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Timeless Strategy Meets New Medium: Going Negative on Congressional Campaign Web Sites, 2002–2006

JAMES N. DRUCKMAN, MARTIN J. KIFER, and MICHAEL PARKIN

In a few short years, the World Wide Web has become a standard part of candidates' campaign tool kits. Virtually all candidates have their own sites, and voters, journalists, and activists visit the sites with increasing frequency. In this article, we study what candidates do on these sites—in terms of the information they present—by exploring one of the most enduring and widely debated campaign strategies: “going negative.” Comparing data from over 700 congressional candidate Web sites, over three election cycles (2002, 2004, and 2006), with television advertising data, we show that candidates go negative with similar likelihoods across these media. We also find that while similar dynamics drive negativity on the Web and in television advertising, there are some notable differences. These differences likely stem, in part, from the truncated sample available with television data (i.e., many candidates do not produce ads). Our results have implications for understanding negative campaigning and for the ways in which scholars can study campaign dynamics.

Keywords campaigns, internet, negative campaigning, candidate Web sites, new media

There is little doubt that the Internet has transformed the way citizens interact with one another and with ruling elites. Yet, the speedy profusion of the Internet leaves the exact nature of its political impact uncertain. Scholars and pundits regularly disagree, for example, on how the Internet affects polarization, deliberation, and targeted marketing. Also unclear is whether the content of political communications on the Internet differs from what is found in more traditional media. This uncertainty stems, in large part, from the fact that “data on the production of political content online are difficult to come by” (Howard, 2006, p. 26). In this article, we explore political communication online by focusing on one of the most enduring and widely debated types of rhetoric: negativity. We are particularly interested in how and why candidates might be using the Web as a new venue for confronting their opponents—a venue that seems to offer some unprecedented opportunities for going negative.

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We explore negative campaigning on the Web with data from a representative sample of over 700 congressional candidate Web sites over three election cycles (2002, 2004, and 2006). We link these data with television advertising data to assess the extent to which candidates may favor the Web over television as the venue for their attacks. This enables us to test the normalization hypothesis that behavior on the Web largely mimics that found in more traditional media.

We find, despite the opportunities provided by the Web and recent claims of relatively high levels of online negativity, that candidates go negative with similar likelihoods across these media. Moreover, the same basic variables determine whether a candidate goes negative on the Internet and/or in their television ads. These findings support the normalization prediction. There is a twist, however: our representative Internet data reveal some dynamics that are missed when relying on the truncated sample of candidates who produce television ads (i.e., well-funded, competitive candidates). This accentuates the advantages of using Web site data to study candidate behavior.

We begin in the next section by offering a basic theory of negativity, including a discussion of how the particular media (i.e., television or the Web) might affect the decision to go negative. We then describe our data, which come from a survey of campaign Web site operators, Web site content analyses, and television advertising data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project (see <http://wiscadproject.wisc.edu>). We follow with a comparative analysis of the trends and determinants of negativity. We conclude with a brief discussion of our findings and their implications, including comments on how the Web offers researchers a unique opportunity to study campaign communication strategies.

Negative Campaigning

Over the last decade, political communication researchers have devoted considerable attention to the causes and effects of negative campaigns (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Lau & Pomper, 2004; Kahn & Kenney, 2004; Geer, 2006; Mark, 2006; Buell & Sigelman, 2008; Lau & Rovner, 2009). We focus on the extent to which candidates go negative and the conditions under which they do so. We next build on a set of widely agreed upon premises to deduce hypotheses about when a candidate will go negative, in general. We then consider how the Internet, in particular, might affect candidates' tendencies toward negativity.

Our first premise comes from a half-century of voting research that demonstrates that, in most circumstances, voters pay scant attention to campaign rhetoric and base their decisions on a subset of accessible considerations (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Zaller, 1992; Kinder, 1998). Second, in congressional elections, incumbency serves as a highly accessible basis of vote choice. In fact, "incumbency is a dominant consideration" (Jacobson, 2004, p. 23) as voters commonly treat congressional races as a referendum on the incumbent (e.g., Mondak, 1995, p. 1045; Herrnson, 2008, pp. 198–201, 246).¹ Third, all else constant, voters favor incumbents (Gronke, 2000, pp. 140–141). This manifests itself in the well-known benefit from incumbency that provides incumbents with up to a 10 percentage point advantage (Ansolabehere & Snyder, 2004, p. 487; Abramowitz, Alexander, & Gunning, 2006). These three assumptions imply that candidates who are not advantaged (i.e., challengers) have an incentive to (a) induce voters to attend to their campaign rhetoric and (b) use the rhetoric to cause voters to base their decisions on criteria other than incumbency.² An additional premise, based on psychological research, is that negativity motivates voters to attend to rhetoric (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000; Druckman & McDermott, 2008).

