement message claims were notably more believable and persuasive for the subjects that were exposed to the strong messaging

advertisements than for the participants who received the weak messaging advertisements. This result seems to prove that the argument strength was manipulated successfully. Further results from the collected data point to the advertisement type being manipulated successfully, too. (p. 868)

The hypothesis tests are broken down by the argument types, strong argument ads and weak argument ads.

First, the strong argument ads, "analysis revealed that the CbOp means significantly more negative for the direct attack ad than for the direct comparison ad." Therefore, hypothesis one is upheld. Further analysis shows that the CbSpon mean was remarkably greater, and the CbSpon → Ab path connection was notably stronger (regarding the direct comparison over the direct attack ad). Therefore hypotheses two and three are also supported. But, the comparison of sponsor attitudes across the ad types showed that the mean Ab was notably greater for the direct attack ad than for both the positive advertisement or the direct comparison ad, leaving hypothesis four undermined. (p. 872)

For the weak argument advertisements, the CbOp → Ab connection was markedly stronger, and the Ab mean was markedly greater for the direct comparison ad than the direct attack advertisement, supporting hypothesis five. But, the Ab mean was markedly greater for the positive advertisement than the direct attack ad, and the CbOp → Ab connection was more negative for the direct comparison advertisement than the positive advertisement, leaving hypothesis six undermined. (p. 873)

Conclusions of this study include that the positive and negative brand attitudes formed are directly affected by the presented argument's strength and the type of

advertisement it is. The collected data suggest that negative feelings about the candidate's opposition can have a positive effect on the attitude toward the candidate — when the message is strong. But if the message is weak, the most effective negative political advertising is by direct comparison ads. (p. 874)

"Our results provide evidence that negative political advertising appeals may indeed be superior to positive appeals. Further, under strong message argument conditions, direct attack ads — which researchers often consider the least constructive form of negative advertising — appear to have the greatest beneficial impact on brand (sponsor) evaluations." In conclusion, Coulter is also quick to point out that his study relied on political attacks, not necessarily attacks on an opposing candidates' personal character or image. (p. 874)

### **Similarities and Differences**

When looking at all of the collected data from the various studies, analysis, and field experiments it is hard not to be overwhelmed by the differences in research and the population as a whole over the past 25 years.

Ansolabehere et al. (1994) state, "The results show that negative political advertising cause as many as 5% of voters to discard their intentions of voting. In addition, voters exposed to negative political advertising develop a cynical attitude regarding the responsiveness of politicians and the election process in general." (p. 1) Yet, most additional research and field studies conducted and cited in this research paper seek to actively refute the claims Ansolabehere et al. made in 1994.

Wattenberg and Briars (1999) claim the experiment was conducted in a lab setting with no actions being required to prove the results, participants were simply asked

about their intentions (with regard to voting) and then went on their way. The research duo spend the majority of their analysis actively denying Ansolabehere et al.; and the other more recent studies all but prove the Ansolabehere et al. experiment irreparably flawed. Citing a lack of real world applicability and even the dis-inclusion of data (ballots) leading to a skew in the experiment's results that very plainly favors the conclusions Ansolabehere et al. were seeking to prove. (Wattenberg M.P., Brians C.L., 1999)

Additionally, Wattenberg and Brians (1999) also claim that there are far to many, other factors that can account for the data Ansolabehere et al. (1994) collected that can be directly contributed to the design of their experiment, and the data they decided to not include. And while the data, and the effects of cynicism in voters cannot be totally discounted, a voters' attitude is not necessarily a direct indicator of whether, or not they will vote.

