

**The Myth of Universal Aversion:  
Public Opinion about Negativity in American Campaigns**

Matt Grossmann  
Department of Political Science  
Michigan State University  
matt@mattg.org

John Sides  
Department of Political Science  
George Washington University  
jsides@gwu.edu

Keena Lipsitz  
Department of Political Science  
Queens College, City University of New York  
klipsitz@qc.cuny.edu

**Abstract**

Commentators claim that voters hate negative campaigning and that it leads to a general disdain for campaigns. We argue that voters hold diverse attitudes toward negativity rather than uniform aversion, and we identify the origins of these different opinions. Using focus groups, we demonstrate that citizens disagree about the merits and demerits of negative campaigning. With survey data, we show that politically informed and better educated citizens, as well as men, are more accepting of negativity. Furthermore, although attitudes toward negativity contribute to overall assessments of campaigns, there is a striking disjuncture: politically informed citizens are less favorable to campaigns in general, but more favorable to negativity. Thus, our understanding of how voters view campaigns needs to take account of negativity, but recognize that there is variation in how different groups of voters evaluate it.

In election season, the day's headlines often reveal complaints about negative campaigning. We are told that candidates are on the attack and that voters abhor the resulting decline in campaign discourse. This conventional wisdom has, not, however, been subjected to any systematic investigation. We know very little about how citizens evaluate negative campaigning in principle. Do they condemn negative campaigning unequivocally, as the conventional wisdom suggests? Or do they manifest ambivalence, allowing that negative campaigning can be valuable in some circumstances? If so, what factors affect attitudes toward negative campaigning? Who is more likely to see its merits or demerits? Finally, does their attitude toward negative campaigning affect how they evaluate political campaigns? Do citizens who disdain negativity actually generalize their disdain to the campaign as a whole?

Political science research has focused largely on the consequences of negative campaigning, examining associations between turnout, efficacy, and candidate evaluations on the one hand, and campaign inputs, such as advertisements, on the other. The debate over negative campaigning's effect on turnout is perhaps the most well-developed (e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Brooks 2006); meta-analysis of this research finds that negative campaigning has little systematic effect on turnout (Lau et al. 2007). Our research departs from this approach. Rather than focusing on the consequences of specific examples of negative campaigning, we seek to understand how citizens evaluate negative campaigning as a tactic and whether these evaluations color how they then evaluate campaigns as political processes.

Why is it important to examine this topic? First, new findings may explain why research into negative campaigning's effects is often inconclusive. Some scholars (Sigelman and Kugler 2003) have argued that the public does not conceptualize negativity as social scientists do when they devise experiments or examine candidate statements. Other scholars (Stevens et al. 2008) have found that voters spontaneously generate the same definition of negativity: critical statements by a candidate

about his or her opponent. Even if voters and scholars share this common definition, voters may have diverse opinions about when negative campaigning is acceptable or unacceptable.

Second, investigating the connection between attitudes toward negative campaigning and attitudes toward campaigns more generally will tell us whether voters dislike campaigns because they are so often negative. If this connection is weak, other factors, such as the role of money in elections, may be equally or more responsible for voter dissatisfaction. Reformers may thus have less reason to “clean up” campaign discourse and more reason to change other aspects of campaigns.

Of course, whether people approve of negative campaigning in general may not predict how they would respond to it in the course of a campaign, and whether it would affect individual decisions or aggregate election outcomes. Nevertheless, public opinion about negative campaigning is an important window into how people feel about political processes. While we know much about the public’s attitude toward government and governance (Hetherington 2005; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), we know much less about its attitude toward campaigns. Campaigns are singular in that they generate more engagement and interest among citizens than does governance, and in that they are the prelude to citizens’ most important democratic act. If citizens are dissatisfied with campaigns, we should find out whether negative campaigning is responsible.

### **Do Voters Dislike What They Say They Want?**

There is an apparent paradox in citizens’ views of negative campaigning: they appear to disdain it, but it provides the kind of information they want. The disdain emerges in a variety of public opinion data. For example, in a February 2004 Pew survey, respondents were asked “How much does negative campaigning bother you?” Sixty-one percent said “very much,” 20% said “somewhat,” and only 18% said “not too much” or “not at all.” In a June 2002 poll by the Institute for Global Ethics, 80% of respondents agreed that “negative attack-oriented campaigning is

undermining and damaging our democracy” (with 46% saying “strongly agree”). In this same poll, vast majorities agreed that “negative, attack-oriented campaigning” is “making people less likely to go out to vote” (81%), is “unethical” (86%), and “produces leaders who are less trustworthy” (77%). These sorts of results are not uncommon (see Garramone 1984) and suggest that average citizens have a natural aversion to debate and conflict in the political process (see also Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 2002). This buttresses the conventional wisdom that most citizens do not countenance negative campaigning.

This view, however, coexists uneasily with two facts. First, citizens routinely say that they want candidates to provide more information about “the issues” and buttress this information with “facts.” For example, more respondents to a 2002 poll (72%) expressed an interest in learning about “stands on the issues” than any other topic ([authors]).<sup>1</sup> Contemporary polls suggest similar priorities. In a 2007 Pew Center poll, 77% of the public wanted more media coverage of candidates’ positions on issues—more than any other category of information (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007).

Second, negative campaigning is more likely to provide this information. Geer (2006) finds negative ads to be more substantive than positive ads. They are more likely to focus on policy-related issues rather than candidate traits and amorphous values, to contain specific evidence for their claims, and to be “more *useful* than positive appeals in informing the public about the pressing concerns of the day” (63, italics in original). Geer’s “defense of negativity” is echoed by others (see Brader 2006; Mayer 1996; Jamieson et al. 2000). Why, then, would citizens condemn a campaign tactic that is more likely to supply the information they desire?

### **An Alternative Portrait of Public Opinion on Negativity**

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents were asked this question: “Overall, what are the top two things that you are most interested in learning about the candidates: stands on the issues, experience, character, intelligence, party platform, campaign practices, or something else?”

