POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Do Negative Ads Really Hurt?

"The Effects of Negative Political Advertisements: A Meta-Analytic Assessment" by Richard R. Lau et al.; "Do Negative Campaigns Mobilize or Suppress Turnout? Clarifying the Relationship between Negativity and Participation" by Kim Fridkin Kahn and Patrick J. Kenney; "Negative Campaign Advertising: Demobilizer or Mobilizer?" by Martin P. Wattenberg and Craig Leonard Brians; and "Replicating Experiments Using Aggregate and Survey Data: The Case of Negative Advertising and Turnout" by Stephen D. Ansolabehere et al., in *American Political Science Review* (Dec. 1999), 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

"Negative" political ads are both ubiquitous and in bad odor these days. They may "work" for the candidates, critics say, but they alienate potential voters and prompt many to stay home on Election Day. A 1994 study by Stephen Ansolabehere, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and three other political scientists lent this contention some support. But now other scholars are calling into question the harshly negative view of negative advertising.

Lau, a political scientist at Rutgers University, and three colleagues did a "meta-analytical" synthesis of the statistical findings from 52 previous studies of negative political ads. Though it's true that people do not like such ads (75 percent said in a 1994 poll that they were "turned off" by them), Lau and his colleagues found no evidence that people dislike them "significantly more than other political ads or, for that matter, than ads in general." Nor did these political scientists find "consistent, let alone strong, evidence" that negative ads generally "work" for their sponsoring candidates (though they may, of course, in a particular case). Finally, Lau and his colleagues found no "significant support" for the notion that negative ads are souring citizens on politics or voting. "Participatory democracy may be on the wane in the United States, but . . . negative political advertising has relatively little to do with it."

In their 1994 study, Ansolabehere and his colleagues concluded, on the basis of some controlled experiments with 1,655 subjects, that negative ads did indeed reduce voter turnout, and found confirmation in an analysis of the 1992 U.S. Senate races. But their study is "deeply flawed," assert political scientists Wattenberg, of the University of California, Irvine, and Brians, of Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Va. They detected "numerous problems" with the data in the Ansolabehere analysis of the Senate contests. Also, surveys in 1992 showed that people who recalled negative campaign ads had a *higher* turnout rate. In response, Ansolabehere and his colleagues contend that "recall of advertising is an unreliable indicator of actual exposure," insist that the discrepancies between their data and the official figures were unimportant, and stand by their main thesis: "Negative advertising demobilizes voters."

But there's negative--and then there's *negative*, argue Kahn and Kenney, political scientists at Arizona State University. Voters distinguish between legitimate criticism, presented in a tempered way, and mudslinging. Partisans and others strongly interested in politics go to the polls regardless of the tone of campaigns. Independents and people with little interest in politics are more affected by it: Useful "negative" criticism in a campaign makes them more likely to vote, say Kahn and Kenney, but "unsubstantiated and unjustified attacks" make them "more likely to stay home" in disgust.