Yoon K. et al. (2005) posit that a voters' view on a candidate's credibility will heavily affect the success of any negative campaigning, that the receivers' general perceptions magnify the extreme importance of variables that could affect the opinions voters make regarding the credibility of a message's sources and the candidate. (p. 98)

Therefore, when a candidate with low credibility utilizes attack-style negative advertising, the voters could become less likely to back them. The voters could even think the candidate in question is only using negative political advertisements because of their own deficiencies or limitations. In contrast, a candidate with high credibility can use negative advertising tactics without losing overall support. (p. 99)

The observations made by Yoon K. et al. then lead to the conclusion that, so long as negative political advertising is used correctly, it can be a powerful tool for elections. Additionally, that the first priority of a campaign should be to establish their candidate as having high credibility, and then protect that perception. Much like eating chocolate, going negative should be done in moderation.

### **Additional Conclusions**

Like all studies pertaining to the human psyche, the human element is just too great a variable to be able to accommodate mathematically. Every person is different, and even the same people are inherently different the next day. Major life events (birthdays, marriage, divorce, becoming a parent, etc.), emotional/psychological trauma, career changes, even something as simple as tripping over a pothole in a sidewalk can fundamentally change people every day.

I am a far different person now than I was at the start of this paper. I have always considered myself someone who had opinions that I based on facts. When I am presented with new, pertinent information, my opinions evolve, which is certainly the way that it should be.

The only fundamentally true thing I can say I have learned about negative political advertising and its effectiveness is this: 'It depends.'

Its effectiveness is dependent on hundreds of thousands of variables that can never be totally controlled or quantified. The only item that can be is the candidate's overall likeability. People-at-large can look past a lot for a person they feel they like. If a potential voter is more moderate than progressive or conservative, they 'could' vote for

either, but chances are they will vote for the person they 'like' the most — or by today's standards, 'hate' the least.

One of the biggest "campaign looking forward" moments of President Barack Obama's career —was when he invited the police and the homeowner he arrested for breaking into his own house to the White House for a beer. That was such a relatable moment for the majority of Americans. While I didn't vote for Barack Obama, I did like him. I found him to be magic on the microphone, relatable, energetic, and even though his politics didn't necessarily align with mine, he was a believer — which was refreshing.

Looking back on the 2020 Presidential Election numbers, it is very easy to postulate the same reasons are why incumbent President Donald Trump lost the election. He had little to no moderate appeal. And while the same could be said for now-President Joe Biden, Biden wasn't as 'loud' about it. There were so many previously immobilized voters (be that because they were formerly too young or lacked the inspiration to become politically active) that showed up simply to vote against President Donald Trump that the numbers were truly staggering.

An article published in 2014 can help point to the reason the election results experienced by now unseated President Donald Trump in 2020 were possible. "Looking at the numbers, it's little wonder why millennials are such a target. Those born between 1981 and the early 2000s make up a quarter of the U.S. population, and roughly 45 million are eligible to vote. That is expected to double by 2020 when millennials will comprise 40 percent of eligible voters. Clearly, Gen Y will play a major role at the ballot box in the midterms, and represents a key demo for Democrats and Republicans in the 2016 presidential race and beyond." (Gianatasio, D. 2014)

A quick glance over election material that was released by the Trump campaign easily reflects the campaign's lack of appeal to the millennial generation. Looking at the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, they couldn't be more different. They stand across the aisle on almost every issue. But, they don't just disagree. They are literally opposed entirely to the position of the other.

Regardless of voter sentiment, negative political advertising will continue to be more effective than ever. With two dominating political parties sitting on the north and south poles, respectively, on all key issues campaigns are being supplied with more than enough ammunition to keep the negative ads coming for years to come.