The resolution to this paradox lies in changing our view of how citizens evaluate negative campaigning. Although most Americans say they dislike it, their actual behavior belies this sentiment. First, citizens gravitate toward negative information, which often stands out amidst the generally positive tenor of daily life, and give it more weight when evaluating candidates (e.g., Fiske 1980). In Meffert et al.'s (2006) simulation of campaign news, subjects tended to examine negative information more often than positive information, spent more time processing negative information, and better remembered the negative information. When confronted with particular instances of negative campaign messages, citizens often accept some criticism as fair (Freedman, Wood, and Lawson 1999; Stevens et al. 2008). Moreover, attending to negative information is logical: people tend to be averse to losses (Tversky and Kahneman 1991) and negative messages contain more information about the potential costs of a vote for a political candidate (Lau 1985).

Thus, we expect that citizens can appreciate certain rationales for negative campaigning—in particular, that such campaigning provides useful information. To date, this more nuanced attitude has been obscured by one-sided polling questions that only highlight negative campaigning's potential detriments (e.g., whether it is “damaging democracy”). Balanced questions should reveal variation in citizen attitudes toward negative campaigning. While some citizens may feel that criticism inexorably devolves into incivility, others may approve of it because they want to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of candidates. No matter how citizens evaluate any particular negative message, they will manifest a general attitude toward negative campaigning that reflects how they prioritize and define ideals such as civility and informativeness.

Moreover, attitudes toward negative campaigning will vary predictably across individuals. Two key factors should systematically affect attitudes. The first is the citizen's level of political awareness. Political awareness has been shown to affect how citizens process and understand political messages (Zaller 1992; Lodge and Hamill 1986) and how citizens weigh the criteria for

political decision-making (Sniderman et al. 1990). In particular, knowledgeable citizens are more likely to appreciate democratic necessities such as conflict (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). In the context of negative campaigning, we expect that those who are more politically aware will be better able to sort through the claims and counter-claims in negative advertising and extract something of value from them. Previous research has found that the politically aware are more accepting of common negative claims made in campaigns and less likely to have an aversive emotional reaction to negative campaigning (Stevens 2005; Stevens et al. 2008), and therefore more likely to engage its content. Thus, the politically aware should evaluate negative campaigning more favorably than do those who are less aware.

We also expect men to support negative campaigning more than women do. In studies of attitudes toward non-political advertising, men tend to be more favorable to negative or comparative advertisements (Shavitt et al. 1998; Chang 2007). Men tend to react to comparative commercial advertising by evaluating the costs and benefits of each brand; women, in contrast, tend to be suspicious of the manipulative intent of comparative advertising (Chang 2007). Studies of political advertising also find gender differences. Women initially increase their support for the sponsor of a negative ad but eventually decrease their support after repeated exposure; there is no such effect for men (King and McConnell 2003). This finding comports with those from studies of women candidates, who disapprove of negative advertising more than male candidates do (Herrnson and Lucas 2006) even if they are no less likely than men to air negative ads (Lau and Pomper 2004).

Finally, we expect attitudes to negative campaigning to be associated with evaluations of political campaigns. Negative campaigning is a highly salient part of campaigns, and thus citizens that dislike negativity are more likely to dislike contemporary campaigns (see also Pinkleton et al. 2002). But this relationship should be relatively weak, as many citizens will have favorable views of campaigns and unfavorable views of negative campaigning or vice versa. Most commonly, citizens

may accept the need for negative campaigning but still feel that contemporary campaigns are going downhill.

The weak relationship between attitudes toward negative campaigning and toward campaigns themselves stems in part from the complex effects of political information. Although informed citizens will be more favorable to negative campaigning, they should be less favorable toward contemporary campaigns. Informed citizens are more exposed to politics, and familiarity may breed contempt (Mondak et al. 2007). Informed citizens also have higher standards for democracy and are more disgruntled when those expectations are not met (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Sigelman and Kugler 2003). In the context of campaigns, politically informed citizens are more likely to object to aspects besides any negativity, such as the role of money in campaigns. The standards by which campaigns can be judged involve many things besides negativity, and informed citizens are likely to find other things problematic.

In sum, three expectations motivate our empirical analysis. First, views of negative campaigning will not be uniformly contemptuous. In the aggregate, voters will be less averse to negative campaigning than is commonly assumed. Second, attitudes toward negative campaigning will vary systematically. The politically aware will countenance negative campaigning more than do the less aware, and men will do so more than women. Third, attitudes toward negativity will be related to but distinguishable from attitudes toward campaigns overall, in large part because the politically aware will be more favorable toward negativity but less favorable toward political campaigns.

### **Research Design and Data**

Our research design draws on data collected from Californians during the 2002 campaign, and from a national sample during the 2006 campaign. In 2002, the major statewide race in

California was for governor. It featured relatively unpopular candidates, the incumbent Democrat Gray Davis and Republican Bill Simon, and considerable negative campaigning, both in political advertisements and in discussions of these advertisements in the news. The 2006 election featured an unusually large number of competitive congressional races and, ultimately, new Democratic majorities in both the House and Senate.

Our data from California in 2002 include six focus groups and a statewide survey. The focus groups took place in September and October; each group included 9-15 participants and lasted approximately two hours.<sup>2</sup> The focus groups were designed to assess citizens' overall evaluations of campaigns and their ideas for improvement. The statewide survey was conducted between October 28 and November 4, 2002, and had a sample size of 1,814 adult citizens age 18 and older.<sup>3</sup> The national data were collected as part of the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). This survey was administered online to a cross-section of American adults and included both pre- and post-election waves (N=1,000 and N=794, respectively). It included several items from the California survey. (See Appendix 1 for more details about the CCES.)

Each set of data serves an important purpose. Both surveys allow us to examine aggregate opinion towards negative campaigning and campaigns generally, and to identify the factors associated with individual-level attitudes. The surveys were conducted in different places and at different times, with attendant differences in the prevailing political climate and nature of the campaigns that respondents were experiencing. Thus, if our findings are robust across both sets of data, we can have more confidence in their validity.

