How Negative Campaign Messages Affect Citizen Assessment of Both Targets and Sponsors

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Abstract

Citizens are bombarded with a great deal of information during election campaigns, much of which takes the form of cues about candidates’ positions on issues. This research focuses on how citizens use the cues embedded in statements made by candidates about their opponents to assess both the target and the sponsor of the statements. I argue that citizens use the informational content of negative messages in two ways: (1) they assess the target of the message as holding more extreme ideological and issue positions in line with the attack while (2) their assessments of the negative message’s sponsor shift in the opposite direction. Using data drawn from a survey experiment, I show that participants respond to the informational cues embedded in negative messages by shifting their assessments of both the attacker and the target.
Candidates want to foster favorable impressions of themselves in the minds of potential voters in order to win elections. They also wish to influence the attitudes citizens hold about their opponents. The most direct method by which they can shape the perceptions of citizens is by talking about themselves and their opponents in advertisements, speeches, press releases, and in interviews with members of the news media. What the candidates say matters; the information contained in their statements should affect what citizens believe about them.

Citizens are able to use a number of different kinds of messages, the two most important of which for this research are positive and negative messages. When candidates produce positive messages, they talk about themselves — their characteristics, qualifications, experience, and positions on issues. Information from positive messages is useful for shaping public opinion about the sponsoring candidate. Messages may also be negative. Negative messages focus on the shortcomings of a candidate’s opponent — their extreme positions, poor record, inexperience, and character failings. Negative messages contain explicit information about the message’s target, but to what extent do they also inform citizens’ views of the sponsoring candidate?

While a great deal of research has focused on how negative messages affect the decision to vote, significantly less has examined how negativity affects public opinion generally and candidate attitudes more specifically. This research advances our understanding of how citizens form attitudes about candidates in response to negative policy-based appeals.

I argue that negative messages contain two-way informational cues, meaning that negative appeals contain information citizens can use to assess both the sponsor and the target of the message. Citizens use the information communicated to them in negative messages to make inferences about candidates’ ideologies, positions on issues that they discuss, and positions on issues that they do not discuss. The theory outlined in this research predicts that
policy-based negative messages lead citizens to assess the targeted candidate as holding more extreme ideological and issue positions. It further predicts that citizens should react in the opposite way when assessing the sponsor of negative messages; sponsors should be assessed as being *unlike* the target, which suggests that citizens should shift their assessments of the ideological and issue positions of sponsors of negative messages in the opposite direction. I test this theory using data collected from a survey experiment and find strong support for my theory; citizens appear to respond to the two-way informational cues embedded within negative messages. Citizens on average alter their assessments of both sponsoring and targeted candidates' ideologies and issue positions in response to negative messages.

1 Campaigns and Attitude Formation

An engaged, informed, and attentive electorate is a key component in most understandings of ideal representative democracies. While citizens are expected to hold these characteristics, it has long been apparent that they are unwilling or unable to do so (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960). Though individual citizens may fail to ideally fulfill their role, the electorate as a whole is able respond to political information in a systematic manner (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Page and Shapiro 1992). Campaigns are salient and dynamic events that provide citizens with the opportunity to learn about candidates and politics more generally. While scholars disagree on how powerful the effects of campaigns on citizens may be, there is a general consensus that they matter in various ways (Holbrook 1996; Carsey 2000; Wlezien and Erikson 2002; Stimson 2004; Kaufmann, Petrocik, and Shaw 2008).

One way in which candidates may seek to influence voters is through the strategic alteration of their campaign messages in an attempt to induce heresthetic change in voters' decisions (Riker 1990). Campaigns may induce these changes in a number of ways: they
may stimulate underlying predispositions (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954) through a sense of “enlightenment” (Gelman and King 1993) or by way of priming (Bartels 2006, but see Lenz 2009). Candidates may also attempt to change which issues the public finds salient (Carsey 2000).

Campaigns also reduce the perceived level of ambiguity in politics. In other words, they may reduce the level of uncertainty citizens feel about political candidates (Franklin 1991; Alvarez 1997; Peterson 2004, 2009). While some research suggests that ambiguity may harm candidates (e.g. Bartels 1986), a more recent study suggests that ambiguity can improve a candidate’s chances of being elected because voters may optimistically project more pleasing issue positions onto them (Tomz and Houweling 2009). Each of the above theories differ from one another in many ways, but all are in agreement that campaigns provide information to citizens and that this information can influence individuals’ views.

