Are Negatives Positive?

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“Does the Election Make You Want to Be Sedated?” So read a late October headline. What was the irritant calling for sedation? The “caustic” attack ads the 2012 political season delivered in spades. With the presidential election still four weeks away, Las Vegas television stations were featuring 10,000 political commercials a week. And Las Vegas ranked only tenth on the list of ad-saturated markets. None of these political ads limned detailed plans for our country’s future. Apart from the few that presented a candidate’s fuzzy “vision” for future prosperity and freedom, the rest sliced and diced opponents, leaving an observant visitor from Mars to conclude that the only people who run for office in the United States are mountebanks, schemers, time-servers, liars, fakers, traitors, quacks, and crooks.

Every opinion poll shows that the public heartily dislikes political attack ads; and baleful commentators ceaselessly lament the damage to democracy done by the steady diet of bile that campaigns feed the electorate. Yet many of those who create the ads take a different view. “Negative ads not only work, they give voters better information than positive ads,” declared one political consultant a few years back. Affirmed another: “competitive, comparative, compelling ads . . . provide voters with the mothers’ milk of political decision-making: information.” This sentiment is widely shared in the consulting profession. Are voters perhaps disgruntled with what in fact is good for them?


He restricted his investigation to 795 television ads run in presidential races from 1960 to 2000, copies of which are readily accessible in a couple of repositories. After coding these ads for content and type, Geer concluded that

- Negative ads have always outpaced positive ads by ratios ranging from 3 to 1 in 1984 to 20 to 1 in 2000. The average is about 8 to 1.
- There is a clear upward trend in negativity since 1960.
- Negative ads, contrary to received wisdom, enhance the democratic process by creating a more information-rich environment.

The last of these conclusions is the most interesting and provocative. How did Geer arrive at it? His argument involved several stages.

First, Geer postulated an “asymmetry” between positive and negative ads. “[F]or the negative ad to be effective, the sponsor . . . must marshal more evidence” [than the sponsor of a positive ad]. “[W]hen politicians present negative messages, they need to provide evidence to make them credible.” Geer then tested this postulate against the data. He examined the 795 ads to see if they included evidence. Geer’s findings supported his postulate: “In every year under study, negative ads were much more likely to provide clear evidence to support their point than positive ads.”

Second, Geer showed that attack ads are more likely to be about issues than about personality. The negative ads he studied were directed against the character of opposition candidates a third of the time and against their policy positions two-thirds of the time. “[N]egative appeals tend to be more positional in nature . . . [N]egative ads are almost twice as likely [as positive ads] to provide voters with a choice of governmental action.”

Finally, Geer presented some scaffolding. He endorsed a standard theme in Western political
Over 350 years ago, John Milton . . . in Aeropagitica argued that it was best to ‘let truth and falsehood grapple . . . in a free and open exchange.’ [. . .] John Stuart Mill . . . some 200 years later went even further, contending that an opinion gains legitimacy and credibility if it faces criticism . . . .

In a healthy democracy, “[we] need the criticisms from competing candidates to ensure that we more fully vet [their] respective plans and qualifications.” In short, in campaigns “the more evidence, the better.” Geer’s argument can be summed up thus:

Negative more than positive ads address issues and appeal to evidence. Thus, negative ads enrich the information environment of voters. Such enrichment strengthens democracy.

Geer presented his thesis about the virtues of negativity as a bold strike against conventional wisdom. He displayed little sympathy for the public disgust at negative advertising. “[J]ust because people do not like the messiness of politics does not mean we should devise a system that is consistent with these preferences . . . . [A]ny effort to lessen negative advertising will lessen the quality of information available to the public.” Evidently we must hold the people’s collective nose and make them take their political castor oil.

II

Geer commends ads that supply information. Of course, he allows, it would also be desirable if the information is accurate. “Obviously, [ads] that convey accurate information are superior to those that lie and mislead.”

Yes, indeed, the accuracy of the “information” in an ad would seem to be relevant to judging how well it enriches the information environment.

But Geer’s elaborate analysis of ads forgoes this crucial inquiry. “I will not,” he writes, “assess explicitly whether information from an ad is accurate or not.” Why not? Geer explains:

The problem is that it is very hard to establish the truth. Moreover, ads, like all propaganda, stretch the truth. Campaigns put forth the most positive account possible of their candidate and paint the least flattering picture of the opposition. However, exaggeration is not the same thing as lying and/or being dishonest. Reasonable people can disagree about how best to present the ‘facts’. Republicans . . . will offer different interpretations of the facts than Democrats. Where one falls politically will almost inevitably influence whether particular information is judged to be ‘accurate’ or ‘inaccurate’. As a result, there is no clear set of guidelines that can clearly establish what is true or false. Efforts to establish whether information in campaigns is misleading strike me as a very slippery slope. It is for these reasons that I chose to establish the standard of evidence . . . . [I]t is possible to determine whether evidence exists or not in a reasonably objective fashion.

