

When negative political ads work

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Televised political advertising takes up a large portion of campaigns budgets. Much of it is spent on negative political ads. But do these negative ads work? A new study by Juliana Fernandes, assistant professor of strategic communication at the University of Miami (UM), shows that a negative political ad is most effective when it's shown in moderation. The findings reveal that massive exposure to a negative ad has a backlash effect on the evaluation of the sponsor candidate.

"People will be more likely to appreciate and vote for the candidate that is sponsoring the negative advertisement, if the ad is presented in a spaced-out manner, over time," "says Fernandes, a UM School of Communication professor. "A candidate that doesn't have a large budget for political advertising can use the same advertising over and over again; but in a way that is more strategic."

In the study, university students participated in two separate tests. First, 150 participants watched the repetition of a 30-second negative political ad of candidates that were likely unknown to participants (one, three, or five exposures). The ads were presented sequentially, characterizing the presentation as massive. The results show that evaluation and the likelihood of voting for the sponsor candidate was highest when the participants were exposed to the ad three times and lowest when they were exposed to the ad five times.

In the second test, 306 university students watched advertisements of unknown candidates within a 30 minute television program, with varying time intervals between ad repetitions. Afterwards participants filled out

questionnaires to evaluate the sponsor and the attacked candidates, as well as the likelihood of voting for them.

The results indicate that larger time intervals between repetitions of the ad favor the evaluation of the sponsor candidate and disfavor the evaluation of the target candidate. This was true even with increased repetition, suggesting that the sponsor candidate can avoid the backlash effect by allowing larger time intervals between ad exposures.

"In my study I show that negative [political ads](#) do work under certain conditions," Fernandes says. "I think they can help the political process, because people can look at some facts, process the information more carefully and later on—when people cast their votes—they can make an informed decision."

The study is titled "Effects of Negative Political Advertising and Message Repetition on Candidate Evaluation" The findings will be published in March of 2013, in the journal *Mass Communication and Society*.

In the future Fernandes would like to investigate valance variation, such as what happens when there are repeated negative and positive political ads and when there are negative ads sponsored by opposing candidates. She would also like to analyze the possible effects of individual variables, such as gender and party affiliation.

Provided by University of Miami

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