Extant research also suggests that citizens are able to process a number of different types of information to form attitudes about politicians. Research in social cognition suggests that citizens often evaluate candidates by using a social taxonomy to categorize them, a shortcut allowing for reductions in the inherent complexity of the political world (Conover and Feldman 1989; Kinder 1986; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuck 1986; Rahn et al. 1990). Citizens may also use partisan stereotypes to form evaluations of candidates (Rahn 1993), a notion that fits with the expectation that citizens associate certain issues with parties (Petrocik 1996). Citizens in the U.S. tend to think about politics in terms of groups (Converse 1964), a fact that is likely reinforced by the tendency of American political parties to emphasize significantly different agendas while in office (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Page 1978). Party labels and other partisan cues provide voters with informational shortcuts (Downs 1957) and knowledge about the partisanship of candidates allows people to make cognitively useful inferences about them (Conover 1981; Granberg, Kasmer, and Nanneman 1988; Hamill, Lodge, and Blake 1985).
While political actors such as the news media, political parties, and interest groups all present a great deal of information during campaigns, information is disseminated primarily by the candidates through the media, both about themselves and about their opponents. Though candidates are less likely to talk about issues on which they are disadvantaged relative to their opponent than they are issues on which they are advantaged (Carsey 2000), they are likely to discuss their own positions and those of their opponent when they are faced with a competitive election (Kahn and Kenney 1999). Citizens can use this information to form attitudes about the candidates.

1.1 Negative Campaigning

Much of the vast campaigns literature has focused on how campaigns influence individual level behavior. Research within this subset of the literature has in large part focused on the ways in which candidate contact (Wielhouwer and Lockerbie 1994), candidate spending (Green and Krasno 1988; Jacobson 1990), and negative campaigning (Lau and Pomper 2004) influence turnout. I focus on negative campaigning in this research, but examine its effects on the formation of public opinion rather than on behavior.

Much of the early work on negativity suggested that higher levels of negativity lead to lower levels of political participation because negative campaigning leads citizens to think poorly of both candidates and, perhaps, the entire electoral process more generally (Ansolabehere et al. 1994; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Kahn and Kenney 1999). Because of the negative perceptions citizens held about both candidates, highly negative campaign information environments were thought to lead citizens to disengage from politics to a greater extent than would citizens who were exposed to comparatively less negative campaign environments.
In stark contrast to this literature, a larger body of more recent research has produced findings suggesting that higher levels of negativity in campaigns are on average associated with higher levels of political participation (Finkel and Geer 1998; Goldstein and Freedman 2002; Kahn and Kenney 2004; Geer 2006; Geer and Lau 2006; Lau and Pomper 2004; Jackson and Carsey 2007, but see Krupnikov 2011). There are several possible explanations for this observed increase in participation. First, negative campaigns draw clear distinctions between the candidates (Carsey 2000) and reduce uncertainty about them (Alvarez 1997). Citizens tend to pay more attention to negative information than they do positive information (Kernell 1977; Lau 1982, 1984) and attacks may generate stronger emotional responses — specifically of feelings of anxiety, concern, and fear — among citizens (Marcus and MacKuen 1993; Finkel and Geer 1998).

While research on negativity is beginning to move beyond questions of turnout and into other forms of behavior like vote choice and to the study of political attitudes more generally (see for example Franz et al. 2007; Ridout and Franz 2011), comparatively little work has been done on the effects of negativity outside on political attitudes. This research focuses on how negativity in the form of candidates’ statements effects the formation of attitudes about candidates.

### 1.2 Two-Way Information Cues and Candidate Assessment

Considered through the lens of social identity theory, partisanship is in part a “motivational need for some positive distinctiveness, which is believed to be satisfied through social comparisons to heighten differences between groups,” (Greene 1999, 394). Citizens, and people more generally, tend to think of the world in terms of dichotomous groupings, the most important of which for this research is one of *us* and *them*. A Democrat thinks of

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1 There is also some evidence that negativity does not affect rates of political participation (see for example Clinton and Lapinski 2004).
other Democrats as *us* and Republicans as *them*. Many citizens are aware that ideological differences between the parties exist, if not precisely then at least in some general manner. Some recent research even suggests that citizens tend to think of Democrats and Republicans as being opposing categories (Heit and Nicholson 2010).

Candidates often communicate with citizens via negative messages. While positive messages contain information that citizens can easily use to make assessments about the sponsor (see for example Banda 2010), the utility of information in negative messages is less clear. I argue that negative appeals contain two-way information cues that inform citizens about both the target and the sponsor of the message. Citizens, then, should use these cues when assessing both the sponsoring and the targeted candidate.

I argue that negative messages contain two-way information cues which can be broken down into two different types of cues. First, *explicit cues* refer to the information that should be attributed to the target of a negative message. These are similar to the informational cues embedded in positive messages; the information should be attributed directly to the target of the message. In the case of positive messages, the sponsor herself is the target while her opponent is the target of negative messages.