It follows that, compared to incumbents, *challengers will be significantly more likely to use negative rhetoric*, with the hope of inducing voters to attend to their messages (also see Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995; Theilmann & Wilhite, 1998; Kahn & Kenney, 1999, 2004; Herrnson, 2008, p. 217). Consistent with this prediction is the idea that advantaged incumbents avoid active advocacy (for fear of appearing insecure about the campaign). Jacobson (2004) explains that “inept, obscure, or underfinanced opponents can be dealt with via routine maintenance of ties with groups in the electoral coalition, and they can otherwise be ignored. . . . Ignoring the opposition is a standard tactic of incumbents who feel relatively secure” (p. 97; also see Trent & Friedenber, 2008, p. 100).

A final assumption (and caveat to our third premise above) is that the incumbency advantage declines as the race becomes increasingly competitive. In competitive races, voters are more likely to attend to campaign rhetoric and incorporate alternative types of information (beyond incumbency; e.g., Kahn & Kenney, 1999, pp. 182–183). Incumbents in competitive races thus have little choice but to enter the fray and attempt to persuade voters. As a result, incumbents will often invoke negativity to induce voters to attend to their preferred rhetoric (rather than the challengers’). In response, challengers may be even more apt to go negative to counter incumbent rhetoric. Two predictions follow: *As competition increases, the occurrence of negativity will increase, and as competition increases, the aforementioned challenger–incumbency disparity in going negative will shrink and/or disappear* (also see Kahn & Kenney, 2004, p. 36).³

Beyond our theory’s focus on candidate status, competition, and their interaction, other factors have been posited to increase negative campaigning, including resources (i.e., funds) (e.g., Pfau & Kenski, 1990; Lau & Pomper, 2001, 2004), candidate and/or district partisanship (Lau & Pomper, 2001, 2004; Peterson & Djupe, 2005), candidate gender (Kahn & Kenney, 2004, p. 36; Lau & Pomper, 2004, pp. 32–33), office (i.e., House or Senate) (Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, & Ridout, 2008), and whether the opponent goes negative (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995, p. 120; Haynes & Rhine, 1998; Lau & Pomper, 2001, 2004; Kahn & Kenney, 1999). Since several of these factors correlate with candidate status and competition, analyses of the determinants of negativity need to incorporate (i.e., control for) these variables.

Negativity on the Internet

How might the Internet affect candidates’ tendencies toward negativity? Does the medium influence their decision about going negative? These questions reflect an ongoing debate about whether behavior on new media matches or differs from that found in more traditional media. The innovation hypothesis posits differences, suggesting that online campaigning is “more disengaged from typical offline patterns of electioneering” (Schweitzer, 2008, p. 450). In contrast, the normalization hypothesis suggests that “political practice on the Internet . . . closely resemble[s] politics offline and that traditional factors affecting the distribution of political resources . . . shape the way that political actors use the Web” (Foot & Schneider, 2006, p. 169; also see Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Graber, 2001, p. 110).

Most extant work on negative campaigning, including our above theory, provides little insight into innovation versus normalization. Indeed, it ignores media differences and implicitly assumes that candidates aim their strategies at voters in general (e.g., the median voter). This may be a problematic assumption for candidate Web sites. Engaged supporters visit candidates’ Web sites with much greater frequency than other voters, and as a result, may serve as the sites’ primary targets (e.g., Bimber & Davis, 2003, pp. 101–124;

Cornfield, 2004; Foot & Schneider, 2006).⁴ This, in turn, might induce candidates to be more apt to go negative online since attacks are less likely to alienate supporters (compared to voters in general). Moreover, online negativity may stimulate supporters to participate (e.g., Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998), volunteer (e.g., Hansen, 1985), and donate funds (e.g., Miller, Krosnick, Holbrook, & Lowe, 2007). Trent and Friedenberg (2008) argue that “websites are not constructed primarily for undecided voters or voters who are strictly seeking information. . . . [Sites are designed to] influence a different set of decisions: whether to volunteer, whether to donate, whether to vote or stay at home” (p. 403; also see Bimber & Davis, 2003, p. 67).⁵

In line with this logic, numerous analysts predict that the likelihood of negativity will be higher online than in other media (i.e., television). Some have even proclaimed that “attack politics has hit the Web in a major way” (Thornburg & White, 2000, p. 1; also see, e.g., Klotz, 2003; Wicks & Souley, 2003; Chadwick, 2006, pp. 155–156, Kaid, 2006, pp. 71–72; Warnick, 2007, p. 87; Trent & Friedenberg, 2008, p. 404). The different cost/benefit calculations of going negative online also might mean that the determinants of online negativity differ from those found in other media. The advantageous cost/benefit structure of online negativity might compel all sorts of candidates to go negative, regardless of their status and the competitiveness of the race. For these reasons, then, we may see differences between the Web and other media such as television. We now turn to empirically examining if this is, in fact, the case.