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<sup>2</sup> The focus groups were held in three different California cities: on September 9 in Walnut Creek; on September 26 in Fresno; and on October 1 in Los Angeles. In Walnut Creek, one group was composed of young people aged 18 to 35, and the other of older people aged 55 and above. We will refer to the latter as "WC1" and the former as "WC2." In both Fresno and Los Angeles, one group was composed of strong partisans and the other of "swing voters" (defined as independents who said that they usually voted a split ticket). The groups of swing voters will be referred to as "F1" and "LA1" and the groups of strong partisans as "F2" and "LA2." Every effort was made to recruit participants diverse with respect to education, income, ethnicity, and party identification.

<sup>3</sup> The survey's design and implementation was a joint project of the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and the Public Policy Institute of California, with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

The focus group conversations provide nuance to these quantitative data, allowing us to identify rationales for and implications of opinions, as well as potential mechanisms linking attitudes (see Morgan 1996; Stewart et al. 2006). Focus groups are especially useful when we do not fully apprehend the underlying perspectives that produce variation in opinion, as is the case in our study. Within political science, focus groups have been employed to study attitudes toward such things as political processes, immigration, and race relations (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Schildkraut 2005; Walsh 2007).

Individually, each set of data has its strengths and weaknesses. Surveys provide generalizability and evidence of systematic relationships, but lack qualitative depth. Focus groups provide depth but do not produce systematic or readily generalizable results. In combination, however, these two sources of data allow us to better assess voters' reaction to negativity in campaigns. Surveys allow us to determine whether opinions expressed in focus groups are representative of views in the general population. Focus group conversations help identify potential reasons for connections among attitudes that emerge from survey data. Stevens et al. (2008) use this combination effectively to gauge sentiments about negative campaigning tactics.

### **Focus Group Results**

Listening to individual voters discuss negative campaigning illuminated important differences of opinion. Focus group participants had diverse concerns about negative campaigning. Though they shared the definition of negative campaigning as criticizing opponents, they disagreed about when negative campaigning is acceptable and what factors might justify its use.

The focus group conversations began with an open-ended discussion of what participants liked and disliked about campaigns. While it was often difficult for participants to name things they liked, negativity was often one of the first things mentioned when the discussion turned to things

respondents disliked. In the abstract, participants tended to argue that candidates should avoid negative campaigning—making references to “slander” and “mudslinging.” Participants condemned negative campaigning for being irrelevant:

*Ralph:* Usually negative advertising, that’s usually the biggest thing. They attack the other person before they’re saying what they’ve done or what they can do.

*Roland:* That’s my feeling also. The television ads are always just knocking the other candidate, they’re not talking about what they’re going to do for the people. (LA2)

*Jeff:* ...When they do dig up something real deep, you know, then everybody makes a big deal out of, you know, something they did when they were 20 or something way back in their college days, and then that takes the center stage. (WC2)

Others believe that campaign discourse deteriorates when negative attacks begin, because they create a cycle of attack and response that ultimately hurts the candidates:

*Jack:* ... A person is attacked, and he can respond with an appropriate answer, I don’t think he should go on, because we’re getting into negative campaigning. That only builds on it, and I think that shows a lot of character of the man, than if [he] backs off, and gets back to what he wants to do for our society... If we allow that to go back and forth, then the next thing we’re back in the negative campaigning... and it ends up being a shouting match between each other. And I think they both lose their integrity, and the sense and purpose of it. (WC1)

Finally, some participants complained that it was difficult to discern who is telling the truth amidst the cycle of attack and counter-attack. As Ralph put it, “With them focusing so much on what someone might have done wrong, and sometimes the way they state it is not necessarily the way it happened... You know, you don’t know the whole story” (LA2).

Amidst these concerns, however, arose dissension. Many participants could see value in negative campaigning. At times, pro and con viewpoints were evident in a single exchange. One moderator, for example, introduced a simple definition of negativity and asked participants to evaluate an attempt to avoid it entirely:

*Moderator:* What if the candidates just decided they were going to talk about themselves and not mention the other candidate, is that a good or a bad thing?

*Many Participants:* Good...

*Ralph:* I think it would be good in a lot of cases, because they would stay more on what they would do, as opposed... to what the other guy would do negative...

*Debra:* I think for me, hearing a candidate I'm planning on supporting, it helps to hear their perspective on their opponent, why they think their opponent's stands are good or bad. It just helps me get a broader picture of the candidate that I want to support thinking, it adds a dimension to it. (LA2)

One important reason that participants indicated some support for negative campaigning is that they believed it provided useful information, as seen in this exchange:

*Brittany:* Well, at the same time I think people do slander, and it's true, and it lets you know that, Hey, that guy's a crook... If there is truth to it, I'd rather know than not, to, you know, base my voting.

*Doug:* I don't think all negativity is bad in this campaign, because it really casts doubt upon somebody's character. And if they're going to grease their own pockets, then... that's one of the best ways to know the guy's character, if he's in it for himself... If they're falsifying their taxes and it's public, someone is going to call them on it, and then you want to know that negative information, and sling as much mud as you can on that guy before he goes in and does some serious damage. (WC2)

Participants were asked whether they could think of examples of acceptable negative campaigning. They referred to an example from the 2002 California gubernatorial campaign:

*Margaret:* When I learned or I believe I learned that [Bill] Simon [the Republican gubernatorial candidate] had a lawsuit against his company, that was critical information to me, because I didn't know Simon. (WC1)

Another participant responded that he agreed but worried about misleading information.

*John:* I agree on that, you know. If it's pertinent and important, you know, but not just mudslinging. It's got to be truthful and honest, and not biased as a result of party separations [*sic*]. (WC1)

Participants struggled to formulate shared standards for acceptable negative campaigning. For example, one participant suggested that, in addition to attacks on business dealings, attacks based on social issues were also relevant but her position attracted dissent:

*Laverne:* I don't think that everything in this life is business. It's some things are emotional. And if I want to vote based on pro choice or, you know, gay and lesbian, or any of the, what we call mudslinging issues, then I think that's okay... I don't consider that slinging mud...

*Lillie:* Pro choice has nothing to do with the campaign. He's running for governor, that has nothing to do with running for the campaign, it's totally irrelevant.

*Laverne:* It's a whole circle of his or her personality, of their being, of how they think, how they're going to react to things. I want the person up here to think as much like me as possible. Right?