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## Appendix A

**Table 1**

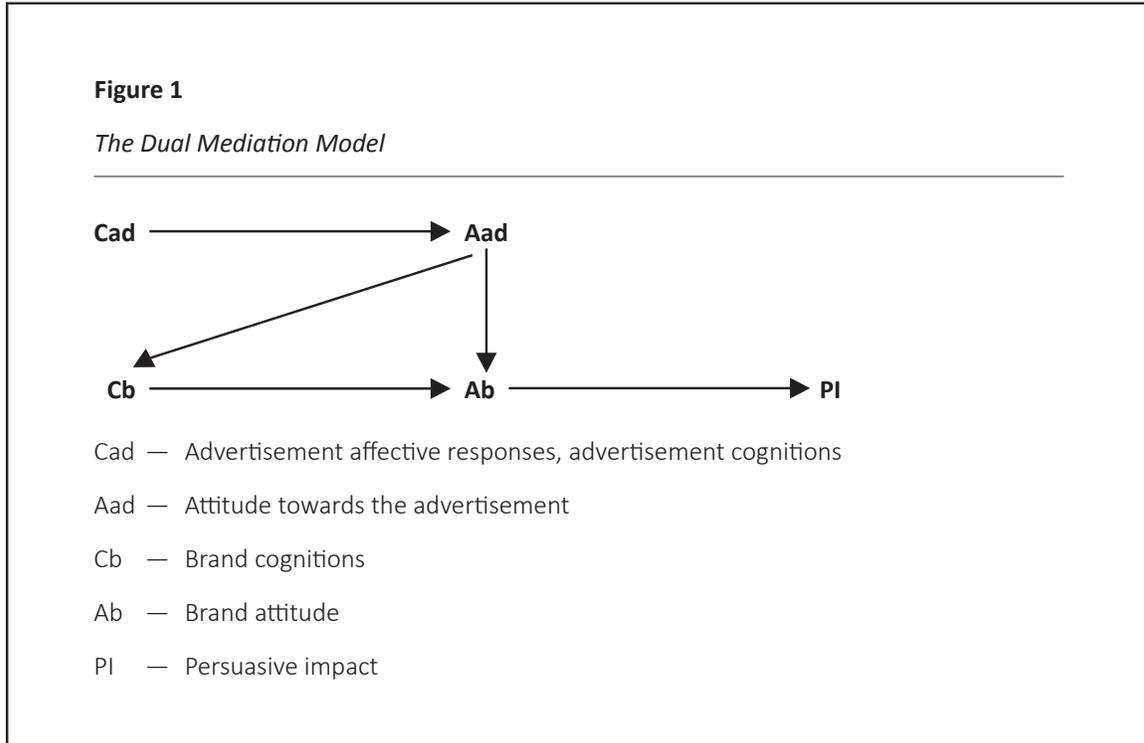
*Average Rolloff and Turnout in 1992 Elections, Comparison of Data Presented by Ansolabehere et al. with Official Election Results*

	Ansolabehere et al. Results	Official Election Results
<b>Average Rolloff</b>		
<b>(Presidential-Senate vote)</b>		
Negative tone states	6.0%	3.6%
Mixed ton states	5.7%	6.0%
Positive tone states	3.3%	2.8%
<b>Average Turnout (Senate vote)</b>		
Negative tone states	49.7%	51.8%
Mixed ton states	52.4%	50.3%
Positive tone states	57.0%	58.9%

Sources: Wattenberg M. P. Brians C. L. 1999. (895) cite Ansolabehere and Iyengar and the Federal Election Commission.