In fact, however, Geer never even determines the existence of evidence in ads. He stipulates a peculiar definition: an ad supplies evidence if it incorporates “specific statistics” or makes “specific references” or uses “direct quotes.” Thus, in analyzing his sample ads, Geer simply tabulated the appearance of various marks or signs of evidence. That’s what can be done in a “reasonably objective fashion” – count the quotes, citations, references, and the like. Do these counted marks or signs underwrite a claim that an ad is full of evidence? Not if they are bogus or fabricated. Yet here is Geer: “I did not undertake any formal verification of the evidence.”

Isn’t this non-undertaking an extraordinary omission in a treatise trying to prove that negative ads supply an “enriched information environment” to the voter? Geer isn’t troubled. Judgments of “truth,” “lies,” “misleading,” “distortion,” and the like, he writes, are inherently normative and “not something that readily applies itself to normal social science standards.”

On Geer’s crudely positivistic conception of social science, he is limited to counting, not judging. By counting the number of quotes in an ad or the number of references it makes to external sources, he can stay away from messy normativity.

The problem with Geer’s methodology should be readily apparent by now. It is this: “Quality of information” is itself a normative notion. “Enriched
information environment” is a normative notion. Indeed, “information” is a normative notion, just like “truth,” “distortion,” “lies,” and all the rest.

Thus, Geer’s finding that the negative ads he studied were more likely than positive ads to supply evidence for their claims has to be taken with a grain of salt. Or better, a whole box.

In defense of his asymmetry thesis, Geer repeatedly protests that candidates can’t just make up stuff. Of course they can. And they do. Fake newspaper headlines, sham quotes, and phony documentation are delivered up more often than you might imagine. Such cheeky counterfeiting is less likely in ads produced in presidential campaigns, but as you travel down the political food chain, you should adopt President Ronald Reagan’s famous slogan (made about relations with the Soviet Union), “trust, but verify” – which means, in effect, “don’t trust, verify.” Geer omits any verifying. Yet he has no hesitation in concluding that negative ads are evidence-driven, and no hesitation in generalizing his “findings” about presidential campaign ads to negative ads in general.

III

If ads “enrich the information environment” of voters, how do they do so and how do they fail? Geer assumes that adding to the “information environment” is the same thing as enriching it. This is clearly not so. Indeed, adding information might degrade a voter’s information environment. We can see this by looking at some ads.

The first we’ll look at is from Guy Millner’s 1994 campaign against incumbent Georgia governor Zell Miller. Millner’s campaign ran this ad:

Guy Millner (into the camera): “My daughter Tricia awoke to a man standing over her bed with a knife in his hand and a ski mask over his face.”

Tricia (into the camera): “I thought he was going to kill me.”

Guy Millner (into the camera): “My daughter I almost lost, but by the grace of God she is with me here today.”

Text and Voice-over: “Keeping violent criminals in jail hasn’t been a priority in Georgia. If Guy Millner were governor, it would be.”

Miller’s campaign cried foul. It claimed the ad was misleading, implying that the attack on Tricia occurred in Georgia when in fact it occurred ten years earlier in Tennessee. The Millner campaign retorted that the ad was not “false” because it never said the attack occurred in Georgia. It was an honest effort at showing Millner’s personal commitment to keeping criminals in jail.

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Misleading? Not misleading? Is this an ad where, like John Geer, we must throw up our hands and simply confess that partisans of the different candidates will come to different conclusions? We can do better than that. Let’s credit Millner’s declared motive for making the ad, and rewrite it so that it honestly displays Millner’s personal urgency:

Guy Millner (into camera): “Some years ago, in another state, my daughter Tricia awoke to a man standing over her bed with a knife in his hand and a ski mask over his face.”

Tricia (into camera): “And I thought he was gonna kill me.”

Guy Millner (into camera): “My daughter I almost lost, but by the grace of God she is with me here today.”

Voice Over: That experience made Guy Millner a firm believer in keeping violent criminals in jail.

Guy Millner (into camera): “I don’t believe that’s been a priority in Georgia. Under my administration, it will be.”

If the point of the ad is to express Millner’s personal commitment to keeping criminals in jail and to give voice to his opinion that keeping criminals in jail hasn’t been a priority in Georgia, then the rewritten ad does the job as well as or better than the original. It follows the original’s format and language, making only minor and inconsequential changes. I say
the changes are inconsequential if the point of the ad is to capture Millner’s personal experience and express his opinion that keeping criminals in jail hasn’t been a priority in Georgia. On the other hand, the changes are quite consequential if the aim of the ad was actually to lead viewers to a false supposition. Seeing the original ad, a Georgia viewer might have had the following thoughts: “A violent criminal, given early release in Georgia under Zell Miller’s administration, nearly killed Guy Millner’s daughter; to my way of thinking, that sure lends some credence to Millner’s claim that keeping violent criminals in jail hasn’t been a priority in Georgia.” The revised ad blocks this inference. The original encourages it.

