

Negative political campaigning

Evidence from the psychological literature: does it work?

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It seems to be increasingly taken for granted by politicians and commentators that it is more effective to attack one's opponent than to promote a positive vision in order to sway voters in an election campaign. This article examines the relevant evidence in the psychological literature to see if this belief is justified. This includes the evidence on information processing, emotion and the specific effects of negative campaigning.

Information processing evidence

People are very aware of negative information, they attend to it more, think about it more, remember it better, and it is more powerful in shaping our impressions of things (e.g. Hodges, 1974). Skowronski & Carlston (1989) showed that given equal amounts of positive and negative descriptions of a person, the overall impression formed is skewed towards the negative. Negative data are also more persistent over time (Richey *et al.*, 1967).

There are several attempts to account for this, including expectancy-contrast theory (Anderson, 1965; Sherif & Sherif, 1967), frequency-weight theories (Hamilton & Zanna, 1972; Fiske, 1980) and cue-diagnostic theories (Wyer, 1973). They include a number of common themes. People have positive baseline expectations in general such that negative information is perceptually more salient. Therefore, people would be more aware of negative information and process it more. If one expects the average person to be basically decent, honest and polite, then if someone is presented as dishonest, this would make a more marked impression.

A given piece of information has a range of possible interpretations. Range theories propose that negative cues are more diagnostic with a narrower range of interpretations. For example, if one was told that a candidate did charity work, this could be seen as a demonstration of altruism or as a public relations exercise. If also told that the candidate was a paedophile, the overall impression would be very heavily skewed by this fact. These theories are not well supported by evidence.

Emotional factors

People's feelings about politicians are more predictive of their voting preference than their beliefs about them (Abelson *et al.*, 1982). While beliefs tend to be self-consistent, people were found to harbour ambivalent and contradictory feelings about politicians at the same time.

To discourage smoking and foster negative attitudes towards smoking, it is more effective to provide dispassionate, matter-of-fact information than to stress the frightening aspects of the related diseases (Janis & Terwilliger, 1962). People are better persuaded by reasonable arguments which engage them than counter-attitudinal arguments that tend to make them switch off. It is more effective to extol the healthiness and sexiness of non-smoking than to reinforce the disease theme.

Attitude to mudslinging

Most people find negative campaigning quite transparent, considering it as dishonest and untrustworthy (Steward, 1975). However, despite seeing it as less ethical, a majority find it more informative (Sirlin & Gordon, 1977). Voters actually develop a negative feeling towards the sponsors of negative adverts (Garramore, 1984) but it is not known whether this affects voting.

Does negative campaigning win votes?

There are a few studies which test this question directly. Garramore (1985) found that subjects vote less for a candidate targeted by an attack commercial, but only if the attacker is independent. Roddy & Garramore (1988) showed that if the attack comes from the opponent, this commonly stimulates a paradoxical negative attitude towards the sponsor of the commercial.

In a typical example of this type of study, Pentony (1995) gave subjects a sheet of neutral information about two candidates. The two descriptions differed only by a single sentence alleging either adultery or corruption originating from either an independent newspaper or the opponent. This single sentence was enough to sway the voters against the candidate. Adultery

was less negative than corruption. It did not matter in this study whether the accusation came from a partisan or independent source. If the accused vigorously denied the negative claim, this reduced but did not eliminate the effect of the claim.

The main limitation of these studies is that their conclusions do not readily generalise to the real election situation with a huge number of interacting variables. In particular, there is little evidence to show how negative campaigning relates to any of the following variables: whether it comes from the government or opposition; whether negative campaigning attracts attention or makes people lose interest; and whether there is a difference between smears, personal attacks and well argued criticisms.

There is little evidence to distinguish the effects of a negative campaign on different target audiences. Does it matter what their existing viewpoint is? Does it vary by type of issue? The effect may be modulated by small group processes operating in the family, workplace or communities.

Conclusion

In favour of negative campaigning, people are more influenced by negative information in forming impressions. Negative information is more salient, better attended to and remembered. Emotions are more important than beliefs in predicting voting choice. Negative emotions can influence people's opinions if used subtly. Excessive fear is counterproductive. Although most people see negative campaigning for what it is and find it unethical, they still find it more informative. Negative campaigns do sway voters, but less so if resisted by the target. It is not clear how the sponsor can avoid provoking ill feeling in the audience.

However, there are many more unanswered questions. Above all, there has been no attempt to compare the value of a negative campaign against a really positive one. It is very hard to simulate the effect of an inspiring leader with a grand vision stimulating a complex nation full of history, diversity and aspirations in an experimental setting.

The overall conclusion is that there is fragmented evidence suggesting that negative campaigning is effective to a degree, but no evidence that it is superior to a positive campaign.

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