

# Lies, Damned Lies and Campaign Advertising

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Should negative campaign ads be added to the list of things that scholars and the media say are good for us but that we just can't seem to develop a taste for?

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While Americans say they don't like negative campaign advertising — in a 2000 Gallup poll, 60 percent said “negative” ads [had no place](#) in a political campaign — observers like Chuck Todd, political director of NBC News, insist that “the negative ad is a [necessary reality](#) that actually does our democracy some good.”

Many political scientists, like John Geer of Vanderbilt University, agree. “Many pundits view negative ads as counterproductive, but nothing could be further from the truth,” Geer says. “Attack ads [contain more substantive information](#) than positive ads.”

As voters in a large number of crucial presidential primary states prepare to cast their ballots, does this mean that negative campaign commercials should be added to the list of things — like tofu and

ab crunches — that scholars and the media say are good for us but that we just can't seem to develop a taste for?

It turns out that when the terms are defined more precisely, we have a higher tolerance for negative ads than we realize. According to Geer and his colleague Deborah Jordan Brooks of Dartmouth College, the academic definition of negative campaigning has traditionally meant merely that an ad or other campaign message [focuses on the candidate's opponent](#) rather than on the candidate. But the general public has a considerably different view: In the Gallup poll, only 20 percent of the respondents considered it an example of negative campaigning to discuss an opponent's position on issues like military spending or education. Framed in the academics' terminology, that means 80 percent could tolerate issues-oriented negative campaigning.

Talking about an opponent's extramarital affairs, by contrast, was considered off base: More than three-quarters of those polled considered that an example of negative campaigning. Such sentiments explain to a large degree the heavy criticism of an attack ad on then-Rep. Harold Ford Jr. of Tennessee in his 2006 bid for a U.S. Senate seat, which suggested sexual dalliances on his part (racial overtones were also prominent, with a flirtatious white woman claiming she met the unmarried, black Ford "at the Playboy party").

#### **Watch the Ford attack ad:**



Media coverage doesn't exactly clear up the question of what constitutes a negative ad. Dan Balz of The Washington Post, while averring that "there were some [negative ads] in the Republican race in Iowa," says negative ads have been ["mostly missing in action this year."](#) But in the view of The Boston Globe's Peter S. Canellos, "Negative campaigning ... defined the Republican race" [leading up to the Iowa caucuses](#).

In The New York Times, Jim Rutenberg and Kate Zernike write that "every campaign cycle ...

seems to begin with the promise of an uplifting, mutually respectful debate of the issues, only to devolve into character attacks and distortions, and for good reason: negative ads work.” But Vanderbilt’s Geer doesn’t see attack ads and issue debates as mutually exclusive. “Positive ads are less likely to be about issues, less documented in their claims and far more vague than negative ads,” he told Miller-McCune.com. “Those who want issue-oriented campaigns should in fact see much merit in negative ads.”

### **Video: Geer defends negativity in politics**



He and Brooks differentiate between negative campaign ads that simply focus on an opponent and those that, in addition, are “uncivil” (disrespectful, contemptuous) and “trait-based” (rather than issue-based) — and conclude that “negative, uncivil, trait-based” ads are “the most despised of candidate messages.” Nevertheless, Geer said, “attack ads, of all stripes, do not have the kind of ill effects many fear ... even uncivil attacks do not unhinge the electorate.”

The ill effects feared by some scholars include depressed voter turnout and a [disinclination to participate](#) in the political process. But in an analysis of data on televised campaign spots, voters’ TV viewing habits and voter turnout in a 1997 Virginia gubernatorial campaign, political scientists Ken Goldstein and Paul Freedman found that exposure to negative ads had a “strong, positive effect” on turnout.

Brooks and Geer reached a similar conclusion in a study they conducted with realistic election ads for a fictitious congressional campaign, taking care to exclude any content about party affiliations or geography that might have biased the nationally representative group studied. The researchers found that exposure to “classic mudslinging” generated the highest rate of intended turnout for the next presidential election and the greatest interest in politics (although they termed the difference in reaction to different types of ads modest).

Ironically, while the down-and-dirty ads may not damage our democracy, they don't necessarily benefit the candidates who air them. Contrary to the oft-repeated assertions of the efficacy of negative ads — and individual examples like that of Rep. Ford, who lost to former Chattanooga Mayor Bob Corker — political scientists Richard R. Lau, Lee Sigelman and Ivy Brown Rovner write in the November 2007 issue of *The Journal of Politics*: “All told, the research literature does not bear out the idea that negative campaigning is an effective means of winning votes, even though it tends to be more memorable and stimulate knowledge about the campaign.” They base their skepticism on a meta-analysis of research literature on the subject.

Nevertheless, harsh campaign tactics just might stimulate voter interest by appealing to our voyeuristic instincts. “Just as people are drawn to celebrity disagreements in tabloids or the viewing of car accidents on freeways, it may be that malicious, personal politics garners interest from people who would not otherwise notice the electoral process,” Brooks and Geer note. Goldstein's take is similar — he likens negative campaigning to a schoolyard fight that everybody gathers to watch.

Well, perhaps not everybody. In this age of TiVo and steadily diminishing market share for the broadcast networks, the most telling statistic from the 2000 Gallup poll may have been this one: given a choice between a campaign with mostly negative ads and no ads, 84 percent chose no ads.

### **Some famous negative campaign ads:**

Anti-Michael Dukakis 'revolving door prison' ad (1988):



Anti-Dukakis 'Willie Horton' ad (1988):



A 'Swift Boat Veterans' anti-John Kerry ad (2004):



Lyndon B. Johnson 'Daisy' ad (1964):



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