American Government

Negative Campaigning
Negative Campaigning

• Why might attack ads be harmful?
  – Increasing voter disgust and alienation toward
    • Candidates
    • Political process itself
  – Turning large segments of the public away from voting
  – Low voter turnout = poorly functioning democracy
Negative Campaigning

• Could attack ads have a positive effect on voter turnout?

  – Perceptual factors: negative ads more likely to be noticed and processed

  – Motivational factors: people more motivated to avoid costs than to achieve gains
The Evidence—Lau and Pomper (2001)

- Study of 189 Senate campaigns across 6 different election years (1988-1998)
- Analysis of statements in news coverage of Senate campaigns
  - Statements classified as positive or negative:
    - Negative = talking about opponent
    - Positive = talking about self
Findings—Lau and Pomper

• Negative campaign ads increased voter turnout
  – Every 1% increase in negative campaigning increased turnout by .04%

• Increase in turnout occurs up to a point (around 59% negative ads), then decreases

• Individual level: strong partisans and independents affected differently.
Negative Campaigning Increases Turnout, Up to a Point

FIGURE 3
Net Effect of Overall Campaign Negativism on Turnout
(Individual Level Data)
Negative Campaigning Affects Independents and Strong Partisans Differently

FIGURE 2
Differential Effect of Campaign Negativism on Independents and Strong Partisans (Individual-Level Data)
Does Negative Campaigning Help Candidates Get Elected?

• If so, who benefits more, incumbents or challengers?

• Prospect theory (exercise)…
Different ways of “framing” the solution

• Program A, where 200 of the 600 people will be saved.
• Program B, where there is 33% chance that all 600 people will be saved, and 66% chance that nobody will be saved.
  – Most people choose Program A

• Program C, where 400 people will die.
• Program D, where there is a 33% chance that nobody will die, and 66% chance that all 600 people will die.
  – Most people choose Program D

• What’s the catch?
Prospect Theory (in a nutshell)

• When faced with two options…
  – A: known good
  – B: uncertain
    • People tend to pick… known good

• When faced with…
  – C: known bad
  – D: uncertain
    • People tend to pick… uncertain

• How does this relate to political campaigns?
  – Incumbent=known, Challenger=uncertain
Back to Lau and Pomper

• Does Negative Campaigning Help Candidates Get Elected? Yes and no….

• **Challengers** can increase performance at the polls by 1% by increasing attack ads by 6%

• **Incumbents** actually decrease their performance at the polls by 1% by increasing attack ads by 6%