The ad-makers were counting on most viewers to react immediately to the ad, not to investigate it.

Was the original ad simply a clumsy effort, an inept try at saying what the revised version says? The ad-maker was young Alex Castellanos, who has gone on to great success in Republican circles and now has the status of wise TV commentator during election season. Look at two more of his ads the same year. One was another Millner campaign ad against Zell Miller. The ad displayed a newspaper headline: “Paroled Murderer Charged in Death of Medicaid Staffer.” A voice declared: “Zell Miller is releasing through his Pardon and Parole Board violent criminals only serving one-third their time.” As it happens, the accused individual described in the headline was paroled during a previous governor’s administration. The ad doesn’t report this fact, however, because doing so would get in the way of viewers assuming a connection between the parole and Zell Miller’s administration. A second ad was one Castellanos produced for Jeb Bush’s run against Florida governor Lawton Chiles. This ad showed the mother of 10-year-old murder victim saying to the camera: “The murderer of my daughter is still in prison and Governor Chiles won’t sign his death warrant. He’s too liberal on crime. I know Jeb Bush. I know he’ll make criminals pay.” Of course, his liberal softness aside, it would have been difficult for Governor Childs to sign a death warrant in a case still before the appeals courts. See a pattern? The ads all invite the viewer to make a connection not actually supported by the content. This invitation is deliberate. Even in his early career, no one would ever have put the words “Alex Castellanos” and “inept” together in the same sentence.

IV

Let’s look at a more recent ad. Made by a group called VoteVets, it was deployed against Virginia Senator George Allen in his 2006 run for re-election. Look at the ad for yourself. It is a masterpiece of visual effectiveness.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUMEcG4NEY

The narrator fires an AK-47 into two dummies, one protected by a modern body armor vest and another protected by an older body armor vest. He then tears open the vests; the first dummy is unscathed, the second pocked with bullet holes. The difference between the two vests is a difference of “life or death,” intones the narrator. Then he tells us that George Allen “voted against giving our troops this,” indicating the modern body armor vest. While he is saying these words, a small script appears for two seconds at the bottom of the picture. It says “vote 116, 108th Congress, 1st Session.”

Only if a viewer recorded this ad and then replayed it back several times could she actually make out what the words say. If such an intrepid viewer went on to search out the Congressional Record for the referred-to vote, what would she find? She would find that vote 116 was on a motion to table an amendment offered by Senator Mary Landrieu to the April, 2003 Supplemental Defense Appropriations Act being considered by the Senate. The Landrieu Amendment in its entirety read, “In chapter 3 of title I . . . insert . . . the following: For an additional amount for National Guard and Reserve Equipment, $1,047,000,000.”

The intrepid researcher could learn more, too, but the ad-makers were counting on most viewers to react immediately to the ad, not to investigate it. More typical was the response by this viewer when she saw the ad (I paraphrase): “As a parent of a combat veteran, I was angered and disgusted at a Senator who didn’t give a damn about our troops.” Do you think the ad-maker, witnessing this reaction, would have exclaimed, “Oops, I didn’t mean for her to draw that conclusion!” – or do you think he would have said, “Bingo?”
The Supplemental Appropriations bill itself provided more than $50 billion to the military services – including to National Guard and Reserve components – to prosecute the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Landrieu amendment was one of many offered by Democrats; all were turned aside. The amendment was non-specific; its funding could have been spent on tents, rifles, field radios, power generators, helicopters, and any other National Guard and Reserve requirements, including personal protection devices. The vote to table it was 52-47. Every Republican voted yea; every Democrat nay. To conclude from George Allen’s vote to table that he didn’t give a damn about the troops, you’d also have to conclude that John McCain, former prisoner of war, didn’t care about the troops, that Chuck Hagel, who served in Vietnam, didn’t care about the troops, that John Warner, stalwart long-time member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, didn’t care about the troops, and that Bob Dole, injured WWII veteran, didn’t care about the troops.

The ad-makers sought a reaction like the one exhibited by the mother, a reaction not earned honestly.