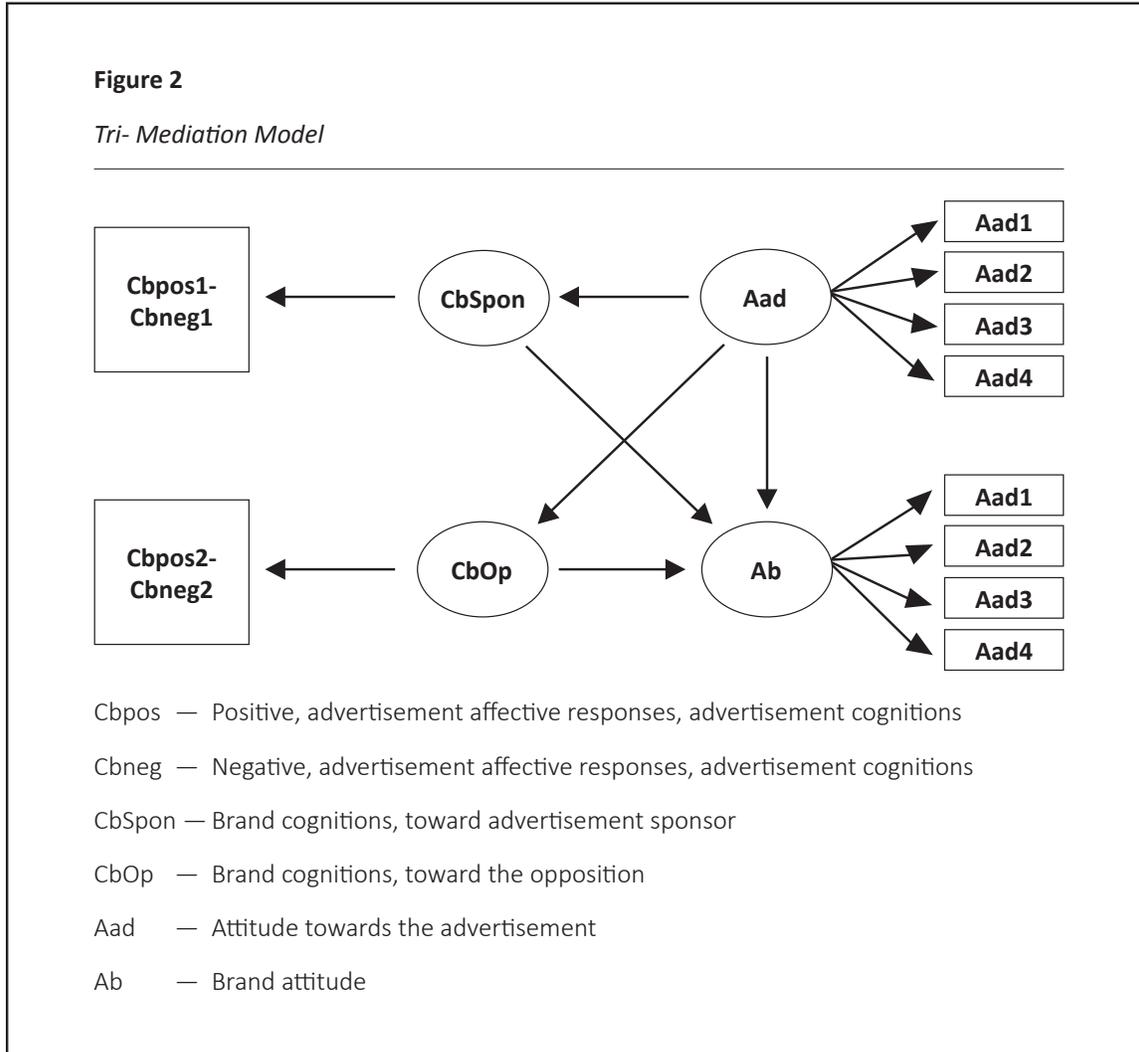
*Note.* This table is a recreation of the "TABLE 4. Average Rolloff and Turnout in 1992 Elections, Comparison of Data Presented by Ansolabehere et al. with Official Election Returns" in *Negative Campaign Advertising: Demobilizer or Mobilizer?* (Wattenberg M.P. & Brians C. L. 1999. p. 895)

## Appendix B



*Note.* This figure is a recreation of the "Figure 1: Dual Mediation Model" provided in Tri-Mediation Model of Persuasion. (Coulter, K. S. 2008. p. 359.) Further information was provided under the figure to explain what the series of abbreviations represent. This figure was included to allow for a deeper context of where the Tri-Mediation Model comes from and how it differs.

## Appendix C



*Note.* This figure is a recreation of the "Figure 2: Tri-Mediation Model" provided in the Tri-Mediation Model of Persuasion (Coulter, K. S. 2008. p. 361). Further information was provided under the figure to explain what the series of abbreviations represent. This figure was included to allow for a deeper context of where the Tri-Mediation Model comes from and how it allows for the deeper analysis of the political advertisements' messaging and reception.