*Lillie:* Right. But... that shouldn't even be brought up, period. (WC1)

Despite concerns that negative campaigning would degenerate into personal "slander," some participants accepted the possibility that attacks on personal character could be acceptable. A few cited examples such as previous crimes and romantic affairs as relevant information. One participant, Charles, articulated the standard more generally: "If there is a glaring personal flaw, then the public should probably know about it... Politicians can be role models, and I wouldn't want my children looking up to someone... whose morality is different than what I'm trying to teach my children" (F2). Though participants generally agreed that negative ads should be true, relevant, and fair, not all would apply those standards in the same way.

The focus groups also shed light on the role of gender as potential explanations for participants' different viewpoints. For example, some male participants, such as Mark, saw campaigns as a marketing tool, where ads were selling a product (candidate) to consumers: "Mostly, it's basically just the essence of marketing, you know, the true essence, is basically to sell... It's about 'I'm better than the next guy'" (WC2). Jeff similarly saw campaigns as about effective marketing: "Political campaigns are much like car sales" (F1). By contrast, women were less likely to express this view. Margaret in Walnut Creek, for example, saw campaigns as a means for educating the voters: "I believe that the purpose of a campaign is to allow me to know enough about the candidate that I, and every other I like me in the whole United States, has a chance to fairly evaluate whether he should be hired or not" (WC1). This view puts more onus on the campaigns and candidates to provide information and to facilitate a "fair evaluation," not merely to market their wares.

We also expected political awareness to affect participants' evaluations of negativity. Here, two potential mechanisms emerged. Some politically attentive participants suggested that negative campaigning is *de rigueur*. Mark's comment about campaigns as the "essence of marketing" is an

illustration. Politically attentive participants were also more likely to appreciate critical exchanges between candidates. The less politically attentive, in contrast, appeared less capable of parsing a critical exchange and extracting useful information. The most poignant example comes from Linda: “There’s a lot of lying, and those of us who are not really politically minded, like myself, end up more confused when it comes to the actual voting” (F1).

How did participants relate their attitudes toward negativity to their feelings about campaigns more generally? Some participants cited campaign negativity as the main reason for their aversion to political campaigns. After being asked what she does not like about campaigns, for example, Michelle said “They’re attacking each other. It doesn’t have nothing to do with the campaign, but they’re bringing in on, saying that this one’s doing this and this one’s doing that” (F1). Yet other participants—especially those with more interest in politics—offered other reasons for their dissatisfaction. The most common complaint about campaigns, aside from their negativity, was that they were too expensive. For example, Lindsey, a politically interested Republican, explained campaigns have deteriorated because, “It’s all based on money and whoever has the most money will most likely have a better campaign. So it gets down to finances, as opposed to who has the better ability or capabilities” (LA2). James argued that campaign contributions corrupt the entire political process, “the money involved in the campaigns is connected to some favor...No one’s going to give someone \$5 million and not expect something from them” (LA2). Several others noted that the amount of money required to run campaigns prevents good candidates from running. “If you have a good candidate that can’t raise the money [he] is not going to survive in the political race,” argued Roland (LA2). Among the politically informed, negative campaigning may be less important than distasteful financing practices for explaining aversion to campaigns.

On the whole, the comments of the focus group participants provide tentative support for our expectations. While many participants condemned negative campaigning, others found it

valuable at times. The crux of any disagreement was not the definition of negativity, but when negative campaigning is acceptable and why. The focus groups conversations also suggest potential mechanisms for why gender and political awareness might affect attitudes toward negativity. Men seem to be more accepting of negativity as part of marketing candidates to voters. The politically informed seem to benefit more from the information contained in negative messages and to object more strongly to other aspects of campaigns. Finally, the panoply of complaints about campaigns—which went beyond negativity to include, for example, concerns about their expense—suggests that attitudes toward campaigns may depend on much more than attitudes toward negative campaigning.

### Survey Results

The results of the 2002 and 2006 surveys allow us to examine public opinion more systematically. As noted earlier, extant survey questions about negative campaigning typically do not present both the benefits and costs of negativity. To gauge feelings toward negativity, we asked respondents whether they supported or opposed the candidates' criticizing one another, providing reasons to support or oppose it. The argument against criticism is that campaigns are too negative; this captures the most common complaint about campaigns. The argument in favor of criticism is that it highlights strengths and weaknesses; this is an important defense of negative campaigning (see Mayer 1996: 442; Geer 2006). The actual question wording was:

“Some people say that in general, political candidates should never be critical of their opponents because campaigns have gotten too negative, while others say that candidates need to criticize their opponents because it is important to know the strengths and weaknesses of all candidates. Which of these comes closest to your view?”

In the California survey, we also conducted a question wording experiment, in which a random half of respondents were asked about “political candidates” and the other half were asked about “Gray

Davis and Bill Simon.” Thus we can compare how voters feel in the abstract to how they feel when specific candidates are mentioned.

Both the 2002 and 2006 surveys revealed a public much more divided on the value of negative campaigning than is commonly believed. In the 2002 survey, Californians were evenly divided. Among those asked the “generic” version of the question, 50% of respondents said that candidates should not criticize one another and 50% disagreed. Among those asked the question that mentioned Davis and Simon, 62% said that these candidates should not criticize one another and 38% said they should.<sup>4</sup> In the 2006 survey, national opinion was slightly more favorable to the idea of criticism. Only 41% of those who answered in the pre-election wave said that candidates should never criticize their opponents, whereas 59% said they should. Responses in the post-election wave were quite similar: 44% opposed negativity while 56% approved. There was very little change in opinion, as 88% of respondents gave the same response in both waves.

These results suggest that voters are not reflexively opposed to criticism in campaigns. Our focus group participants were not atypical in this respect. Support for negativity is higher when its potential merits—in this case, illuminating the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates—are made clear. Opposition to negativity was higher, however, when voters were reminded of a specific campaign, in particular one that featured a great deal of criticism between unpopular candidates.