V

Look at another ad from the 2006 campaign season.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBobHMq-ixI

If there were an Academy Award for political ads, this one would qualify, it is that good. Three figures address the camera one after the other. A teenage boy: “Returning from a camping trip next week I’ll be in a car accident and paralyzed for life.” A forty-something woman: “In twenty years I’ll have Alzheimer’s. I won’t recognize my husband or my kids.” Little girl: “This week my mommy and daddy are going to find out that I have diabetes.” The gist of the ad: each of the individuals speaking could be your child, your spouse, or you. And each might have his or her prospects improved by the fruits of stem cell research. But their Congressman, James Walsh, “voted against federal funding for stem cell research.”

Unlike the VoteVets ad, this one contains no brief reference to the specific vote, so an intrepid viewer would have to do even more sleuthing to dig out the underlying facts. However, with enough patience and digging she would come across two votes recorded in the Congressional Record for May 24, 2005. One vote was for H. R. 810, the “Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2005.” It directed the Secretary of Health and Human Services to support “human embryonic stem cell research.” Congressman Walsh voted against H. R. 810. A second vote was for H. R. 2520, the “Stem Cell Therapeutic and Research Act of 2005.” It directed the Secretary of Health and Human Services to support research using stem cells collected from “cord blood,” blood from the umbilical cords of newborn babies. Congressman Walsh voted for H. R. 2520.

So it’s not quite true to say without qualification that Walsh voted “against stem cell research.” The ad could easily have offered the appropriate qualification and squeezed the word “embryonic” in between “federal funds for” and “stem cell research.” Why didn’t it? Was the omission inadvertent? Don’t believe it. The ad-makers knew what they were doing. They wanted an audience reaction unclouded by a potential turn-off for some viewers – namely, that the research on embryonic stem cells involves destroying the human embryos from which the cells are taken.

VI

Finally, here is an ad by one of the consultants who touted the informational value of attack ads. His candidate was running for the Senate against an attorney who had established a multi-office law firm across the Midwest. The ad informed viewers that the attorney’s firm had been sued for malpractice “hundreds of times.” The ad-maker clearly intended for viewers to conclude that the attorney was an untrustworthy sleaze-ball. The average viewer hears “sued hundreds of times” and reactively concludes “bad man.” What could be more natural? But did the ad provide any basis for this natural slide? Does the fact that the attorney’s firm was sued “hundreds of times” speak for itself? No.

Do you know how often lawyers get sued for malpractice? I don’t. I bet none of the ad’s viewers knew. I’m certain the ad-maker had no idea. But without a baseline, the information in the ad supplies no warrant for any kind of judgment about the attorney and his firm. To see, let’s just make up some numbers. Suppose the national average is 0.4 malpractice lawsuits per lawyer per decade. On average then, a 100-member law firm will incur 40 malpractice lawsuits in a decade, a 1000-member firm 400 lawsuits. The attorney’s firm was very large. Let’s
assume that it was in the 1000-member range. The ad alleges (“informs us”) that the firm was sued “hundreds of times.” How many hundreds? If it were three hundred in ten years, we would have a reason to think the attorney actually ran a better-than-average firm, one more honest and competent than most. If it were seven hundred over ten years, then we could suspect the attorney ran a shoddy operation. Without a baseline and some specific numbers, the ad’s “hundreds of times” tells the viewer absolutely nothing. Yet the ad-maker didn’t run this ad on the expectation that viewers would draw no conclusion from it.

VII

The ads we’ve looked at are dishonest. They deliberately omit facts that would prevent viewers from jumping to conclusions. By Geer’s mechanical counting method, only the ad against George Allen counts as evidence-based, but all them inform. They add information to the voter’s stockpile (although some of the information is tendentiously characterized). Tricia was attacked. George Allen did vote against something having to do with body armor. James Walsh did vote against federal funding of one kind of stem cell research. The attorney’s firm was sued hundreds of times.

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Mere addition, however, doesn’t put the voter in a better position to make a fact-based and warranted decision about candidates. Indeed, addition without context, or addition yoked to clever omissions, can lead the voter to jump to false conclusions and make unfounded inferences. It can degrade voters’ “information environment” by making it more rather than less likely that they will draw an unsupported conclusion.

The ads we’ve looked at manipulate viewer response. They play upon associations that viewers would naturally make, elicit responses further information would forestall, and the like. If we are concerned about the quality of information that voters receive, then the relevant empirical query is this: How many attack ads are like the ones we’ve looked at? If most are, then the public revulsion is well justified. Geer thinks the public is turned off by the harsh tone of negative ads. More likely they are revolted at the transparent mendacity that fills the airwaves. But, of course, mendacity is a normative notion that lies outside of Geer’s purview.

Why the upward trend in attack ads since the 1950s? One reason is this. Elections are not occasions to teach and inform voters, they are occasions to mobilize them. As parties have become more polarized over the decades, successful mobilizing increasingly provides the key to electoral victory. Information? All you need to know is that the country will go to hell if the other guy wins. That’s what will drive you to the polls.

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Source: