

Crying Foul: The Limits on Negative Advertising in the 1986 Tennessee Gubernatorial Race

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Introduction

—In South Dakota, Republican Senator James Abdnor's television ads wooed the state's beef and pork producers by accusing his rival of accepting advice on farm problems from red meat critic Jane Fonda.¹

—In New York, Democrat Mark Green's ads questioned his Italian-American opponent's campaign contributions from alleged organized crime figures.²

—In Maryland, Republican Linda Chavez branded unmarried foe Barbara Mikulski a "San Francisco-type liberal" with an anti-male Marxist feminist on her staff.³

—In Pennsylvania, Democratic gubernatorial candidate Bob Casey accused his opponent, Lt. Governor William Scranton, III, the son of the popular former governor, of absenteeism from the state senate. "They gave him his job because of his father's name," one television ad suggests. "The least he could do would be to show up for work."⁴

As the mud began to mount, the pundits spoke out, labeling "1986 as the year of the negative campaign,"⁵ and the "low-water mark" in negative political advertising.⁶ Explanations for the rise in negative advertising were almost as plentiful as the examples of it. Leonard Matthews, president of the American Association of Advertising Agencies, suggested that in political advertising, as in all advertising, "it's harder to say something positive about yourself or your product than it is to attack the other guy."⁷ Republican consultant Roger Stone admitted that "voters don't like negative ads, but they retain the information so much better than the positive ones."⁸ Former Democratic political consultant Charles Guggenheim speculated that "the nature of the 30 and 60-second spot encourages negative advertising because it's much easier to hit and run and to use innuendo."⁹ But Barry Goldwater blamed the consultants, who "just sit down and think up dirty things."¹⁰ However, the most widely accepted explanation was simply that "negative commercials work."¹¹

Reactions to the blight of negative ads were varied and not always rational. While continuing to run his own negative ads, Colorado Republican gubernatorial nominee Ted Strickland proclaimed that "if elected he would consider signing legislation preventing people who use negative ads from serving in office."¹² Revolted by the negative advertising in the Pennsylvania gubernatorial race, William Scranton, III declared a "unilateral truce" and withdrew his own negative ads.¹³ After the November election, several groups—including a ten member bipartisan commission in Wisconsin, members of Congress, and advertisers—discussed ways to control negative advertising in future elections.¹⁴ Finally, one candidate for county sheriff beat his opponents to the punch by launching his campaign with a newspaper ad "that boldly proclaimed he hadn't been inside a church for years, once drank heavily and curses 'like a sailor'."¹⁵

During the 1986 Tennessee gubernatorial race, negative campaigning was, at first, limited. But in mid-October, Republican gubernatorial candidate Winfield Dunn began airing a "man on the street" television ad that questioned opponent Ned McWherter's interests in "the state-regulated industries of trucking, banking, nursing homes, and beer distribution."¹⁶ McWherter responded by accusing Dunn of "running a negative campaign" and "polluting the airwaves."¹⁷ Later, McWherter's television ads attacked Dunn's record as governor and his avoidance of income tax payments in 1982 and 1983.¹⁸ In the last week of the campaign, McWherter kept airing his negative ads, but Dunn switched to television ads featuring a strong endorsement from Governor Lamar Alexander.¹⁹ After Dunn's defeat, Tennessee Republican Chairman Jim Henry saw McWherter's attacks on Dunn's tax records as especially damaging, lamenting "I can assure you that no one in this state can miss two years paying taxes and win an election."²⁰

Previous Research

Studies of negative campaigning have focused on the acceptance of negative advertising by the electorate, the demographic variables related to its acceptability, and the impact of negative advertising on both the target and the sponsor of the attack. In an early study of public perceptions of mud-slinging and mud-slingers, Stewart measured attitudes toward twenty hypothetical campaign statements.²¹ He found that "all statements that seemed to attack a political opponent—even ones referring to broken promises and voting records—were cited as mud-slinging by the majority or a large minority of respondents," and mud-slingers were perceived "to be untrustworthy, dishonest, incompetent, unqualified, unlikeable, not self-confident, and immature."²²

Surlin and Gordon found that different types of eligible voters respond differently to negative political ads.²³ In particular, low socio-economic status (SES) respondents believed that these ads are both more informative and more unethical than middle SES respondents. In addition, Black respondents found negative ads to be both more informative and more "affective" (the ads both entertained and made the respondent more favorable toward the sponsoring candidate) than White respondents.

In a study of the recall of specific television ads, Garramone found that the more frequently a negative ad was perceived to be true, the more effective it was.²⁴ However, in general, negative advertising delivered a backlash, producing "a strong negative influence on the viewer's feelings toward the sponsor but only a slight net negative influence on feelings toward the target."²⁵ In a subsequent experimental study, Garramone found that negative advertising was more effective if it was sponsored by a source other than the candidate (e.g., political action committees).²⁶ In addition, Garramone found that rebuttals by the target candidate increased the backlash against the original attacker, but did not change respondents' perceptions of the target. In summary, although most eligible voters are critical of negative political advertising, it can negatively effect perceptions of the attacked candidate when its claims are widely believed. However, attacking candidates runs a substantial risk of backlash, which may be more detrimental to the attacker's image than the original attack was to their opponents'.

Although previous research has identified and qualified some of the effects of negative advertising, it has not specified the limitations the public places on negative advertising. Specifically, previous research has not identified what characteristics of a candidate are believed by eligible voters to be "fair game" for attack by the candidate's opponent in a political ad and what characteristics should be "off limits." In addition, previous research provides an incomplete picture of how demographic variables (sex, age, race, income, education) and political beliefs (partisanship, ideology) are related to tolerance for negative political advertising.

This study addressed these concerns by exploring the limits on negative political advertising expressed by eligible voters during the 1986 Tennessee gubernatorial race. The study addressed two questions:

1. What candidate characteristics do eligible voters believe can be fairly attacked in an opponent's political advertising, and what characteristics should not be attacked?
2. How do eligible voters with a high tolerance for negative advertising differ from voters with a low tolerance?

Method

Respondents and Procedure

The respondents were 336 eligible voters from Memphis, Tennessee. Respondents' households were randomly selected from residential listings in the most recent Memphis telephone directory using a procedure outlined by Frey.²⁷ To lower the refusal rate, an introductory letter was mailed to each household, before telephone contact, explaining the nature of the study. Four attempts were made to contact each randomly selected household before that household was dropped from the sample. Once the household was contacted, one eligible voter per household was randomly selected for interview, using procedures described by Backstrom and Hursh.²⁸ The refusal rate for those households contacted was 28%. The sample was 61% female and 64% White, with an average age of 45 years and an average of 13 years of education. The median household income was between \$19,000 and \$30,000.

Trained graduate students conducted the interviews. Most interviews were conducted on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights between 6:30 and 9:30 PM, during the weeks of October 12 and October 19, 1986.

Negative Advertising Item

The negative advertising attitude measures were developed by using the results of a pilot study of 55 Little Rock, Arkansas residents conducted in August 1986. Respondents answered two open ended questions:

1. What elements in a candidate's record or personal life are fair game for attack in an opponent's political ads?
2. Is there anything in a candidate's record or personal life that should not be attacked in an opponent's political ads?

These open ended questions generated 34 items considered fair to attack in political ads and 26 items considered unfair. These 60 items were reduced to the 10 most frequently mentioned items: four "fair" and six "unfair" items. The fair items were a candidate's political records, stands on the issues, voting records, and criminal activities. The unfair items were a candidate's personal life, current or past marriage, family members, religion, medical history, and sex life.

In the main study, respondents were asked if they believed it was fair or unfair for an opponent to attack each of these ten items in a political ad. For each item, an answer of unfair was scored as zero and an answer of fair was scored as one. Negative Advertising Tolerance (NAT) equalled the sum of the respondent's answers to the ten individual items. Thus, the possible NAT scores ranged from zero to ten.

Demographic and Political Belief Variables

Partisanship was measured on a seven point scale where one represented strong Democrat and seven strong Republican. Ideology was also measured on a seven point scale where one represented strong conservative and seven strong liberal. At the close of the telephone interview, respondents were asked their sex, age, race, education and household income levels.

Results

Table 1 contains the percentages of respondents who found each of the ten negative advertising items either fair or unfair.

