

Young voters influenced by negative political ads, says study

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In the April issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, an important field study of registered voters aged 18-23 reveals that negative “attack” ads provoke more voter migration than positive ads. Researchers from Notre Dame and the University of Texas at Dallas used real advertisements from the 2004 presidential election to show that, although negative political ads are explicitly disliked, they have a powerful impact on voters’ mindsets that positive ads do not – and the potential to change preference and behavior in ways that benefit the advertiser.

About 77 percent of college-educated 18-24 year olds who were registered cast a vote in the 2004 presidential election, compared to 64 percent of registered voters as a whole. In this presidential election, young voters may have even more of an impact.

Focusing on this segment in the 2004 presidential election, Joan M. Phillips, Joel E. Urbany (both University of Notre Dame), and Thomas J. Reynolds (University of Texas at Dallas) asked participants – 93 percent of whom said at the time that they would definitely vote in the 2004 presidential election– to indicate their likelihood of support on a seven point scale: definitely Bush, most likely Bush, leaning toward Bush, undecided, leaning toward Kerry, most likely Kerry, definitely Kerry. The order of the candidates was random.

Participants were then shown one of four political ads, gauged on their perceptions of the ad, and asked to re-report their likelihood of support

for a candidate.

The researchers found that, even for a candidate's supporters, an anti-opponent ad was more likely to be deemed less persuasive than a positive pro-candidate ad. However, "the notion that negative ads may be disliked yet influential is paradoxical," the researchers write. Overall, negative advertising prompted more movement along the seven point scale, causing voters to both strengthen their resolve and to move away from the candidate they initially supported.

For example, after viewing an ad that attacked their favored candidate, about 14 percent of the voters "dug in their heels" and indicated stronger support for their favored candidate, who had been the subject of an attack. More importantly, however, the researchers also found that 14 percent of the young voters – after viewing an ad that attacked their preferred candidate – were influenced by the ad's content and weakened their support, moving in the direction of the advertising candidate. Viewing positive ads did not lead to significant voter movement.

"These findings parallel marketing studies of both comparative and reference price advertising where consumers report disliking or disbelieving the ads, yet the ads still measurably influence consumer behavior," the researchers explain. "Advertising perceived by voters or consumers as negative carries a potential cost. However, these ads also have the potential to change preference and behavior in ways that benefit the advertiser."

They continue: "We do not conclude that positive political ads are not effective or that negative advertising should be used instead of positive advertising. Rather, our focus is on pointing out that negative advertising has several potential effects."

Source: University of Chicago

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