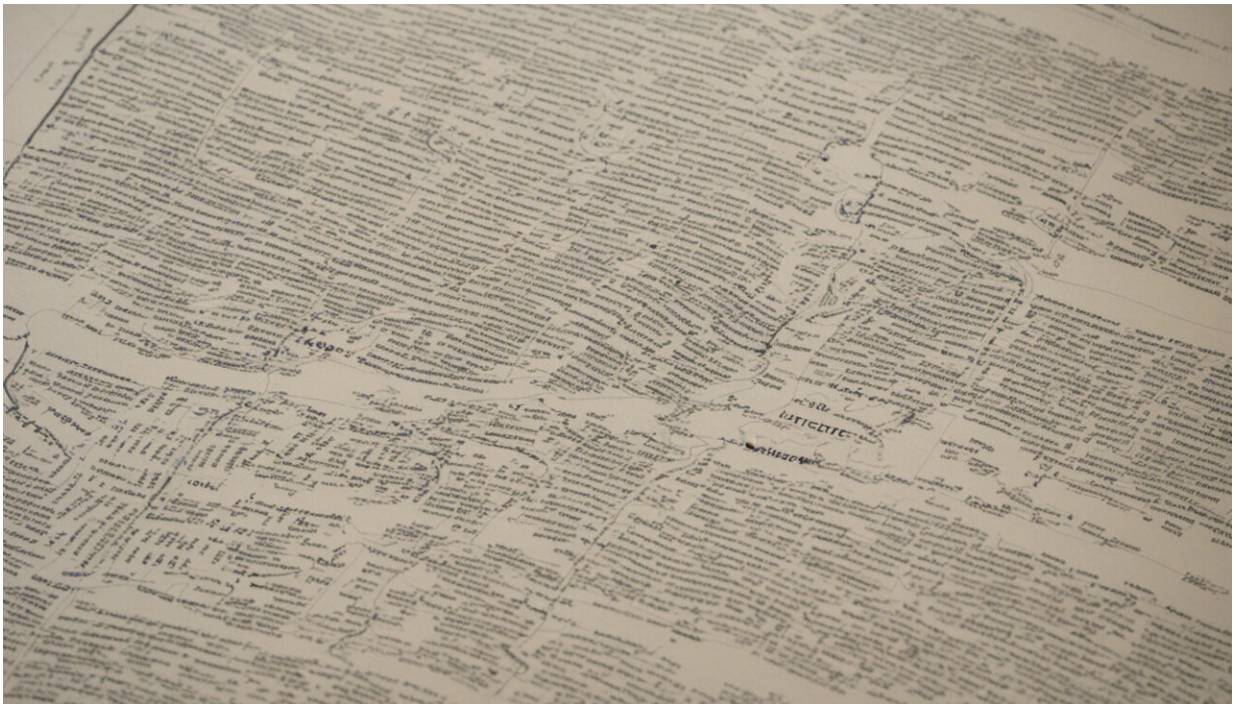


How low can you go? Stanford experts weigh in on the tone of 2012 presidential race

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The race for president has turned nasty over the past several weeks and it's only going to get worse. Or at least that's what we're told.

President [Barack Obama](#) and Mitt Romney, the presumptive Republican nominee, have traded barbs in speeches and [ads](#) over tax returns, energy

loans, personal business history and the handling of the economy.

Words like liar and felon have crossed the airways, and candidates have issued demands for apologies for statements described as beneath the office of the president.

But compared to years past, the 2012 contest, so far, is actually pretty mild, say politics experts at Stanford who analyze campaign ads, rhetoric and races.

Nothing this year, for example, has approached the ugliness of the 2004 race's Swift Boat ads attacking Sen. [John Kerry](#)'s military service, said Shanto Iyengar, who runs Stanford's [Political Communication Lab](#), which analyzes ads.

"If you put that ad up against any of the ads today, it's really stark," said Iyengar, a professor of communication.

The 2008 race

In 2008, the Obama campaign also aired two ads poking fun at Sen. [John McCain](#)'s inability to answer a reporter's question about how many homes he owned. And in 2000, [Al Gore](#) questioned whether George W. Bush understood how the federal government worked.

And those are nothing compared to the rhetoric seen and heard in 1964, when Lyndon B. Johnson ran the "Daisy" ad, which aimed to scare voters into believing challenger Barry Goldwater would start a nuclear war.

Historians also point back to the contest in 1800 between President John Adams and Vice President Thomas Jefferson. The pair traded slurs, including calling the other a fool, weakling, coward, hypocrite and

criminal.

"Alas, we have a sorry history of mudslinging campaigns," said David M. Kennedy, Stanford professor emeritus of history. "I don't think this one has approached the [Richard Nixon](#) level yet, but hey, it's not over."

Kennedy said Nixon "takes the cake among modern campaigners, from his accusations about 'Dean Acheson's cowardly college of Communist containment' and virtual labeling of Harry S. Truman as a traitor . . . and, of course, his later running mate Spiro Agnew's riffs on the 'nattering nabobs of negativism.' "

It's true that the majority of the ads this year have been critical, so defining the race as overwhelmingly negative seems logical even if over-hyped, Iyengar said.

But the ads have remained targeted at the actions and records of the candidates, not personal attacks on their character, religion, race or family.

A negative era

"To be sure, this campaign is one-sided," Iyengar said. "In this campaign, if you just count up the number of positive ads, it's as close to zero as it gets. So in that sense, yes, it's extremely negative. But times are tough. We're living in a negative era. Who's going to go out there and say, 'Jeez, it's morning in America.' That would be a joke. Your message has to resonate with the state of the world."

The more tame language may also be a result of candidates learning that negativity can backfire.

"Attacking has the potential to both discredit the opponent and the

criticizer," said Professor Jon Krosnick, an expert in public opinion research. "It's not always the case the criticizer gets off scot-free."

Krosnick, a professor of communication and of political science, said the negativity could also affect voter turnout.

"If people watch one of these ominous ads with scary music, the ad makes people feel so unpleasant that they want to turn it off," Krosnick said. "And they get turned off of politics, in general. Certainly, the candidates aren't going to benefit from that."

[Research](#), however, also has produced evidence that disliking candidates can be a strong motivator to get to the polls – even more motivating than liking them, Krosnick said.

"If you really hate one and dislike the other, that is more motivating than if you like one and dislike the other," Krosnick said. "Two disliked candidates constitute a threat of something bad and a threat of something really bad. This sort of threat motivates people to take action to avert disaster, in this case by voting."

The debates matter

The tit-for-tats currently making headlines now will probably be forgotten come fall, Krosnick said.

Instead, perceptions of candidates that matter on Election Day will come especially from debates, when voters can see the men up close and in action.

"Only very rarely will a scandal revealed early in a campaign season have the legs to trip up a candidate on Election Day," he said.

As November gets closer, ads may become more personal to help define the candidates beyond policy, but they'll most likely be sponsored by third-party groups. And true nastiness might not show up in prime time.

"Some topics, like race and religion, have gone underground," Kennedy said. "It's very bad form to raise them in public. But you can be sure that 'whispering campaigns' about such matters continue sotto voce, as they did in 2008."

Whether any of it will be effective in an extremely polarized society remains to be seen.

"The ads are all an illusion. The real story in American politics is the extent to which you've got this big gulf between Democrats and Republicans," Iyengar said. "No matter what you say about one, no matter how positive, you'll have a group of people saying, 'Gee, I can't stand that guy.' "

All the candidates can hope for then is that voters can't stand the other guy more.

More information:

comm.stanford.edu/faculty/krosnick/docs/2001/2001%20bivariate.pdf

Provided by Stanford University

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