Though citizens tend to know little about a candidate’s positions on issues and may have trouble remembering which issues candidates focused on during their campaigns (Dalager 1996), they may be able to make well reasoned inferences about the candidate’s positions based on other information to which they have access. One such source of information could be the positions that a candidate attributes to her opponent. These attributions represent the second kind of cue — *implicit cues* — which suggest that the candidate is not like her opponent. Citizens are able to use these implicit cues because they know that Democrats and Republicans are different from one another and hold different policy preferences. These differences are likely reinforced by the partisan stereotypes that citizens use as informational
shortcuts when dealing with the political world (Rahn 1993). This suggests that when candidates engage in negative campaigning, they communicate information about both themselves and their opponents to potential voters. Social identities and partisan stereotypes, then, combine to allow citizens to infer that candidates are different from one another.

While many citizens may know that the parties differ from one another, several scholars have noted (e.g. Carsey and Layman 2006) that not all citizens are aware of the nature of the ideological and issue position differences between the Democratic and Republican parties. However, even if citizens do not know that Democrats tend to hold more liberal issue positions than do Republicans, they likely assume that the parties differ from one another on a wide range of issues. If this is the case, it follows that citizens who are exposed to negative messages that identify the target as holding some position on an issue should infer that the sponsor of that message is dissimilar from the target because attacks only make sense when they highlight differences between competing candidates. Thus, citizens should respond to the explicit and implicit cues embedded within negative messages when forming attitudes about candidates in an election. For example, if Candidate A accuses Candidate B of holding excessively liberal positions on issues, citizens’ attitudes about A and B should be affected in two different ways. First, the explicit cue communicated by this message is that B is liberal. Citizens should respond to this cue by assessing B as being more liberal than they might have had they not heard the negative message. Stated more formally:

\[ \text{H}_1: \text{Candidates who are attacked for holding an extremely liberal (conservative) issue position will be assessed as being more liberal (conservative) ideologically than candidates who are not attacked.} \]

The second way in which Candidate A’s message about Candidate B should matter is by altering the views citizens hold about A. A communicates additional information to citizens about herself by attacking B for having liberal positions on issue. The implicit cue suggests
that $A$ is not like $B$. In other words, the implicit cue implies that Candidate $A$ is unlike $B$, i.e. conservative. Put more formally:

$$H_2: \text{Candidates who attack their opponents for holding an extremely liberal (conservative) issue position will be assessed as being more conservative (liberal) ideologically than candidates who do not attack.}$$

Citizens evaluate candidates on dimensions beyond ideology; they also assess their positions on issues. The way in which citizens respond to negative messages when forming attitudes about issue positions should be similar to the process citizens go through when forming attitudes about candidates ideologies. Using the earlier example of Candidate $A$’s attack on Candidate $B$, the explicit cue should lead citizens should assess $B$ as holding more liberal positions on the issues on which $A$ attacked them.

$$H_3: \text{Candidates who are attacked for holding an extremely liberal (conservative) issue position will be assessed as being more liberal (conservative) on that issue than candidates who are not attacked.}$$

The implicit cue will shift citizens’ assessments of the sponsoring candidate’s positions on the issues mentioned in the opposite direction. In other words:

$$H_4: \text{Candidates who attack their opponents for holding an extremely liberal (conservative) issue position will be assessed as being more conservative (liberal) on that issue than candidates who do not attack.}$$

Candidates do not necessarily discuss all of the issues that may be of interest to citizens. This can be due both to strategic behavior — candidates may wish to avoid certain issues or they may not differ from their opponents on some issues — and to limited resources —
candidates may lack the time and money to explicate their positions on all issues. Despite little to no information about the candidates’ positions on issues that are not discussed, citizens should still be able to make reasonable inferences about these issue positions. I argue that when faced with two-way information cues, citizens will use the information they have available to them to generate assessments of candidates’ positions on issues that are not mentioned. In other words, citizens should use explicit and implicit cues when assessing candidates’ positions on unmentioned issues in the same ways they use them to assess candidates ideologies and positions on the issues that were discussed. Put in formal terms:

\[ H_5: \text{Candidates who are attacked for holding an extremely liberal (conservative) issue position will be assessed as being more liberal (conservative) on other issues than candidates who are not attacked.} \]

\[ H_6: \text{Candidates who attack their opponents for holding an extremely liberal (conservative) issue position will be assessed as being more conservative (liberal) on other issues than candidates who do not attack.} \]

2 Data and Methods

I designed a web-based survey experiment to test this theory. Participants were undergraduates recruited from an introductory political science course at a large southeastern public university. Four hundred sixty three students participated. The survey instrument was administered online. Participants completed the experiment at a time and place convenient to them during the collection period. Subjects first completed a pretest, part of which was devoted to collecting demographic information such as ethnicity, partisanship, level of education, and ideological disposition. Participants were also asked a series of politi-
cal knowledge questions and were asked to rate their feelings towards a number of individuals and groups.

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of four treatment conditions, the cell sizes for which are presented in Table [1]². Each treatment was made up of four statements attributed to two Senatorial candidates running for an open seat who were identified as being a Democrat and a Republican.³ The partisanship of the candidates were explicitly identified in all treatments, including the control. In order to allow for a baseline for comparison among the assessments made about the candidates by treatment, the control treatment was made up of statements containing only references to valence issues. These kinds of statements were noncontroversial and were designed to limit the transmission of political information to as great an extent as possible. The candidates did not talk about issues and did not talk about their opponents. Instead, they talked about themselves.

