

A Positive Take on Negative Advertising

By Dan Balz Thursday, April 27, 2006; A25

In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns

John G. Geer

University of Chicago Press,

218 pages

If you are one of those Americans who cringe every time they see a negative political ad on television, John G. Geer is not your cup of tea.

Geer, a Vanderbilt University political scientist, has set out to challenge the widely held belief that attack ads and negative campaigns are destroying democracy. Quite the opposite, he argues in his provocative new book: Negativity is good for you and for the political system.

Geer believes that democracy is strengthened by vigorous debate and asserts that negative ads contribute to, rather than detract from, that dialogue. His conclusions will surprise those who have lamented what seems to be the growing trend toward negativity. He confirms that negativity is on the rise -- the 2004 campaign was the most negative of the past four decades -- but from there he parts company with the hand-wringers.

Negative ads, he says, are far more likely to be about substance rather than personal attacks and are more likely to be supported by documentation than are positive appeals. He argues that negative ads are more specific than positive appeals and therefore more useful to voters in weighing the relative merits of presidential candidates. He also says the media have been far too alarmist about the level of negativity and the effects of attack ads on the political process.

"In Defense of Negativity" is replete with statistics, charts, graphs, regression analysis and other tools of social science that may test the average reader, but there is no escaping the clarity of Geer's conclusion. As he puts it, "The findings of this book show that any effort to lessen negative advertising will lessen the quality of information available to the public."

His conclusions are based on a study of the appeals in presidential campaign ads (an average of about 12 appeals per ad) aired over the past four decades. He selected 795 ads that included nearly 10,000

separate appeals, examined them all, coded them individually and analyzed the results.

His analysis does not include ads run by statewide or congressional candidates nor by third-party organizations that have aired some pretty nasty stuff over the years. That means he does not include in his findings the 1988 "Willie Horton" ad attacking Democratic nominee Michael S. Dukakis, but he does include Lyndon B. Johnson's famous "Daisy" ad from 1964 suggesting Barry Goldwater could not be trusted with his finger on the nuclear button.

Geer states what others before him have said: Negativity has long been part of American politics. He points out that 70 percent of the statements in the Declaration of Independence were negative and that candidates have been called liars and murderers or worse in campaigns that took place long before television or radio.

While conceding that negativity has steadily increased, he challenges the belief that the rise results from scurrilous personal attacks by one candidate against another. "Personal attacks in presidential campaigns do not appear to be excessively harsh, nor are they particularly frequent," he writes. "The concerns among political observers about personal attacks seem unwarranted in light of these data."

Negativity has increased because the two parties, now more ideologically divided than in the past, have more to argue about. Where this rise in negativity has shown up is in advertising based on issues, but Geer concludes that these attacks often are warranted and are less misleading than critics claim -- although he acknowledges that what crosses the line is open to debate, and he is perhaps overly generous in declining to declare what may be out of bounds.

Because voters are skeptical about attack ads, candidates provide far more documentation to support their criticisms (and were long before the media began to referee the ads) than they do to validate claims in positive ads. He quotes Republican media consultant Mike Murphy as saying, "We have a joke in this business: The only difference between negative and positive ads is that negative ads have facts in them." Those "facts," however, are sometimes open to question.

What has really changed, according to Geer, is awareness of negativity by the media, and he cites some statistics to buttress his argument. For example, from Aug. 1 to Nov. 1, 1984, there were nine stories in major newspapers about negative advertising. In the same period in 2004, there were 114 stories.

He devotes an entire chapter to the 1988 campaign between Dukakis and George H.W. Bush, which is remembered by many in politics as one of the low points in terms of the tone and substance. Geer says not so. "The advertising in 1988, despite all the claims, did not usher in a new era of American politics," he writes. "It was the news media's coverage that brought about a new era. . . . Journalists were committing the same sin they were accusing the candidates of: exaggerating."

Geer's arguments will hardly find universal acceptance, and the fact that he has focused only on the ads aired by candidates will subject him to the criticism that he has not looked as widely as he might have at

sources of some of the most negative attacks going these days.

But "In Defense of Negativity" adds a new argument to the debate about America's polarized politics, and in doing so it asserts that voters are less bothered by today's partisan climate than many believe. If there are problems -- and there are -- Geer says it's time to stop blaming it all on 30-second spots.

Balz is The Post's chief political reporter.

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