The Fallout From Those Dirty 30-Second Ads

David S. Broder

The polarization of American politics is not an accident. The uncivil atmosphere of Washington, so evident in the protracted battle of the budget, is not a happenstance. Both of them are direct byproducts of the dominant means of political communication, the 30-second campaign ads, whose increasingly negative tone and content heighten partisanship and drive centrist and independent voters away from the ballot box.

That is the central argument and ingeniously demonstrated conclusion of a new book called "Going Negative," by two political scientists, Stephen Ansolabehere of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Shanto Iyengar of the University of California at Los Angeles.

The subtitle of the book, "How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate," states the case that is persuasively made by the MIT and UCLA professors.

Many of us in journalism have decried the effects of negative political ads because of the repulsion many voters and some politicians have expressed for them -- and because of our own distaste for the meanness of these attacks. The authors have found a way to describe and measure what those ads really do.

They ran experiments with cross sections of California voters, using ads from the 1990 and 1992 gubernatorial and senatorial campaigns. The subjects were shown local newscasts, some containing no political ads, some with one, and some with two. Before-and-after questionnaires allowed the professors to measure the effects of positive or negative ads, singly or in various combinations, on voter attitudes and intentions, in a controlled laboratory environment.

Their findings shatter some of my preconceptions and illuminate a problem more serious than I had ever reckoned. They report that the ads give people a lot of information. Seeing even a single ad gives the prospective voters more data, especially on an issue, than they had before. The increase is especially great for those who start with little knowledge of the candidates.

With partisan voters, the ads are not as manipulative as one might think. Few Democrats are persuaded to vote Republican or vice versa by seeing an opposition ad. For the partisans, ads tend to reinforce allegiance. Positive ads modestly increase the partisans' motivation to vote; negative ads lessen their turnout only slightly.

Unfortunately, the main finding of this survey is a powerful confirmation of the intuition that negative ads are a turnoff to the growing number of independents in the electorate -- those with weak party ties or no ties at all.

"Among partisans (Republicans and Democrats alike), the drop in turnout produced by negative advertising was 3 percentage points," the authors write. "Among non-partisans, the decline was an astounding 11 points. . . . Our findings show that negative advertising demoralizes the electorate. It eats away at the individual's sense of civic duty, especially in those people whose connection to the political process is marginal. In the long run, negative campaigns contribute to the general antipathy
toward politicians and parties and the high rates of disapproval and distrust of political institutions."

That, of course, is exactly what many of us critics have been saying. But one device that we hoped would help -- ad watches, newspaper or television features examining and critiquing campaign ads -- appear only to reinforce the negative consequences. They "clearly backfired." In test groups where ad watches were included in the news, the candidate whose ad was criticized gained even more support among partisans, while independents were further disenchanted with the whole political process.

Ansolabehere and Iyengar argue that it is futile to urge candidates to "stay positive." Their experiments confirm the political consultants' advice that the damage is heaviest for a candidate who stays positive while his opponent is attacking.

How then to change the dynamic that is driving away the moderate middle of the electorate and increasing the influence of the partisan extremes? The authors endorse an approach I have long championed: increase the roles of our two parties in elections, especially their grass-roots activities. Media campaigns aim to persuade, and negative ads do that efficiently. But party organizations try to mobilize voters, because "a party-centered campaign must sell the entire ticket, not just a particular name."

Stop the "wrongheaded" reform effort to curb or eliminate the "soft-money" contributions that pay for party registration and get-out-the-vote efforts, they urge. Give public subsidies to the parties, not to individual presidential candidates.

The evidence is strong. The conclusions strike me as being dead-right.

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