

Attacks Make a Better Sales Campaign
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From Tony Abbott condemning Julia Gillard as a hypocrite to President Obama's chief reelection strategist branding Republican contender Mitt Romney a "political cyborg", politicians everywhere attack their opponents rather than promote themselves. The underlying logic is that attacks gain far more media attention than statements regarding one's own platform, good character or qualifications. Yet the predominant use of negative campaigning is attributable more to the dictates of modern-day journalism than anything else. Controversy and fireworks sell far better than harmony and goodwill.

Modern negative campaigning was first implemented in the United States by Republican campaign strategists Roger Ailes and Ed Rollins in the early 1980s. In 1988, George H.W. Bush's presidential campaign overcame a significant lag in the polls by relentlessly attacking Michael Dukakis as soft on crime. Controversial television ads linked Dukakis with any number of social problems from high crime to environmental degradation. The Dukakis campaign took the high road, ignored the attacks and ultimately lost the election. The take-away was that the only effective defense against attacks is counter-attacks. When President Bush attempted to replicate his attack strategy in 1992, the Clinton campaign promptly responded in kind. This trend has only increased in intensity over the last two decades.

As voters repeatedly encounter the spiral of negativity, they come to believe that politicians and political parties hate each other and probably for good reason. The effects on American democracy include both increased polarization of the party faithful and dampening of voter interest and turnout among the uncommitted. Thus, as Steve Ansolabehere and I pointed out in our 1995 book *Going Negative*, negative campaigns both polarize and shrink the electorate.

Within the genre of negative campaigning, however, it is important to distinguish between attacks based on policy or ideological differences and those that address the personal attributes of candidates. Based on my recent visit to Australia as a guest of the US Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, Australian political discourse appears relatively elevated, at least by American standards. For all the heat generated by the carbon tax legislation and the aborted migration bill, the on-air discussions I took part in such as The Drum panel show on ABC News 24 were more about substance and the contrasting ideological stances of the Labor and Liberal parties, rather than the personality, patriotism, or basic decency of individual leaders.

By contrast, public debate and political campaigns in America are typically about personality rather than policy. At the outset of the 2008 presidential campaign, the fiery

sermons of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright – the pastor of Barack Obama’s church in Chicago – elicited a firestorm of media attention led by Fox News about Obama’s religious suitability for America’s top job. Most recently, conservative Republicans have attempted to focus attention on former Massachusetts Governor Romney’s religion by labeling Mormonism as a “cult”.

The rise of new media has been hailed as a game-changer for democratic politics worldwide, yet its true impact on the quality of political debate remains ambiguous. On the one hand the internet provides a degree of what I call “freedom from the press” because politicians can now communicate directly with voters en-masse. Online town halls are the current rage in the US. These follow the format of the age-old town hall meetings where voters get to ask questions directly of a candidate or sitting member. The main difference is that the questions to the politician come in from a web audience and thus geographic and other physical limitations are abolished. A farmer in Kentucky and a single working parent in Seattle can each ask questions of and listen in to a president or member of congress answer them from Washington D.C. or wherever else he or she may be.

On the other hand there is an irony to these novel events in that they are designed to attract the attention of print and broadcast media. For instance less than a month ago President Obama did an online town hall through LinkedIn and three Republican congressmen showed up shortly afterwards for a similar session at Facebook. Both events were given full treatment on TV in California and the next day in the New York Times.

New media is therefore no savior from negative politics, or at least not yet. In the meantime our political leaders will continue to thrive and campaign for re-election on a diet of blame, anger and one-upmanship. It may be cold comfort, but Australians should know that things could be worse – you could be in America.