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# Negative campaigning, fundraising, and voter turnout: A field experiment

Jared Barton<sup>a,\*</sup>, Marco Castillo<sup>b</sup>, Ragan Petrie<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Martin V. Smith School of Business & Economics, One University Drive, California State University–Channel Islands, Barton, Camarillo, CA, United States<sup>b</sup> Interdisciplinary Center for Economic Science and Department of Economics, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Why do candidates risk alienating voters by engaging in negative campaigning? One answer may lie in the large empirical literature indicating that negative messages are more effective than positive messages in getting individuals to do many things, including voting and purchasing goods. Few contributions to this literature, however, gather data from a field environment with messages whose tone has been validated. We conduct field experiments in two elections for local office which test the effect of confirmed negative and positive letters sent to candidates' partisans on two measurable activities: donating to the candidate and turning out to vote. We find that message tone increases partisan support in ways that may help explain the persistence of negative campaigning. Negative messages are no better than positive messages at earning the candidates donations, but negative messages yield significantly higher rates of voter turnout among the candidates' partisans relative to positive messages. Positive messages, however, are not neutral relative to no message.

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## 1. Introduction

Negative campaigning in American politics is as old as the country (Felkner, 1966), despite the fact that large majorities of the current U.S. voting public report the belief that negative campaigning is unethical (86 percent), produces less ethical leaders (76 percent), and hurts democracy (81 percent) (Green, in press). While a large empirical literature in political science (Lau et al., 2007) finds a small but positive effect of negative campaigning on voter turnout, and the literature that has examined comparative advertising – of which negative campaigning is one type – has found comparative messages more effective at changing consumers' buying intentions (Grewal et al., 1997), there are few randomized experiments measuring individual behavior on this topic in naturally occurring settings, as such tests impose costs on those running for office. Outside of some notable exceptions (Arceneaux and Nickerson, 2010; Gottfried et al., 2009; Niven, 2006), previous studies frequently measured intentions rather than behavior, used laboratory experiments with synthetic candidates or products, or examined indirect evidence and required strong identification assumptions to reach their conclusions<sup>1</sup>. In this paper, we present the

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 3012197326.

E-mail addresses: [jared.barton@csuci.edu](mailto:jared.barton@csuci.edu) (J. Barton), [mcastil8@gmu.edu](mailto:mcastil8@gmu.edu) (M. Castillo), [rpetrie1@gmu.edu](mailto:rpetrie1@gmu.edu) (R. Petrie).

<sup>1</sup> Over half of the studies reviewed by Lau et al. (2007) use non-experimental observational data. Of the experimental studies included in their analysis, few measure intended or actual voter turnout, and 18 of the 49 laboratory experiments use fictitious candidates, advertisements, or both (e.g., Carraro et al., 2010; Fridkin and Kenney, 2011; Wu and Dahmen, 2010). Only 6 of the 77 studies examined by Grewal et al. (1997) examined actual buying behavior.

results of a field experiment on negative campaigning with candidates running for office in a real political campaign. We find that negative messages do affect voters' behavior and are sometimes more effective than positive messages. However, consistent with informational theories of campaigning, we find that communication doesn't always increase voters' support for candidates.

The field experiment was designed to test the effect of externally-validated negative and positive messages on actual campaign outcomes. Working with two campaigns for local office, we sent either a negative or a positive letter to the candidates' partisans and measured its effect on campaign donations and their voter turnout. Positive letters highlighted a candidate's qualifications, while negative letters alerted voters to the opponent's undesirable qualities (from like-minded partisans' point of view). We compare these two treatments to each other, and to a control group that receives no letter. We used letters because they allow us to manipulate messages in a non-intrusive way that is carefully controlled, as there is no human interaction. All letters contained a contribution card and return envelope, stated the date of the election, and asked for voters' "support," but did not explicitly mention giving to or voting for either candidate. As the messages are delivered by letter, and not through direct personal contact, we know that nothing about the messages is correlated with the method of delivery or the receptivity of the subject. The advantage of targeting partisans is that it allows us to cautiously interpret voter turnout as a proxy for voter support, as partisans who turn out to vote are generally unlikely to support the opposition (Abramowitz et al., 1981; Phillips et al., 2008). We verify turnout with official voter records.