Our Approach

We explore negativity online with data from three different sources. We use information from a survey of congressional campaign Web site operators to get a sense of how campaigns view their Web site audiences. We then investigate patterns of online negativity with a novel content analysis of over 700 House and Senate Web sites from 2002, 2004, and 2006.⁶ To compare negativity across media, we link our Web site data to television advertising data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project.⁷

Survey of Web Site Designers

As explained, underlying the expectation of relatively more online negativity is the premise that Web sites target engaged supporters so as to recruit volunteers, garner donations, and mobilize participation. We tested the veracity of this assumption by conducting a survey of individuals involved in the design of congressional campaign Web sites during the 2008 campaign ($N = 137$). We identified potential respondents by assessing the universe of U.S. Senate and House campaign Web sites in 2008. We contacted the 716 campaigns that provided workable e-mail addresses or online inquiry forms, up to three times during the course of the campaign (from October 17 to November 5). We asked that an individual involved in the creation and/or updating of the campaign’s Web site complete a confidential 5-minute online survey.⁸ We received a total of 137 responses (a 19.13% response rate, which falls within the typical range; see Couper, 2008, p. 340). The sample reflects the population fairly well in terms of office (14% Senate), party (53% Democrat), and status (31% incumbents, 53% challengers, 15% open seats).

To ensure that we received responses from appropriate individuals, we asked respondents, on a 7-point scale, to indicate the extent to which they are informed about how the content of the site is determined, with higher scores indicating more knowledge. The average response was 6.51 ($SD = 1.16$; $N = 136$). The survey also asked respondents to rate the

priority of several groups of voters (e.g., undecided voters, supporters), in terms of each being a target audience of the Web site, on a 7-point scale, with higher scores indicating increased priority. Respondents used a similar scale to rate their perception of how often an average member of each group (e.g., undecided voters, supporters) visited the site, with higher scores indicating more frequent visits. Finally, we asked respondents to rate, again with a 7-point scale, the importance of various goals for the site, such as “persuading undecided voters” and “fundraising.”

Web Site Data

We began our Web site data collection for each year—2002, 2004, and 2006—using the *National Journal*, *Congressional Quarterly*, and various national and state party homepages to identify all Democratic and Republican House and Senate candidates.⁹ We included the universe of Senatorial candidates and then selected a systematic random sample of approximately 20% of House races, stratified by state and district to ensure regional diversity in the sample. We searched for the candidates’ Web sites in our sample by following links from the *National Journal*’s Web site (www.nationaljournal.com) and using search engines such as Google. We were careful to identify only candidates’ personal *campaign* Web sites, excluding official congressional Web sites and Web sites sponsored by other groups or individuals. We were able to identify almost all Senate candidate Web sites and nearly 95% of House sites in our sample. This suggests that while not all candidates had Web sites, clearly the overwhelming majority did, substantially outnumbering candidates who produced television advertisements (see Foot & Schneider, 2006, pp. 7–11). Our sample consists of a total of 736 Web sites, with 26% coming from Senate candidates and 74% coming from House contenders.¹⁰

In each year, we assembled a team of content analyzers. All coders participated in a detailed training session that included practice coding before being randomly assigned a set of candidate Web sites. All coding was conducted in the 10 days preceding election day; however, we also tracked a small sample of Web sites from after Labor Day until election day, and found little evidence of changes that would have significantly altered our coding (i.e., changes almost always concerned items such as the candidate’s schedule). For the years in our sample, we thus believe our coding approach successfully captured campaign strategy.

Coders examined all major parts of the candidate’s self-contained Web site for evidence of negativity. That is, they searched the homepage, the fundraising area, the issues area, the biography area, and any other major area linked to the homepage (e.g., news room and media pages) to find material about the candidate’s opponent that was negative or critical—either in tone or explicitly. Our approach follows Geer’s (2006) depiction that “negativity is any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign” (p. 23; also see Buell & Sigelman, 2008).