To identify the underpinnings of attitudes toward negativity, specifically the effects of political awareness and gender, we estimated a logit model. To capture political awareness, we include the respondents’ level of formal education as well as a scale tapping their overall level of political information, which has been shown to capture attention to politics (see Zaller 1992). We include a dummy variable for gender, with female respondents coded 1. Our model also controls for

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<sup>4</sup> The difference across these two versions of the question was consistent among both partisans and independents.

three factors that are associated with political awareness: age, ethnicity (a dummy variable for white respondents), and strength of partisanship (the seven-point party identification scale, folded).<sup>5</sup>

[insert Table 1 about here]

Table 1 presents the results, which confirm both of our hypotheses. In each of the two surveys, political information and education are associated with a greater likelihood of endorsing criticism, while being female is associated with a lower likelihood of endorsing it. To calculate the substantive magnitude of these effects, we compute the change in the predicted probability of endorsing negativity, shifting an independent variable from its minimum to maximum, and holding all other variables constant at their means or modal values. The two topmost panels of Figure 1 present the effects of political awareness in particular, focusing on the 2002 survey and the 2006 post-election survey.

[insert Figure 1 about here]

In the 2002 survey, the effect of a shift in political information is a .07 increase in the likelihood of favoring negative campaigning. The effect of education is similar, an increase of .08. In the 2006 survey, the substantive effects are larger for both political information and education. In the post-election wave, the proscribed shift in political information increases the likelihood of endorsing negative campaigning by .47; education's effect is .36. In both the 2002 and 2006 surveys, women are less likely to favor negative campaigning. The changes in probability are -.11 in 2002 and -.15 in 2006. The two surveys do not generate consistent findings about the effects of age,

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<sup>5</sup> The dependent variable is coded such that 1 indicates support for candidates' criticizing each other. For the California survey analysis, we combined both the generic version of this question and the version referencing Davis and Simon. When these two versions are modeled separately, the only major difference is that the effect of gender is much stronger in the version mentioning Davis and Simon explicitly. Our measure of political information is the number of political figures a person could identify correctly. In the 2002 survey, respondents were asked to identify the offices held by Dianne Feinstein, Tony Blair, and Colin Powell. The mean number correct was 1.7, and the overall reliability of the index is .60. In the 2006 survey, respondents were asked to identify the offices held by Dick Cheney, Tony Blair, Dennis Hastert, and John Roberts. The mean number correct was 2.7 and the scale reliability is .62. All independent variables have been scaled 0-1.

partisanship, and ethnicity.<sup>6</sup> Attitudes toward negativity thus depend most notably on political awareness and gender: informed and educated citizens, as well as men, are more likely to endorse negative campaigning.

Are these attitudes toward negativity linked to overall assessments of campaigns? In the 2002 survey, we measured respondents' attitudes toward campaigns and toward the current gubernatorial candidates. Respondents were asked whether they thought that "election campaigns in California had gotten better, worse, or remained the same in the last 10 years," and whether they were "satisfied or not satisfied with the choice of candidates in the election for Governor on November 5th."<sup>7</sup> In the 2006 survey, we included the measure of attitudes toward campaigns. (The lack of a common set of candidates for this nationwide sample precluded the other measure.) In 2002, the majority of Californians (58%) said they were "not satisfied" with the gubernatorial candidates. They were also unhappy with political campaigns: 49% said "worse," 40% said "the same," and only 10% said "better." The 2006 sample was even more disgruntled. In the pre-election wave, 80% thought campaigns had gotten worse, 15% thought they had stayed the same, and only 2% thought they had gotten better. In the post-election wave, responses were largely the same: 75% said they had gotten worse, 17% said they had stayed the same, and 2% said they had improved.<sup>8</sup>

To identify the underpinnings of attitudes toward campaigns, we estimate models identical to those of attitudes toward negative campaigning, except that we include attitudes toward negative

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<sup>6</sup> Other analysis suggests no significant differences between Republican and Democrats, or liberals and conservatives.

<sup>7</sup> The question about campaigns is not an ideal question, in that respondents could think campaigns in California were awful ten years ago and awful now, which would lead them to say "the same" even though their opinion of the campaign was hardly positive. This question also randomized respondents into two subsamples; in one sample, we specifically referenced "ethics and values" in campaigns. This experiment produced only a little variation in response and so we combined those questions into a single measure.

<sup>8</sup> Attitudes towards both criticism and the campaign do not change very much between the pre- and post-election waves. Most people gave the same answers in both the pre-election and post-election survey. Of those that said "same" in the pre-election survey, however, 28% said "worse" after the campaign— becoming more contemptuous about the direction of campaigns. Eight percent of those who said worse initially (a far larger group) changed their mind in a more positive direction, saying things had remained the same.

campaigning as an independent variable.<sup>9</sup> Again, our first expectation is that those who favor negativity will be slightly more favorable toward campaigns but that this attitude will not explain much of the variation in feelings toward campaigns. Our second expectation is that although political awareness is associated with favorable views of negativity, it will be associated with unfavorable views of campaigns generally. The full results are again presented in Table 1, and the substantive effects of political awareness are presented in the two bottom panels of Figure 1.

The results confirm both of our hypotheses. Views of negative campaigning do affect satisfaction with the candidates in the 2002 California gubernatorial campaign and, in both surveys, satisfaction with campaigns in general. Those who endorsed negative campaigning were more likely to say they were satisfied with the candidates and to express more positive views of campaigns generally.<sup>10</sup> In the 2002 survey, a shift in opinion on negative campaigning increases the probability of expressing satisfaction with the candidates by .08. The effect of this variable on the probability of believing that campaigns had gotten better or remained the same is .09. In the 2006 survey, the substantive magnitude of the effect is larger: .15 (s.e.=.03) in the pre-election wave and .21 (s.e.=.04) in the post-election wave. Thus, those who dislike negative campaigning are not bullish on the state of campaigns generally.<sup>11</sup> That said, support for negativity is clearly separable from general impressions of candidates and campaigns. For example, in the 2006 post-election wave, evaluations of campaigns were still quite dismal, even among those who favor negative campaigning. A

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<sup>9</sup> Given the paucity of respondents who stated that campaigns had gotten better, we combine those respondents with those who stated that campaigns had remained the same. Thus, the dependent variable is coded 0 for those who thought campaigns had gotten worse, and 1 for those who thought they had gotten better or remained the same. In the 2002 survey, satisfaction with the gubernatorial candidates is also dichotomous, with 1 indicating satisfaction.