[Insert Table 1 here]

I varied the target of the candidates’ statements in the remaining treatments. In the treatments in which one or both candidates attacked, they did so on the basis of their opponent’s positions on health care and taxes. When the Democrat attacked their Republican opponent, they claimed that the latter held extremely conservative positions on the issues. Similarly, when the Republican attacked the Democrat, he did so on the basis of his opponent’s extremely liberal positions on the issues.

I created three experimental treatments. In the first, the Democrat attacks the Republican while the latter talked about valence as in the control treatment. In the second, the Democrat discussed valence while the Republican attacked him. In the final experimental treatment, both candidates attacked each other. Comparing the effects of the experimental

²I report the full text of each treatment in the appendix.
³While the candidates were fictional, participants were not informed that this was the case until after the posttest.
treatments to those generated by the control will allow me to test the effects of two-way informational cues on the formation of ideological and issue position assessments.

After reading the statements made by the Senators, participants were asked to assess the ideologies and issue positions of the candidates. Ideology was coded from one to seven, with one meaning “very liberal” and seven meaning “very conservative.” Issue positions were measured on a one to eleven point scale with low values indicating very strong Democratic positions and high values indicating staunch Republican positions. In addition to questions asking participants to evaluate the positions of the candidates on the two issues that they may have talked about, health care and taxes, subjects were also asked to place the candidates on four issues that were never discussed: government aid to blacks, defense spending, abortion, and government services. Including these issues in the survey experiment allows me to test the degree to which citizens infer the positions candidates hold on issues are not discussed in response to two-way informational cues.

2.1 Model

I use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to model participants’ assessments of the candidates’ ideologies, positions on mentioned issues, and positions on unmentioned issues as a function of three dummy variables indicating whether or not each participant received one of the experimental treatments reported in Table 1. I estimate models for both candidates separately. This is substantively similar to performing a series of difference of means tests, but OLS in conjunction with rope ladder plots allows for easier visual comparisons of the effects of the various experimental treatments in relation to the control treatment.

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4 I chose an 11 point scale to allow for variation in respondents’ assessments of the candidates’ positions on issues. See the appendix for question wordings.

5 Though the dependent variable in the ideological evaluation model is ordinal rather than continuous, I use OLS for three reasons. First, OLS is easily interpretable and allows for clean presentation of results. Second, my results are not substantively different when I model ideological assessments using a more appropriate ordinal logistic regression, the results of which can be found in the appendix.
I do not include any additional covariates in my models (1) because I am only interested in the direct effects of the treatments and (2) because participants where randomly assigned to a treatment, the effects of other controls should be orthogonal to those of the treatments.

OLS is appropriate for the models of participants’ assessments of the candidates’ positions on issues they do and do not discuss because the dependent variables have substantial ranges. To create these dependent variables, I sum the participants’ assessments of the candidates’ positions on health care and taxes for the former. For the latter, I sum participants’ assessments of the candidates’ positions on government aid to blacks, defense spending, government services, and abortion. Assessments of the candidates’ positions on mentioned issues range from 2 to 22. This range is 4 to 44 for unmentioned issues. Again, higher values indicate that a participant assessed the candidate as holding more conservative positions while lower values indicate that they were assessed as holding more liberal positions. Table 2 contains the means, standard deviations, minimum values, and maximum values of participants’ assessments of the ideologies, positions on mentioned issues, and positions on unmentioned issues of both the Democratic and the Republican candidates. These summary statistics suggest that citizens’ assessments of both the Democratic and the Republican candidate vary a great deal.

[Insert Table 2 here]

2.2 Expectations

I expect to observe negative coefficients for each of the treatment indicators in the models estimating the Democratic candidate’s ideology, positions on mentioned issues, and positions on unmentioned issues. This is because each of the experimental treatments should on average lead to participants assessing the Democrat as being more liberal or holding more liberal positions relative to the control treatment regardless of whether they are making an
assessment on the basis of an explicit cue — as in the treatment in which the Republican attacks the Democrat — or an implicit cue — as in the treatment in which the Democrat attacks the Republican. I similarly expect to observe positive coefficients for all of the experimental treatment indicators in each of my models estimating participants’ ideological and issue position assessments of the Republican candidate.

3 Results

I present the results of my analyses graphically using rope ladder plots in which I plot the estimated coefficients generated by each model along with their 90% confidence intervals. Each plot contains a vertical dashed line at zero. If a confidence interval crosses this line, it indicates that the assessments made by those who received this treatment did not differ significantly (p ≤ .1) from those reported by participants who received the control treatment.

