
Accentuate the Negative

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Midterm election season is almost upon us, and so we can safely expect that the tenor of TV advertising is about to take a negative turn. Attack ads are regularly condemned as a plague on the body politic, but in a new book, political scientist John Geer argues that negative ads can actually be a positive contribution to political discourse. Geer makes the case for Brooke.



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BROOKE GLADSTONE: Marc Leepson is the author of *Flag: An American Biography*. If, as he suggests, the current flag debate is partly a product of election year politicking, that's nothing new. For instance, *Old Glory* was mobilized in the 1988 presidential campaign when George Bush Senior attacked Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis for vetoing a bill mandating the Pledge of Allegiance. Never mind that the state Supreme Court said the measure was unconstitutional. It made Dukakis look bad in those all-important 30-second spots. Attack ads are regularly condemned as a plague on the body politic, but political scientist John Geer argues that negative ads can make a positive contribution to political discourse. He put that argument, along with lots of charts quantifying the content of 44 years of presidential campaign ads, in his new book, called *In Defense of Negativity*. John Geer, welcome to the show.

JOHN GEER: Thank you for having me.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Why don't we start with the most notorious attack ad of all time, probably? It was the Johnson for President Campaign ad that suggested that a Goldwater administration would lead to nuclear holocaust. And it depicts a little girl picking petals off a daisy. [CAMPAIGN AD CLIP]

LITTLE GIRL: Eight, nine – nine –

OMNIOUS SOUNDING MALE VOICE: Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. Kill. [EXPLOSION]

LYNDON JOHNSON: These are the stakes, to make a world in which all of God's children can live or go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die.

ANNOUNCER: Vote for President Johnson on November 3rd. The stakes are too high for you to stay home. [END AD CLIP]

BROOKE GLADSTONE: So fair or unfair? Bad for democracy or not?

JOHN GEER: Well, this is —I mean, you're right. This is an amazingly powerful ad, and, at the time, it was unheard of to talk about the nuclear issue in such a forceful way. But keep in mind that Barry Goldwater had said, prior to his run for the presidency, that maybe we should lob a nuclear bomb into the men's room of the Kremlin. He had made these kinds of loose statements. Barry Goldwater made a statement one time that, sometimes I think the whole country would be better off if the Eastern seaboard was sawed off -

BROOKE GLADSTONE: [LAUGHS]

JOHN GEER: - and it was just allowed to float to sea. The Johnson people created an ad where actually there was a saw aimed through a map of the United States where the Eastern seaboard then fell off and floated off to the ocean. [BROOKE LAUGHING] Barry Goldwater said that. These things weren't made up. From my point of view, it's a very defensible ad as opposed to some, you know, positive ad where Lyndon Johnson is, let's say, sitting on a porch and surrounded by his family and talking about what a wonderful person he is. I don't know what you'd learn from that ad

BROOKE GLADSTONE: So if people praise themselves inordinately, we don't take umbrage. but i

they attack their opponent unfairly and with exaggerations, we do. But why wouldn't we? The positive ads, the exaggerations, are less corrosive. It doesn't propagate lies about the other candidates or deceptive exaggerations, and it doesn't promote a culture of incivility.

JOHN GEER: Well, let's think about this for a second. In 1988, Michael Dukakis was attacked very harshly by then Vice-President Bush. He also had a positive ad, Michael Dukakis, that is, during the course of the '88 campaign where he talked about having balanced ten budgets in a row, touting his fiscal conservativeness, touting the fact that he was a balancer of budgets. Well, is that true? Turns out the Massachusetts constitution requires a balanced budget. It had nothing to do with any of his fiscal skills or any of his talents. He had to do it as governor. I could have been governor and I would have done it.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: [LAUGHS]

JOHN GEER: So here's an exaggeration that leads people, if it goes unchecked, to say, hey, this person's a fiscal conservative, but in point of fact, they're not. That's pretty corrosive if it goes unchecked.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Fair enough. And you do point out that in general, critical ads are more informative than the positive ones because they tend to focus on facts rather than hopes, and on the candidate's record rather than his or her hopes for the future.

JOHN GEER: Well, that's right. If you want campaigns to be about issues, if you want those issues to be talked about in specific terms, if you want to have some documentation behind the claims that are being made and if you want these issues to be things that matter to the public, which are four pretty reasonable goals, negative ads have all of those more so than positive ads. Yeah, sometimes people get turned off by attack politics, but at the same time, an attack may remind you why you are a Democrat. For instance, 2004 was one of the most negative campaigns at the presidential level in recent times. And what happened? The public turned out at a very huge rate. They knew it mattered, and these attacks reflected that.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: But things that were aired in 2004, specifically the Swift Boat ads, were pretty much made up.

JOHN GEER: Well, the Swift Boat ads are a unique set of ads. They're from these groups, 527s. The 527 ads, both sides have lots of them being aired. The Swift Boat ads are the most famous ones, but the problem with the Swift Boat ads was not the airing of the ads. It was the news media's attention on these ads. They gave them life.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: All right. If we want to apportion blame, I'll be happy to reserve a big chunk for the media. But the fact is, what you're saying in your book is that the public ought to embrace negative advertising because it increases our stake in campaigns and it increases our understanding of the candidates. And I say, perhaps sometimes, but what the public is really furious about is ads that obscure the issues, that propagate lies. I'm not saying that we can ban them. I'm just saying we ought to feel free to hate them.

JOHN GEER: Well, you can feel free to hate them. First of all, I'm not asking people to embrace negative ads per se. What I'm asking them to do is to accept the fact that politics is rough-and-tumble and you need to be prepared for these attacks and defend the kinds of things you've said in the past. Incivility is certainly a problem in American politics today. But if we only allow civil discussion, and let's say there's some issue that's a tremendous outrage to people, and there are certainly some individuals that are totally outraged by Iraq, as an example, why can't they scream about it? Why can't they yell about it? It's one way to create change, because sometimes the public isn't all that attentive, and it might take a little bit of yelling. We need this kind of discussion. We need to know the good sides and the bad sides of these contenders, because they're going to hold a huge amount of power.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: All right. Well, thank you very much.

JOHN GEER: Well, thank you.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Vanderbilt University professor John G. Geer is the author of *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns*.

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