GOING NEGATIVE
How Attack Ads Shrink and Polarize the Electorate.
By Elizabeth Kolbert

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N the last Presidential election cycle, candidates for all manner of public office sprang for an estimated $300 million to use television advertising. Apparently they accepted the conventional wisdom. Put simply: advertising works. But does it? And if so, how?

Four decades after television advertising became a major expense in American politics, scholars are still surprisingly divided about its impact. Some argue that campaign commercials, with their ominous imagery and evocative music, can persuade voters to do pretty much anything, including even to vote against their best interests. Others maintain that political ads in the mass media provide more substantive information than the press does. And then there are those who say forces like the state of the economy overshadow the ads' effects that they are hardly worth talking about.

In "Going Negative: How Attack Ads Shrink and Polarize the Electorate," the political scientists Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar offer the latest, and for fans of participatory democracy perhaps the most disheartening, theory of how ads affect our political culture. By the authors' account, it is not so much what negative advertising persuades viewers to do that matters; it is what it persuades them not to do. Such ads, Mr. Ansolabehere and Mr. Iyengar maintain, encourage viewers to opt out of electoral politics altogether, and they are used strategically by candidates who believe they benefit from a low turnout. "Political advertising, at least as it is currently practiced — is slowly eroding the participatory ethos in America," they write.

Mr. Ansolabehere, an associate professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Mr. Iyengar, a professor of political science at the University of California, Los Angeles, base their dispariting conclusions on an exhaustive set of experiments involving some 3,500 potential voters. These voters were paid to show up at rented offices, watch videotapes of news broadcasts stuffed with political ads and fill out lengthy questionnaires. The controlled circumstances give the authors' conclusions a clinical quality that invites skepticism: this, after all, is not the way most Americans watch television.

A central target of the book is the oft-repeated notion that television advertising's rise has meant party loyalty's demise. Mr. Ansolabehere and Mr. Iyengar reach the opposite conclusion: advertising, they maintain, tends to reinforce partisan ties. Democrats are more likely to respond to political ads with a positive message, a tendency they attribute to the Democratic view of government as problem-solving, whereas Republicans are more likely to respond to negative ads. The good news, they say, is that advertising does not "manipulate" voters; rather, commercials are effective only to the extent that they resonate with ideas that viewers already hold.

The bad news, though, is that an increasingly polarized electorate doesn't hold any particular party loyalties, and these people respond only to negative appeals, which, in turn, reinforce their already low opinion of politicians. The paradoxical result, Mr. Ansolabehere and Mr. Iyengar argue, is that both parties can engage in mutual mudslinging through attacks that end up persuading large numbers of them simply to sit the election out.

WHAT can be done? Well, the news media tried to help reduce the "ad watch," a feature aimed at exposing the distortions and inaccuracies of political commercials. This well-intended effort, according to the authors, has "clearly backfired," because what sinks is the candidate's hostile message, not the truth. Mr. Ansolabehere and Mr. Iyengar end up arguing in favor of stronger national party organizations, which, they claim, would work against individual candidates' efforts to depress turnout. The argument seems pretty flimsy, though, in a world in which almost everyone acknowledges to be the fallen state of the two major parties.

Among political professionals, the central message of "Going Negative" is not likely to raise many eyebrows. Insiders have appreciated for years the chief weakness of network advertising: the opponent's voters stay home. But the message deserves a good deal more attention from the public at large, and with another slash-and-burn election season upon us, it couldn't have arrived at a better time.