3.1 Ideology

I plot the results of two models estimating participants’ ideological assessments of the candidates in Figure 1. The equation of these model is as follows:

\[
Ideology = \alpha + \beta_1 DEMATTACK + \beta_2 REPATTACK + \beta_3 BOTHATTACK + \epsilon \quad (1)
\]

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The plot on the left shows the results of the model for the Democratic candidate while I present the results for the Republican candidate on the right. Turning first to the ideologi-

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6I report full statistical results in the appendix.
cal assessments of the Democratic candidate, the results I present suggest that participants responded to the information contained in all three of the experimental treatments. As indicated by the negative coefficients, participants who received an experimental treatment assessed the Democratic candidate as being more liberal than did those who received the control treatment. All of these coefficients differ significantly \((p \leq .1)\) from zero. Participants receiving the treatment in which the Democratic candidate attacked their Republican opponent on average assessed the Democrat as being just over one unit more liberal than did those who received the control treatment. The effect of the treatment in which the Republican attacked the Democrat appears to be smaller; the estimated coefficient of this dummy variable indicates that participants who received the treatment generally assessed the Democrat as being more liberal, but the average effect size was only a change of roughly one third of a unit. For participants who received the treatment in which both candidates attacked one another, this effect was similar in size, falling just under a one unit decrease on the ideology scale.

The results for the model predicting participants’ ideological perception of the Republican candidate are similar. As predicted, all of the coefficients are positive, indicating that on average participants who received an experimental treatment assessed the Republican as being more conservative than did those who received the control treatment. The estimated coefficients for the treatments in which the Republican attacks and both candidates attack differ significantly \((p \leq .1)\) from zero, but the coefficient generated for the dummy variable indicating that participants received the treatment in which only the Democrat attacked failed to achieve a traditional level of significance. The estimated coefficients of the dummies for the treatment in which only the Republican attacks and in which both candidates attack are both roughly equal to one, indicating that these treatments on average induced participants to assess the Republican’s ideology as being one unit more conservative that did the people who received the control treatment.
Taken as a whole, these results suggest two things. First, citizens tend to assess the targets of attacks as being more ideologically extreme — more liberal for Democrats and more conservative for Republicans. Second, the models reported in Figure [1] also suggest that citizens’ ideological perceptions of candidates also shift in the direction suggested by their partisanship. Put another way, Democratic (Republican) candidates who are attacked tend to be assessed as being more liberal (conservative) while the Republican (Democrat) who sponsored the attack tends to be assessed as being more conservative (liberal). These findings line up with the expectations generated by my theory[7]. When assessing the ideological dispositions of candidates, citizens appear to respond to both the implicit and the explicit cues contained in negative messages.

### 3.2 Perceptions of Positions on Discussed Issues

Next, I report the results of two models estimating participants’ assessments of the candidates’ positions on issues that they discussed in Figure [2]. The following equation represents these models:

\[
\text{Mentioned Issues} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{DEMATTACK} + \beta_2 \text{REPATTACK} + \beta_3 \text{BOTHATTACK} + \epsilon
\]  

[Insert Figure 2 here]

The results of each of these models is substantively similar to those produced by the models estimating participants’ ideological assessments of the candidates. In the case of

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[7] I also ran models in which I included a dummy variable indicating whether or not the participants was a Democrat. I interacted this dummy with each of the dummy variables indicating whether or not participants received each of the experimental treatments. These models, which can be found in the appendix, suggest that partisanship did not condition the way in which participants responded to the treatments. This is true of both linear and ordered logistic models.
the Democratic candidate, participants who received an experimental treatment on average assessed him as holding more liberal positions on the issues that were mentioned in the treatments than did those who received the control treatment. While the coefficients for the dummies indicating that participants were exposed to the Democrat attacks treatment and the treatment in which both candidates attacked one another differed significantly \((p \leq .1)\), that of the Republican attacks treatment failed to attain a traditional level of statistical significance. This suggests that citizens who see either attacks made by a Democrat or attacks made by both candidates assess the Democratic candidate as holding more liberal positions on the issues that were discussed than did those who received the control treatment in which neither candidate attacked the other. Both treatments on average led participants to assess the Democratic candidate as holding positions just over two units more liberal than did those who received the control treatment.

All of the experimental treatments also on average led to participants assessing the Republican candidate as holding more conservative positions on the issues that were mentioned than did those who received the control treatment. Only the coefficient for the treatment in which the Democrat attacked their Republican opponent failed to achieve a traditional level of significance. When the Republican attacked their opponent or attacked and was attacked, he was assessed as holding more conservative positions on mentioned issues. In the case of the treatment in which just the Republican attacked, participants on average assessed the Republican as being approximately two units more conservative on the mentioned issues scale. In addition, participants who received the treatment in which both candidates attacked on average assessed the Republican as being a being just under 1.4 units more conservative than did participants who were members of the control group.