Table 1
Fairness or Unfairness of Items Attacked

ITEM	UNFAIR TO ATTACK	FAIR TO ATTACK	NO RESPONSE
Unfair Items			
Sex Life	81.3%	14.9	3.9
Marriage	79.5%	18.8%	1.8%
Religion	75.3%	23.5%	1.2%
Personal Life	74.7%	23.8%	1.5%
Family Members	73.5%	24.1%	2.4%
Medical History	61.3%	36.9%	1.8%
Fair Items			
Voting Record	20.2%	77.7%	2.1%
Political Record	17.9%	79.5%	2.7%
Criminal Activities	14.0%	84.2%	1.8%
Stands on the Issues	8.6%	89.0%	2.4

Five of the six items viewed as unfair to attack in the pilot study were also deemed unfair by respondents in the main study. Less than 25% of the respondents believed that it was fair for candidates to attack their opponents' sex lives, current or previous marriages, personal lives, religious preferences, or family members. There was slightly more tolerance of attacks on an opponent's medical history. The four "fair" items suggested by respondents in the pilot study were also viewed by respondents in the main study as fair areas for attack, especially the candidates' stands on the issues and criminal activities.

The respondents had an average Negative Advertising Tolerance of 4.79 on a ten point scale. Twenty-four percent of the respondents had low NAT's (scores ranging from zero to three), 57% had average NAT's (scores ranging from four to six), and 19% had high NAT's (scores ranging from seven to ten). The relationships between NAT and five demographic variables (sex, race, education, household income, age) and two political belief variables (partisanship and ideology) are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Relationships between Negative Advertising Tolerance (NAT) and Demographic/Political Beliefs Variable

VARIABLES	% WITH LOW NAT	% WITH AVERAGE NAT	% WITH HIGH NAT
SEX*			
Males	16.7	59.6	23.77
Females	28.5	55.4	16.11
RACE*			
Whites	20.8	55.7	23.44
Blacks	29.5	59.0	11.44
EDUCATION*			
No H.S. Degree	40.4	40.4	19.1
H.S. Degree	27.2	53.3	19.66
Some College	23.4	63.6	13.00
College Degree	12.0	63.9	24.1
HOUSEHOLD INCOME			
Under \$19,000	32.4	52.9	14.77
\$19-30,000	20.3	58.0	21.77
Over \$30,000	17.3	60.9	21.8
AGE			
18-30	22.9	65.1	12.0
31-40	17.9	59.7	22.4
41-60	22.0	54.9	23.2
Over 60	31.7	47.6	20.6
PARTISANSHIP*			
Republicans	21.7	46.7	31.7
Independents	21.6	62.1	16.4
Democrats	28.1	57.0	14.9
IDEOLOGY*			
Conservatives	26.4	40.3	33.3
Moderates	22.8	62.9	14.4
Liberals	22.4	63.8	13.8

* Indicates significant chi-square (p .05) with NAT

Chi-square analyses between each of these variables and NAT produced five statistically significant ($p < .05$) relationships: sex (chi-square 6.47, Cramer's V .147, N 300), race (chi-square 7.38, Cramer's V .158, N 297), education (chi-square 16.97, Cramer's V .168, N 299), partisanship (chi-square 9.35, Cramer's V .127, N 290), and ideology (chi-square 15.84, Cramer's V .163, N 297). Household income and age were not significantly related to NAT.

An analysis of cross tabulations and significant chi-squares reported in Table 2 reveals some clear patterns. Females were more likely to have low NAT's than males and males were more likely to have high NAT's. Blacks were more likely to have low NAT's than Whites and Whites were twice as likely to have high NAT's. Respondents without a high school degree were twice as likely to have low NAT's as they were to have high NAT's. For college graduates, the reverse was true. Democrats were somewhat more likely than Republicans to have low NAT's, but Republicans were over twice as likely to have high NAT's. Finally, conservatives were almost two and a half times as likely as liberals to have high NAT's. To summarize, high NAT respondents were more likely to be male, college educated, White, conservative, and Republican. Low NAT respondents were more likely to be female, without a high school degree, Black, and Democratic.

Conclusions

Previous research has identified some of the effects negative political advertising has on both the target and the sponsor of that advertising. This study has attempted to clarify attitudes regarding the boundaries of negative political advertising during a particular political contest. Specifically, respondents evaluated the fairness of ten candidate characteristics that might be attacked in a political ad. Then, the responses to these items were summed to produce the respondents' Negative Advertising Tolerances (NAT). The relationships between NAT and seven demographic and political belief variables were then evaluated to determine which groups have high tolerance for negative political advertising and which groups have low tolerance.

In general, respondents believed that negative political advertising that addresses the target candidate's political record, including his/her voting record and stands on the issues of the campaign, is fair. The possible criminal activities of the target candidate are also fair game. However, attacks related to the candidate's personal life are usually considered unfair. These include attacks on the candidate's sex life, marriage, religion, and family members. A majority of respondents also believed that the candidate's medical history should not be attacked, although the percentage was substantially lower than for other personal matters.