<sup>10</sup> In the 2002 survey, we estimated models with the two versions of the negative campaigning question entered separately. In these models, support for criticism by Davis and Simon is more strongly related to satisfaction with the candidates than generic support for criticism. Both versions of this question, however, were significantly associated with overall evaluations of California campaigns.

<sup>11</sup> Could general opinions of campaigns affect attitudes toward negative campaigning, making our findings attributable to reverse causality? We believe that approval of negative campaigning reflects fundamental values about the purposes of campaigns and is unlikely to be influenced by whether people approve of a specific campaign or of campaigns generally. Removing attitudes toward negativity from the model, however, does not substantively alter any other results or conclusions.

whopping 71% of these respondents still believed that campaigns had gotten worse in the past decade.

The role of political awareness may help account for this. Although the politically aware are more likely to support negative campaigning, they are much less likely to have favorable views of campaigns. The upward sloping lines in the top panels of Figure 1 contrast sharply with the downward sloping lines in the bottom panels. In the 2002 survey, both political awareness and education have a large and negative effect on satisfaction with the candidates and with campaigns. A shift in information from its minimum to maximum value decreases the likelihood of satisfaction with the candidates by  $-.38$ , and satisfaction with campaigns by  $-.12$ . Although awareness is not significantly associated with satisfaction with campaigns in the 2006 pre-election wave, its effect in the post-election wave is quite large ( $-.22$ ). This suggests that the 2006 campaign helped prime the effect of awareness; those at different levels of awareness were more distinct in their attitude toward campaigns after they had witnessed, to a varying extent, the 2006 campaign.<sup>12</sup> These results complicate the notion that disdain for campaigns stems from disdain for negative campaigning. Furthermore, they suggest that the politically informed may find other features of campaigns problematic.<sup>13</sup>

Given that the 2002 and 2006 surveys took places amidst very different political climates and campaigns, the consistency of the results is notable. In both years, political information, education, and gender affect support for negativity. Support for negative campaigning affects views of campaigns generally but views of campaigns also depend on other factors. In particular, the politically knowledgeable are less likely to believe that current campaigns meet their standards.

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<sup>12</sup> We also investigated whether political information conditions the relationship between views of negative campaigning and satisfaction with campaigns. There was no consistent evidence of any relationship across these two surveys.

<sup>13</sup> There is some evidence that suggest that satisfaction with the candidates or campaigns is greater among strong partisans, the young, men, and non-whites, but these effects are not consistently significant across the two surveys.

### Why Do Political Sophisticates Dislike Campaigns?

If those with higher levels of political awareness are simultaneously more likely to support negative campaigning but more dissatisfied with campaigns in general, what might explain their dissatisfaction? A common complaint in the focus groups was, as noted earlier, the role of money in elections. Participants criticized elections as too expensive and speculated about the potentially corrupting effects of campaign donations. The 2002 survey data also suggest that political sophisticates are concerned about the role of money in elections. In this survey, respondents were asked two questions that bear on this issue:

- “Would you favor or oppose having a system of public finance for state and legislative campaigns in California if it cost taxpayers a few dollars a year to fund?”
- “If a candidate publicly released a list of his campaign contributors and amounts received as soon as they got them, would this make you view him much more favorably, somewhat more favorably, or would it make no difference to you?”

Answers to the latter presumably reflect concerns about the corrupting influence of money, for which greater transparency is a potential antidote. Answers to the former may also reflect concerns about corruption, as well as the sheer expense of campaigns.

In both cases, political sophisticates were more likely to agree with these proposed reforms. We estimated models identical to those of support for negative campaigning (see Table 1), except including a measure of ideology, as we expected liberals to favor these reforms more so than conservatives. Each model reveals the strong and statistically significant effect of political awareness (data not shown). For example, *ceteris paribus*, shifting from the lowest to highest values of awareness increases support for public financing by .13. This same shift in awareness increases by .29 the likelihood of saying that a candidate’s immediate release of contributors would leave to a “much more favorable” view of the candidate. Although these items are indirect measures of concern about

money in elections, their relationship to political awareness suggests that, among the politically aware, campaigns fail not so much in terms of their tone but in terms of how they are financed.

### **Conclusion**

Our research questions have departed from the previous literature in important respects. Rather than examine the consequences of negative campaigning for voter turnout, political trust, or political efficacy, we have examined how voters view negative campaigning itself. Many citizens experience campaigning more closely than governing, so attitudes toward campaigns may form an important piece of citizen views of American democracy. Negativity has previously been seen as a key complaint of voters and a key element in their dissatisfaction with campaigns.

Our account, by drawing on both quantitative and qualitative sources of information, allows us to generalize about the American public while also learning from their individual voices. Although our results derive from disparate campaigns and sources of data, they generate a coherent set of conclusions. First, the conventional wisdom that voters universally disdain negativity is a myth. It does not reflect the diversity or complexity of public opinion about negative campaigning. In both surveys, at least half of respondents believed that candidates should criticize their opponents. Among the focus group participants, there was a great deal of skepticism about negative campaigning, but many participants also saw value in negative messages, particularly if those messages conveyed relevant and truthful information about a candidate. Respondents differed on what constitutes a relevant attack.

Second, a primary influence on attitudes toward negative campaigning was political awareness. Politically attentive participants in our focus groups were more likely to suggest that negative campaigning was par for the course and could be easily fact-checked by voters. More importantly, in both surveys, educated and informed voters were more supportive of negativity.

Third, support for negativity is also associated with gender. Women were significantly less supportive of negativity in both surveys. The focus groups suggest a reason for this difference: men profess to accept the marketing of candidates whereas women expect fairness in candidate tactics.