The general pattern of these results is that citizens responded to the implicit cues, but not the explicit cues, when assessing the candidates’ positions on the issues that were mentioned in the treatments. Attackers were assessed as being more ideologically extreme, but their
targets were not unless both candidates attacked each other.

### 3.3 Perceptions of Positions on Unmentioned Issues

I present my final set of analyses in Figure 3. I present the results of models estimating participants’ perceptions of the candidates’ positions on issues that they did not discuss. The equation for these models is as follows:

\[
Unmentioned \text{ Issues} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{DEMATTACK} + \beta_2 \text{REPATTACK} + \beta_3 \text{BOTHATTACK} + \epsilon
\]  

(3)

Once again, the results presented here, while perhaps weaker than those shown in the previous analyses, are similar. All three of the experimental treatments on average shift participants’ assessments of the positions of the Democratic candidate on issues that they did not discuss in a liberal direction as indicated by the three negative coefficients. However, only one of the three estimated coefficients differs significantly \((p \leq .1)\) — that of the treatment in which only the Democrat attacks. On average, this treatment led participants to assess the Democratic candidate as holding positions on unmentioned issues that were approximately 1.7 units more liberal than were the assessments made by the members of the control group.

Participants’ perceptions of the Republican candidate’s positions on unmentioned issues also shifted to become more conservative relative to those reported by members of the control group in response to all three of the experimental treatments. The estimated coefficients for the dummy indicating that participants were exposed to the treatment in which only the Republican attacked and in which both the Democrat and the Republican attacked one
another differed from zero at a traditional level of significance. In addition, the former on average led participants to assess the Republican candidate’s positions on unmentioned issues as being just under 2.3 units more conservative than did those who received the control treatment. The latter generated a smaller effect; those who received the treatment in which both candidates attacked each other on average assessed the Republican candidate as holding positions on unmentioned issues that were about 1.6 units more conservative than did participants who received the control treatment.

These analyses suggest that when assessing candidates’ positions on issues that candidates do not discuss, citizens respond to the implicit cues embedded within negative messages. Citizens do not, however, appear to respond to the explicit cues contained within attacks, at least not in the absence of implicit cues.

4 Conclusions

Taken as a whole, the results of this research suggest that citizens respond to the two-way informational cues embedded in negative messages when forming attitudes about candidates contesting elections. In other words, the results of my analyses suggest that citizens use the information about the target of an attack in negative campaign messages to inform their attitudes about both the target of the attack and the message’s sponsor. This further suggests that citizens, then, respond to both explicit and implicit cues in negative messages.

More specifically, this research provides evidence that two-way informational cues affect three sets of citizens’ attitudes about candidates. First, citizens’ attitudes about the ideologies of both the target of a negative message and the attacking candidate are informed by these cues. Citizens who are exposed to negative messages perceive the target of the attack as being more ideologically extreme in the direction congruent with their party. At the same time, citizens’ ideological perceptions of the sponsor of the attack also become more extreme,
but in the opposite direction. Second, citizens’ perceptions of the candidates’ positions on issues — both mentioned and unmentioned — appear to be affected similarly by two-way informational cues, but while the effects of implicit cues remain key components in the formation of these attitudes, the effects of explicit cues appears to be weaker for issue position assessments than for ideological assessments. Finally, because citizens use the information communicated to them by two-way informational cues to inform their attitudes about issues that are never discussed, my findings further suggest that citizens form positional attitudes on the basis of the information to which they have access (see also Banda 2010).

These findings lead to an important implication about the formation of attitudes about candidates. Despite being generally uninterested in politics, unknowledgable about politics, and inattentive to politics, citizens are able to draw reasonable inferences about the ideologies of the candidates they must choose between on election day. They do this in part on the basis of exposure to two-way informational cues embedded within negative campaign messages. Ideological location is key to theories of spatial voting; proximity theories assume that the perceived distance between a citizen and candidates determines vote choice (Downs 1957) while directional theory predicts that citizens support the candidate who sends the clearest signal that they are on the same side (Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989). Ideological location matters for both theories, though in different ways. Negative messages inform citizens’ perceptions of where the candidates are located in ideological space and this knowledge allows citizens to make more informed choices.

Another implication of this research speaks to the negative advertising and mobilization literature. The results I present in this research suggest that negative messages on average contain more information than do positive messages. In this sense, scholars who argue that negative campaigns provide more information than do predominantly positive campaigns (e.g. Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004) appear to be correct; negative messages tell citizens about both candidates while positive messages only provide individuals with infor-
mation about the sponsoring candidate. The additional information provided to voters by negative messages may in part explain the increase in turnout that may correspond with increasingly negative campaigns.

This research also produces four key implications about candidate behavior. First, candidates may be able to influence citizens’ views about their opponent by utilizing negative messages. By defining their opponents as holding positions outside of the mainstream of American politics, candidates can induce citizens to alter their perceptions of their opponents in a way that may be advantageous. If a candidate successfully frames their opponent as being ideologically extreme or as holding extremist positions on issues, they may be able to reduce their opponent’s electoral support, strengthen support for their own candidacy, or they may be able to both weaken their opponent and improve their own support. All of these possible outcomes increase the likelihood of victory for the attacking candidate.