Negative Advertising Tolerance was significantly related to sex, race, education, partisanship, and ideology; but not related to age or household income. Males, Whites, college graduates, Republicans, and conservatives are more likely to be high in NAT; females, Black, high school dropouts, and Democrats are more likely to be low in NAT.

Although potentially useful to politicians considering a negative advertising campaign, the results of this study should be interpreted cautiously. The results represent the opinions of respondents from a particular location during a specific election about the fairness of attacking a candidate in general areas such as personal life, voting record, etc. At best, they represent a baseline of opinion from which eligible voters judge concrete political advertisements within the context of an ongoing political campaign. The complex rhetorical situation that exists in even a simple campaign demands the careful interpretation of these results. In general, males may be more tolerant than females of negative advertising, but convincing evidence of spouse abuse a week before an election might persuade many undecided women voters. In the abstract, voters may believe that it is not fair to attack a candidate's sex life in a political ad, but that does not mean that it will not be a major factor in a campaign. Just ask Gary Hart.²⁹

Notes

¹John J. Fialka, "Intense Mudslinging in South Dakota Senate Race Provokes Many to Favor Restricting Political Ads," **The Wall Street Journal**, November 13, 1986, p. 68.

²Steven W. Colford, "Polls Accentuated Negative," **Advertising Age**, November 10, 1986, pp. 104.

³Ibid.

⁴David Shribman, "Scranton's Shift to High Road in Governor's Race in Pennsylvania May Test Effect of Negative Ads," **The Wall Street Journal**, November 3, 1986, p. 68.

⁵Haynes Johnson, "Peddling the Negative," **The Washington Post**, October 29, 1986, p. A-2.

⁶Colford, p. 3.

⁷Ibid, p. 104.

⁸"Negative Advertising Pro and Con," **Advertising Age**, November 10, 1986, p. 104.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Johnson, p. A-2.

¹¹Colford, p. 104.

¹²"Do as I say, Not as I do," **The Washington Post**, October 31, 1986, p. A-6. Stickland's opponent, Democrat Roy Romer, questioned the credibility of someone who says "I'm going to continue to do this negative advertising, but I'm going to go to the legislature and pass a law to make it illegal for anyone like me to serve."

¹³Shribman, p. 68. Scranton lost his bid for governor.

¹⁴"Bipartisan Wisconsin Panel's Goal is Halt in Negative Campaigning," **The Washington Post**, November 16, 1986, p. A-4; David Shribman, "Costly, Negative Congressional Campaigns Spur Immediate Backlash, Legislative Calls for Reforms," **The Wall Street Journal**, November 7, 1986, p. 70; Colford, p. 104.

¹⁵Mike Tapscott, "Forthright Candidate is 'Telling it Like it is,'" **The Commercial Appeal**, July 1, 1987, p. B1.

¹⁶Philip Ashford, "Dunn Cools Attack, but McWherter Ads Keeping up the Heat," **The Commercial Appeal**, November 1, 1986, p. A1.

¹⁷Richard Locker and Terry Keeter, "McWherter Says Dunn Turning Negative," **The Commercial Appeal**, October 14, 1986, p. B1.

¹⁸Ashford, p. A1.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Terry Keeter, "Tax Records Hurt Dunn, GOP Leader Says," **The Commercial Appeal**, January 20, 1987, pp. B1-2.

²¹Charles J. Steward, "Voter Perception of Mud-Slinging in Political Communication," **Central States Speech Journal**, 26 (1975), 279-286.

²²Ibid., p. 285.

²³Stuart H. Surlin and Thomas F. Gordon, "How Values Affect Attitudes Toward Direct Reference Political Advertising," **Journalism Quarterly**, 54 (1977), 89-98.

²⁴Gina M Garramone, "Voter Responses to Negative Political Ads," **Journalism Quarterly**, 61 (1984), 250-259.

²⁵Ibid., p. 258.

²⁶Gina M. Garramone, "Effects of Negative Political Advertising: The Roles of Sponsor and Rebuttal." **Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media**, 29 (1985), 147-159.

²⁷James H. Frey, **Survey Research by Telephone**, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1983), p. 65.

²⁸C.H. Backstrom and G. Hursh, **Survey Research**, Chicago: Northwestern University, 1963), pp. 50-53.

²⁹The survey was taken seven months before Gary Hart's 1988 Presidential campaign was ended by a sex scandal. Whether or not this scandal has changed eligible voters' minds about the acceptability of attacks on a candidate's sex life is an interesting empirical question.