We opted for a dichotomous measure of negativity, rather than a count across the entire Web site, for two reasons. First, on a particular page, we found it highly unreliable to count the number of negative statements (when does a negative statement end and another one begin?). Second, using a subsample of 41 sites, we counted the number of distinct pages (e.g., front page, personal page, issue page) that included negativity. We found very little variance such that most candidates who went negative on their sites did so twice (most typically, on the front page and issues page; also see, e.g., Klotz, 1998, 2003).¹¹ Not surprisingly, then, we find virtually identical results, in our subsample, when using this count or employing our simpler and more reliable dichotomous indicator.¹² We do

acknowledge that counts of entire sites may become increasingly important in future years as the sites become more complex; yet, we believe our approach for 2002–2006 is meaningful and valid.¹³

Television Advertising Data

For each candidate in our Web site sample, we obtained data—from the Wisconsin Advertising Project—on whether the candidate produced one or more television advertisements and the tone of the ad(s). Of particular interest is whether a given advertisement was coded as “attacking” the opponent (see Franz et al., 2008, pp. 56–57, who similarly operationalize negative ads as attack ads). To ensure comparability with our negativity measure, we created a variable indicating whether each candidate created at least one negative ad. The results reported below are similar if we instead used the proportion of a candidate’s ads that are negative and, thus, we opt for the comparable dichotomous measure, which facilitates comparisons. The television advertising data were available only for 2002 and 2004.¹⁴

Results

We present our results in three sections. We start with information from the campaign Web site operator survey. We then present our comparative analysis of the frequency of negativity. Finally, we report results about the determinants of negativity.

Campaign Web Site Audience and Objectives

Results from our survey of campaign Web site operators show that campaigns typically design their sites for a general audience, although they recognize that supporters are the most likely to visit. The results, which we present in Figure 1, show that those involved in the creation of the sites view “voters in general” and “undecided voters” as the primary

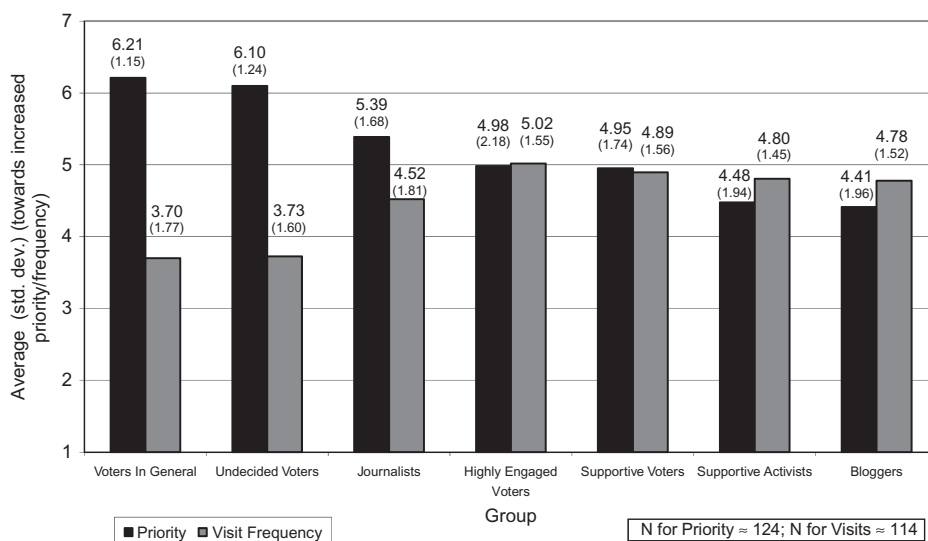


Figure 1. Web site visitor priority and visit frequency.

31. Further analysis reveals that 32% (73 of 229) of the candidates did not go negative on either of the media, 13% (30 of 229) went negative on their Web sites but not in their television ads, 22% (51 of 229) went negative only on television (and not on their Web sites), and 33% (75 of 229) went negative on both. Thus, a majority of the candidates make the same decisions across media. We explored what might lead a candidate to go negative in one medium and not the other; the results mimic what we report in general (e.g., Democrats were more likely to go negative only online, and candidates who only went negative on television responded strongly to their opponents).

32. Given the aforementioned endogeneity issues with the opponent negativity measure, we reran our analyses excluding the variable. The Web results remain unchanged. The television ad results change slightly, with Democrat and female becoming insignificant (in both models) and the competition-challenger interaction becoming marginally significant. Also, if we rerun our analyses excluding candidates who are in the sample multiple times (e.g., in multiple years), our main results are unchanged.

33. We also investigated trends and determinants in policy-focused and personal-focused negativity on the Web. The results, which are available from the authors, mimic what we find with overall negativity with regard to our key variables of challenger status, open seats, and competitiveness.

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