Finally, views of negative campaigning were significantly associated with views of campaigns generally, but only to a limited extent. Voters who dislike negative campaigning are, perhaps unsurprisingly, more disappointed in contemporary campaigns. But at the same time, many who supported negative campaigning expressed similar disappointment. In fact, those most supportive of negative campaigning—political sophisticates—were the least complimentary of current campaigns. This suggests that negative campaigning is not the only factor on people's minds when they evaluate campaigns. Focus groups participants proffered many other complaints about campaigns, such as concern over the role of money in politics. The survey data suggest that political sophisticates are particularly concerned about the role of money. Thus, our results are in significant tension with the conventional story that voters dislike contemporary campaigns because they are too negative. Although this may be true of some voters, the story does not hold for others, especially among the politically attentive.

What is the significance of these attitudes toward negativity? Again, our claim is not that these attitudes govern how voters respond to actual episodes of negative campaigning. But these attitudes are still informative and important for two reasons. First, they provide some insight into why research on negative campaigning has not found any consistent and substantively significant link between exposure to negative campaigning and political efficacy or voter turnout. Citizens do not find negative campaigning to be entirely irrelevant or inappropriate; in fact, at times it may actually provide useful information, much as its defenders suggest that it does. It is particularly noteworthy that those citizens most likely to vote and to feel efficacious about politics—those with higher levels of formal education and political knowledge—are most likely to countenance negative

campaigning. These citizens, especially the most habitual voters, are unlikely to base their decision to turn out on their reaction to campaign tactics.

Second, public opinion of campaigns is important as a manifestation of attitudes toward political processes. Campaigns constitute the primary political process that American citizens experience, witness, and take part in. If citizens are dissatisfied with campaigns, the political process that facilitates their chief means of political involvement, they may be disillusioned with their capacity for democratic participation. As the American government regularly promotes elections in other nations, its own citizens remain critical of the spectacle that accompanies its own. Past scholarship has been concerned with public views of government and the policymaking process, but opinions about campaigns may be just as important for popular views of self-government.

Public opinion about negative campaigning may ultimately reflect different values, with some prioritizing debate and competition and others prioritizing fairness or the ease of making choices. These conflicting values complicate strategies for improving campaigns in the eyes of voters. because any proposed reform may address the concerns of only some voters. For example, efforts to improve campaign discourse by encouraging candidates to sign “codes of conduct” or engage in fewer attacks may be more popular with women but less popular with the politically informed.<sup>14</sup> To address the concerns of politically informed voters, reformers and candidates may have to look beyond campaign discourse altogether. Weakening the influence of money in the campaigns may be the highest priority of these voters.

Voter disdain for contemporary campaigns cannot be reduced to a simple and inevitable aversion to negative campaigning. Voters hold complex and differing opinions about how campaigns should be conducted. Many do not feel that they have the capacity to effectively

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<sup>14</sup> Given a recent study that demonstrates most reforms designed to improve campaign discourse have failed (Maisel et al. 2007), even voters upset with negative campaigning may not be satisfied with the results of efforts to remedy its deficiencies.

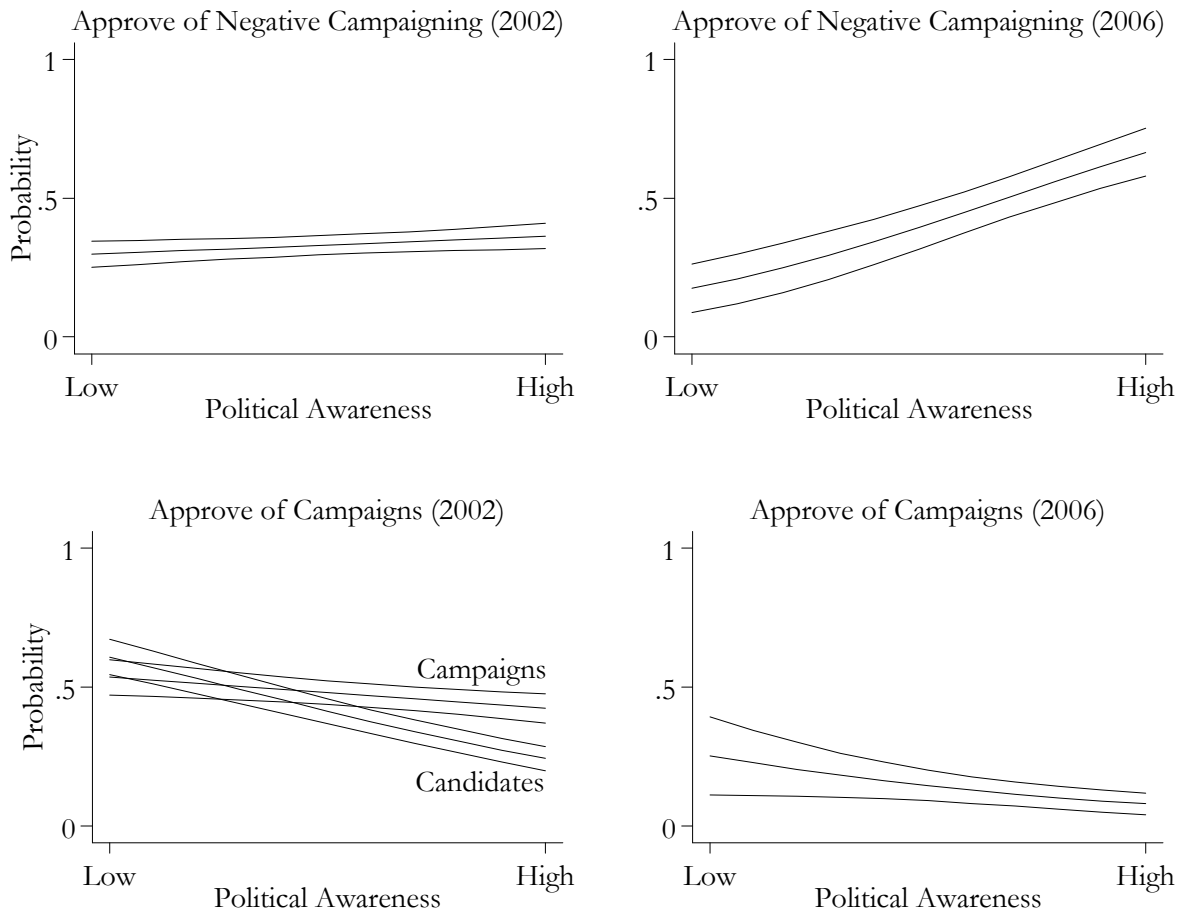
participate. Few, if any, are content. The crucial tasks for future research entail mapping more precisely citizens' ideals with regard to political campaigns and then identifying how campaigns might be improved in ways that will appeal to as many citizens as possible.