We pair this field experiment with a pre-experimental survey among partisans outside the district. We asked subjects from a population similar to our target population – same party voters but in another city – to rate the campaigns' messages along several dimensions (randomizing the order of the two messages, and also which candidate's messages the subject examined), including their open-ended impressions of each message, the tone of the message, how informative each message was, and their affect toward the sender. The survey has several purposes. First, it ensures that our manipulations are indeed as positive and negative as we claim. Previous field experiments utilizing negative messages or differences in message tone do not confirm that their manipulations are interpreted as they intend among voters similar to those they target. This leads to uncertainty as to whether voters view these messages as the researchers (or their coders) do. Our messages are validated: positive messages are viewed as positive and our negative messages as negative by partisan voters. This difference is strongly statistically significant (Wilcoxon signed-rank  $z = -4.42$ ,  $p > |z| = 0.000$ ), and is reflected in subjects' open-ended responses as well.

Second, the survey allows us to examine more deeply elements of positive and negative messages that may be drivers of behavior. Previous research suggests that negative campaigning (Brians and Wattenberg, 1996; Joslyn, 1986) and comparative advertising more generally is found to be more informative (Harmon et al., 1983; Chou et al., 1987) and memorable (Faber and Storey, 1984; Appleton-Knapp and Mantonakis, 2009) than positive or non-comparative advertising, and researchers have suggested this difference as a possible reason for a mobilizing effect of negative campaigns. Contrary to these findings, survey respondents rated the candidates' positive messages as more informative than their negative messages in our experiment (Wilcoxon signed-rank  $z = -3.83$ ,  $p > |z| = 0.000$ ), suggesting that any relative mobilizing effect of our negative messages is not due to greater informational content of the negative message.

We find that the negative messages are no better than positive messages at earning the candidates donations, but negative messages yield significantly higher rates of voter turnout among the candidates' partisans relative to positive messages. The donation rate in the positive treatment was 0.9 percent and was 0.7 percent in the negative treatment; these are not statistically different ( $p$ -value = 0.65)<sup>2</sup>. However, negative message recipients are 3.8 percentage points more likely to vote ( $p$ -value = 0.024)<sup>3</sup>. We find this pattern of results (negative messages increase turnout relative to positive ones) in both districts, suggesting it is not something particular to the electoral environment or the specific race. Since the fundraising letter was sent five months prior to the election, we check the robustness of our turnout results with a placebo check. We compare the turnout of the voters in our sample in each of the previous four elections as a function of our treatments. There is no relationship between our treatment and past turnout behavior, indicating that the effect of a negative message on turnout in the current election is not spurious.

While comparing negative messages to positive ones allows us to consider relative mobilization (of money and votes), it is also important to examine the absolute levels of mobilization compared to having sent no message. Compared to the control group, we find that both messages stimulate financial contributions to the candidates, as candidates receive no unsolicited contributions from the control partisans. Relative to no message, our turnout findings are more nuanced. In one district, negative message recipients have higher turnout than the control group (though the difference is not statistically significant), while turnout for the positive message recipients is slightly lower than the control (and again not significantly different). In the other district, it is the turnout of negative message recipients which is nearly identical to the control group, while the positive messages led to significantly lower voter turnout relative to the control.

Though not as high profile as elections for federal office, local races are the most common elections in the United States (U.S. Dept. of Commerce Census Bureau, 1995) and provide opportunities to conduct experiments with common campaign tactics that candidates in larger races do not use as often, such as in-person canvassing (Barton et al., 2014). Our results,

<sup>2</sup> As we discuss below, however, our available sample was likely underpowered to detect differences in the donation rate.

<sup>3</sup> This  $p$ -value applies when pooling the data across districts. For reasons discussed below, we only present our turnout results for each district separately. The pooled analysis is available upon request.

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