The second implication — and also the third — is related to my finding that citizens’ ideological and issue position assessments of candidates are responsive to implicit cues. Candidates want to control the campaign information environment. They can attempt to exert control by defining the way that citizens view both themselves and their opponent. Because the primary way that candidates communicate with voters is through television advertisements and they have limited resources, it is reasonable for candidates to attempt to define both themselves and their opponents simultaneously.

The third implication is that candidates may use negative rather than positive messages in order to alter public opinion about themselves because citizens tend to give greater weight to negative information (Kernell 1977; Lau 1982, 1984) and negative messages may lead to strong emotional responses among voters (Marcus and MacKuen 1993; Finkel and Geer 1998). In this sense, negative message may be more valuable — offering candidates more “bang for their buck” — for candidates than positive messages because they are more likely
to draw the attention of citizens and more likely to effect their views. Positive messages may be less effective in this way.

The final implication for the behavior of candidates is that candidates may be able to alter citizens’ views of their positions on issues that they do not want to address. A candidate may, for example, hold a position that is unpopular with members of her party. Rather than remind her supporters that she holds an unpopular position that is more congruent with the opposing party than her own, she may instead opt to attack her opponent on other issues. Given the finding that implicit cues are effective in shifting citizens’ assessments of candidates’ positions on issues they do not discuss, it is possible that candidates may be able to alter citizens’ views on their own positions on these issues without engaging the issues.

Much of the extant research on negative campaigning has focused on the question of why candidates go negative. Given the implications produced by this research, a better question emerges: why don’t candidates go negative?
5 Appendix

5.1 Treatments and Questions

The text of the treatments and questions is presented below exactly as participants in the pilot study saw them. Participants first saw the following text:

We are going to show you a number of statements made by two candidates running for an open Senate seat during their recent election campaigns. Steve Franklin is a Democrat and Jeff Perkins is a Republican. Please read the statements on the following page carefully. When you are finished, please move on to the next section.

They were then randomly assigned with equal probability to one of the four treatment groups, after which they were exposed to the text of their treatment. The text of each treatment follows:

Control treatment

- Democratic candidate Steve Franklin
  - “America is the greatest country in the world, and I intend to keep it that way. Send me back to Washington so I can keep fighting for you and our families.”
  - “My record of public service is second to none. I have served this great state for many years and, with your blessing, will continue to uphold our ideals in Washington.”

- Republican candidate Jeff Perkins
  - “I’m on your side and always have been. I have and will continue to fight against special interests and Washington’s culture of corruption and incompetence.”
  - “I have been a successful leader for my entire life and I will continue to be a leader in the United States Senate well into the next decade.”

Treatment A: Democrat attacks, Republican does not

- Democratic candidate Steve Franklin
— “My opponent doesn’t want you to notice his record on health care. He talks a lot about fostering competition, but what he really wants to do is eliminate all federal funding for Medicare and Medicaid. He may not come out and say it like that, but it’s one of his goals.”
— “Jeff Perkins would have you believe that he wants to cut taxes for all of you. Nothing could be further from the truth; he only wants to cut taxes for corporations and the richest one percent of the country. That won’t stimulate economic growth; it’ll just make the rich richer.”

• Republican candidate Jeff Perkins
  — “I’m on your side and always have been. I have and will continue to fight against special interests and Washington’s culture of corruption and incompetence.”
  — “I have been a successful leader for my entire life and I will continue to be a leader in the United States Senate well into the next decade.”

Treatment B: Republican attacks, Democrat does not

• Democratic candidate Steve Franklin
  — “America is the greatest country in the world, and I intend to keep it that way. Send me back to Washington so I can keep fighting for you and our families.”
  — “My record of public service is second to none. I have served this great state for many years and, with your blessing, will continue to uphold our ideals in Washington.”

• Republican candidate Jeff Perkins
  — “Ladies and gentlemen, my opponent talks a good game about providing health care to everyone, but he skips over all of the most important parts of his plan. He’s doesn’t want to tell you that he supports an expensive and wasteful federal takeover of our health care system.”
  — “If you look at his record, you’ll see that Steve Franklin always supports raising your taxes, not just for the rich but for everyone! He doesn’t think you know what to do with your money. He thinks the government knows how to spend it better than you do. He wants to take your hard earned money and give it to other people.”

Treatment C: Both candidates attack

• Democratic candidate Steve Franklin
“My opponent doesn’t want you to notice his record on health care. He talks a lot about fostering competition, but what he really wants to do is eliminate all federal funding for Medicare and Medicaid. He may not come out and say it like that, but it’s one of his goals.”