**Table 1. Models of Support for Negative Campaigning**

	Support negative campaigning			Satisfied with candidates	Perceive campaigns as better or same, not worse			Support release of donors	Support public financing
	2002	2006 pre	2006 post		2002	2006 pre	2006 post		
Political awareness	0.30*	1.57*	2.11*	-1.48*	-0.46*	-0.33	-0.71*	0.77*	0.52*
	[0.15]	[0.31]	[0.39]	[0.17]	[0.16]	[0.37]	[0.43]	[0.12]	[0.15]
Education	0.38*	1.18*	1.20*	-0.72*	-0.75*	0.06	0.33	0.41*	0.84*
	[0.20]	[0.32]	[0.37]	[0.22]	[0.21]	[0.38]	[0.41]	[0.16]	[0.21]
Female	-0.45*	-0.53*	-0.49*	0.02	-0.03	-0.65*	-0.73*	-0.24*	-0.23*
	[0.10]	[0.16]	[0.18]	[0.11]	[0.11]	[0.19]	[0.21]	[0.08]	[0.11]
Democrat	0.34*	0.93*	0.56*	0.70*	0.32*	0.02	0.58	-0.07	-0.01
	[0.17]	[0.27]	[0.32]	[0.21]	[0.18]	[0.35]	[0.42]	[0.14]	[0.18]
Republican	0.28	0.75*	0.56*	0.51*	0.01	0.69*	0.96*	-0.14	-0.18
	[0.18]	[0.27]	[0.32]	[0.21]	[0.18]	[0.33]	[0.41]	[0.14]	[0.18]
Liberalism	-0.06	-0.97*	-0.39	0.25	0.26	-1.52*	-1.59*	0.06	0.91*
	[0.20]	[0.40]	[0.49]	[0.22]	[0.21]	[0.49]	[0.56]	[0.16]	[0.20]
Age	0.09	-0.58	-0.91*	-0.42*	-0.25	-1.68*	-0.84	-0.28*	0.57*
	[0.17]	[0.42]	[0.50]	[0.19]	[0.18]	[0.53]	[0.60]	[0.14]	[0.17]
White	-0.27*	-0.01	-0.22	-0.37*	-0.50*	-0.52*	-0.85*	0.24*	0.18
	[0.12]	[0.21]	[0.25]	[0.13]	[0.12]	[0.24]	[0.26]	[0.09]	[0.12]
$\tau_1$	-0.64*	-1.03*	-1.26*	0.73*	0.98*	0.16	0.18	-0.07	-1.27*
	[0.22]	[0.43]	[0.53]	[0.26]	[0.23]	[0.52]	[0.62]	[0.17]	[0.23]
$\tau_2$								0.70*	
								[0.18]	
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.11	0.12	0.13	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.06	0.05
N	1737	848	609	1558	1563	958	691	833	1657

Table entries are logit coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variables are coded 1-candidates need to criticize and 0-candidate should not criticize; 1-satisfied with candidates or 0-not satisfied with candidates; and 1-campaigns have gotten better or remained the same in the past decade or 0-campaigns have gotten worse. \*p<.05 (one-tailed).

**Figure 1. The Contrasting Effects of Political Awareness**



Figures present predicted probabilities and confidence intervals from the logit models in Table 1. All other variables held at their means or model values. The 2006 graphs derive from the post-election models.

### Appendix 1. The 2006 Congressional Cooperative Election Survey

The 2006 CCES was a collaborative venture involving 39 universities in the United States, with Stephen Ansolabehere of MIT as the principal investigator. Each university designed a module of questions that was given to 1,000 respondents.<sup>15</sup> The fieldwork for the survey was carried out by Polimetrix, Inc., of Palo Alto, CA. The survey was fielded in October and November of 2006.

The CCES was administered online and, as such, was not administered to a traditional probability sample.<sup>16</sup> Two initial investigations of non-probability Internet-based samples (Malhotra and Krosnick 2007; Sanders et al. 2007) find that their results may differ from traditional probability samples in both the mean levels of particular attributes and in the relationships among attributes, although Sanders et al. reach a more sanguine conclusion about the substantive importance of such differences than Malhotra and Krosnick. Of course, there is no way to conclusively determine which kind of poll will consistently produce results closer to the “truth.”

To date, forecasts of election outcomes using Polimetrix data have proven quite accurate (Polimetrix 2005). Moreover, comparisons of the CCES with other surveys, such as the American National Election Studies and the 2006 exit polls, suggest that the CCES produces similar distributions of opinion with regard to attitudes toward Bush and the Iraq War (Jacobson 2007) and stereotypes of whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians (Sides and Gross 2007). This suggests that the mode of the survey does not affect the mean levels of at least some key attitudes. That the CCES results are somewhat comparable to the results from the 2002 California survey also gives us confidence that differences in mode are not consequential for our findings.

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<sup>15</sup> The combined sample of 39,000 respondents was asked a common module of questions preceding the others.

<sup>16</sup> Respondents were selected from the Polimetrix PollingPoint Panel—a pool of several hundred thousand individuals who have volunteered or been recruited to participate. Respondents were selected using the following procedure. First, a random subsample was drawn from the 2004 American Community Study, which is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and has a sample size of nearly 1.2 million and a response rate of 93%. Then, for each person in this sub-sample, the closest matching respondent was located using a function that minimized the difference between the ACS and PollingPoint respondents on several variables, including gender, race, age, marital status, education, party identification, and ideology. Finally, post-stratification weights were created for the CCES respondents, matching the CCES marginals to the ACS marginals for education, race, gender, and age. For more on matching and weighting, see Rivers (2006).

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