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Independent Reading

Ansolabehere, S., Iyengar, S., Simon, A., & Valentino, N. (1994). Does attack advertising demobilize the electorate? *American Political Science Review*, 88, 829-839.

In the United States, political campaigns have changed dramatically since the 1940s and 1950s. Television has been a driving force in this change, undermining the traditional party organizations and giving candidates direct access to the voters. Paid political advertisements have become an essential part of every campaign. According to Ansolabehere et al., in 1990, candidates spent more on televised advertising than any other form of campaign communication. Candidates criticize, belittle, and discredit their opponents, rather than promoting their own beliefs, ideas, and programs. The 1988 and 1990 elections saw attack advertisements become the norm rather than the exception in political advertisements.

In this experiment, the authors held all other features of the study constant, except for the tone, to demonstrate that the exposure to attack advertising decreases voter participation. To validate the study, the authors demonstrated that turnout in the 1992 Senate campaigns was significantly reduced in states where the overall tone of the campaign was relatively negative. For the study, the authors developed an experiment to assess the effects of advertising tone on public opinion and voting. The experimental commercials were professionally produced; only a political expert would be able to distinguish the experimental commercial from other political advertisements. Experimenters embedded the commercial into a 15-minute local newscast. Viewers watched a 30-second advertisement that either promoted or attacked the view of the sponsoring candidate or opposing candidate respectively. Because the advertisements watched by the viewers were identical in all respects other than the tone of the commercial and participants were randomly assigned to experimental groups, any difference between the conditions may be attributed to the tone of the advertisement.

The demobilization hypothesis predicts that exposure to negative advertising will lower the percentage of likely voters. The authors found that of the participants who viewed the positive advertisement, 64% were likely to vote, while only 58% of those who saw the negative advertisement were likely to vote. The control group was shown a product commercial rather than a political commercial; 61% of the participants in the control group said they were likely to vote. The authors emphasize that these results were found with participants viewing one 30-second commercial in a 15-minute newscast. Over the course of a typical campaign, these effects would be compounded. After analyzing the 1992 Senate races, the authors found that negative campaigns decreased voter turn-out by 2%.

The authors concluded that negative campaigns demobilize the electorate. They offered explanations for the demobilization, such as partisanship and blanket negativity, but refuted both of these suggestions. The authors finally concluded that negative advertising makes voters disenchanted with politics in general. The authors suggested solutions for this problem, such as charging more for air-time for negative advertisements, requiring candidates to make attacks in person on camera, and the use of media monitoring to give critical news coverage for candidates who use negative advertising.