“Jeff Perkins would have you believe that he wants to cut taxes for all of you. Nothing could be further from the truth; he only wants to cut taxes for corporations and the richest one percent of the country. That won’t stimulate economic growth; it’ll just make the rich richer.”

- Republican candidate Jeff Perkins

“Ladies and gentlemen, my opponent talks a good game about providing health care to everyone, but he skips over all of the most important parts of his plan. He’s doesn’t want to tell you that he supports an expensive and wasteful federal takeover of our health care system.”

“If you look at his record, you’ll see that Steve Franklin always supports raising your taxes, not just for the rich but for everyone! He doesn’t think you know what to do with your money. He thinks the government knows how to spend it better than you do. He wants to take your hard earned money and give it to other people.”

After participants finished reading their treatment, they were asked fourteen questions. First they were asked to assess each candidate’s ideology and then their positions on six different political issues. The text and for the former were as follows:

**Question 1 and 2:** Where would you place [Democratic candidate Steve Franklin’s/Republican candidate Jeff Perkins’] political ideology on the following scale?

- Very liberal
- Liberal
- Somewhat liberal
- Moderate
- Somewhat conservative
- Conservative
- Very conservative

There were eleven possible responses to each of the issue position questions, each of which were labeled numerically from 1 through 11. The text of the questions were as follows:
Questions 3 and 4: On a scale of one to eleven, with one meaning the government should provide health insurance to all citizens and eleven meaning the government should ensure that health care is available to its citizens through private insurers, where would you place [Democratic candidate Steve Franklin/Republican candidate Jeff Franklin] on the issue of health care reform?

Questions 5 and 6: On a scale of one to eleven, with one meaning the government should help blacks and eleven meaning blacks should help themselves, where would you place [Democratic candidate Steve Franklin/Republican candidate Jeff Franklin] on the issue of aid to blacks?

Questions 7 and 8: On a scale of one to eleven, with one meaning taxes on the wealthy should be greatly increased and eleven meaning taxes on the wealthy should be greatly decreased, where would you place [Democratic candidate Steve Franklin/Republican candidate Jeff Franklin] on the issue of taxation of the wealthy?

Questions 9 and 10: On a scale of one to eleven, with one meaning defense spending should be greatly decreased and eleven meaning defense spending should be greatly increased, where would you place [Democratic candidate Steve Franklin/Republican candidate Jeff Franklin] on the issue of defense spending?

Questions 11 and 12: On a scale of one to eleven, with one meaning the government should provide many more services and eleven meaning the government should provide many fewer services, where would you place [Democratic candidate Steve Franklin/Republican candidate Jeff Franklin] on the issue of government services?

Questions 13 and 14: On a scale of one to eleven, with one meaning by law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice and eleven meaning by law, abortion should never be permitted, where would you place [Democratic candidate Steve Franklin/Republican candidate Jeff Franklin] on the issue of abortion?

5.2 Partisanship and Candidate Assessment

[Insert Table 3 here]

[Insert Table 4 here]
References


Table 1: Treatment Assignment

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*Experimental treatments*

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Note: Estimated OLS and ordered logit coefficients are reported along with standard errors in parentheses.

† = p ≤ .1 and * = p ≤ .05 (two tailed)
Table 4: Issue Position Assessments

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Note: Estimated OLS coefficients are reported along with standard errors in parentheses. † = p ≤ .1 and * = p ≤ .05 (two tailed)
### Democratic Candidate

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### Republican Candidate

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**Note:** Estimated OLS coefficients are plotted along with 90% confidence intervals. For the ideological assessment model for the Democratic candidate, the intercept is equal to 3.33 with a standard error of 0.09, $N = 446$, and $BIC = 1,272.14$. For the model estimating ideological assessments of the Republican candidate, the intercept equals 4.87 with a standard error of 0.10, an $N$ of 445, and a $BIC$ of 1,328.53.

**Figure 1:** Perceived Ideological Positions
Note: Estimated OLS coefficients are plotted along with 90% confidence intervals. The intercept is the model estimating assessments of the Democratic candidate’s positions on mentioned issues is 9.44 with a standard error of 0.44, the N is 439, and the BIC is 2,601.81. For the model estimating the Republican candidate’s positions on mentioned issues, the intercept is equal to 17.65 with a standard error of 0.69, the N is 422, and the BIC is 2,858.55.

Figure 2: Perceived Positions on Mentioned Issues
Note: Estimated OLS coefficients are plotted along with 90% confidence intervals. The intercept is the model estimating assessments of the Democratic candidate’s positions on unmentioned issues is 17.65 with a standard error of 0.69, the $N$ is 422, and the BIC is 2,858.55. For the model estimating the Republican candidate’s positions on unmentioned issues, the intercept is equal to 29.70 with a standard error of 0.65, the $N$ is 429, and the BIC is 2,858.55.

Figure 3: Perceived Positions on Unmentioned Issues