RUNNING SCARED
The first book on the effects of attack ads.

BY ANDREW FERGUSON

Another election year has dawned, bringing with it a host of ancient worries. Reporters and commentators, pollsters and social scientists, the concerned citizens of the League of Women Voters and the even more concerned ones of Common Cause—all will find good reason to fuss as the campaign grows old. What, they will ask, can be done about—and here you should feel free to fill in the blank. Low voter turnout? The influence of PACs? The single-issue voter? The sound bites of TV news? The polarized electorate? The decline of party discipline? The fretting grinds on and on, as each worry is adduced as evidence that the democratic process itself has been brought low.

One worry looms over all the rest, as a kind of Queen Bee of Concerns, for it seems to contain within it the cause and the consequences of every other worry. I refer, of course, to negative campaigning, or attack ads, as the worry is also known. These can polarize the electorate, drive voters from the polls, destroy party discipline, force even the most idealistic reporters to deal in sound bites—all at the same time. At least, that's what political observers have decided, and so they will surely welcome the publication of "Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate" (Free Press; $24), the first book-length study of the effects of negative campaigning. There's enough here to make the most experienced worrier giddy with concern.

"Going Negative" is a work of political science, stuffed with charts and tables and algebraic equations, but it conforms in many of its essentials to the wisdom of the popular press. The authors—Stephen Ansolabehere, of M.I.T., and Shanto Iyengar, of U.C.L.A., both political scientists—begin with the premise that while politics, as Mr. Dooley said, ain't beanbag, it has become increasingly un-beanbag-like over the last several years. Our political discussion, as reflected in Congress and elsewhere, is dominated as never before by the ideological extremes. Voter turnout is at an all-time low, voter cynicism at an all-time high. Political rhetoric drips with vitriol. The best lack all conviction, while Republicans are filled with passionate intensity. What's more, the authors write, "the single biggest cause of the new, ugly regime is the proliferation of negative political advertising on TV."

This, as I say, is the premise not only of the book but of most serious discussion among the political class. It is so widely accepted that it seems pointless to point out that it's also highly questionable. The "regime" may be ugly, but it isn't new. Andrew Jackson went to his grave believing that his wife had been driven to hers by the harshness of his opponents' attacks. The cartoonists of Lincoln's day routinely depicted him as a baboon. Until the late nineteenth century, fistfights could break out in the halls of Congress. The electorate of 1860, or of 1896, or of 1936, was far more polarized than the one today.

But the historical memory of most political commentators goes back only to
the postwar plodding of the Eisenhower years. By then, a consensus had jelled about the role of government in national life—always the fundamental question of democratic politics—and the consensus held for thirty years. Democrats and Republicans alike were comfortable with the status quo, the one pushing gently this way, the other tugging ever so slightly that way. For a brief sunny moment, politics actually was beanbag.

The consensus has now broken down, owing to the failure of the status quo on many fronts, and the fundamental question has reasserted itself. The argument turns on ideology, and engages ideologues. Ideologues tend to be indecorous, their debates overheated. Most voters, not being ideologues, or even politically inclined, view the argument with dis-taste. In time, we can expect a new consensus to emerge, but for now the regime will indeed be ugly—as it has been, off and on, throughout American history.

"GOING NEGATIVE" would be of little interest were it merely a reiteration of the common view. But it contains surprises. The authors have reached their findings after a series of elaborate and expensive experiments, and the book's description of these is tedious enough to convince us that they are scientifically sound. "Our results are unexpected, in both big and small ways," they write. For instance: "Campaign advertising is not a "pack of lies." Ads impart real information, "even on matters of substance," about the candidates. Political advertising doesn't manipulate voters but "awaakens latent partisan predispositions" in them. Further, the influence of interest-group advertising is more benign than is commonly thought; special interests, for various reasons, purchase many more "positive" than "negative" ads. Still more ironically, the truth-squad techniques of recent journalism, in which TV reporters assess the truthfulness of negative ads, is probably backfiring. "Ad-watches actually benefit the candidates whose messages are scrutinized in the media"—mostly because they repeat the ads themselves.

"Political advertising is not the bogeyman that its critics have often portrayed it to be," they conclude. This is refreshingly unorthodox. When it comes to negative political advertising, however, Ansolabehere and Iyengar find themselves squarely within the mainstream of the worrywart community. "We would even go so far as to say," they go so far as to say, "that negative advertisements may pose a serious antidemocratic threat." How so? "Attack advertising actually suppresses voter turnout"—by inflaming partisan-ship, lowering the tone of the campaign, and encouraging the belief that politics is a mean business. As a consequence, "nonpartisan" voters, in particular, stay home come Election Day. Low voter turnout, as we have seen, is a disease that the doctors of democracy diagnose every campaign season. The authors have now found the virus responsible.

The cure is more elusive. Even for a work of social science, "Going Negative" offers a hopelessly uninspired peroration. Given the First Amendment and its inconvenient protection of political speech, laws against "negative" ads are out of the question. Networks themselves might be asked to refuse to air negative ads, but this would seem merely to shift power away from voters to jour-nalists or, worse, network executives. In the end, the authors say, the answer may lie in a revival of party discipline—returning them, no doubt with great relief, to yet another favorite worry. And the rest of us are right back where we began.

So let's start over, with another premise: we might even go so far as to say that positive campaign ads pose a serious anti-democratic threat. Imagine an ad for Candidate X, who strides confidently before the cameras, perhaps with her photogenic daughter in tow, and announces that if elected she will do everything possible to protect the right to abortion, or to reduce street crime. Her opponent goes unmentioned, and only substantive issues are addressed: a perfectly positive ad, sure to bring a coo from the truth squaddlers in the press. It will take a negative ad from Candidate Y to tell voters that X is in favor of parental notification and a forty-eight-hour waiting period, or that as a federal judge she routinely let violent felons back on the streets.

Political consultants like this joke: How do you tell a positive ad from an attack ad? Answer: the attack ad has a fact in it. The joke is a bit too defensive, and consultants are a cynical, not to say sleazy, bunch, but they have a point. Attack ads are cayenne in the jambalaya of American democracy. They may even have some nutritional value. But they will never be to the taste of people who prefer puffed wheat, or beanbag.