



Institute for Policy Research
Northwestern University
Working Paper Series

WP-09-06

Timeless Strategy Meets New Medium: Going Negative on Congressional Campaign Websites, 2002-2006

James N. Druckman

Faculty Fellow, Institute for Policy Research
Associate Professor of Political Science
Northwestern University

Martin Kifer

Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

Michael Parkin

Assistant Professor of Politics
Oberlin College

Version: May 19, 2009

DRAFT

Please do not quote or distribute without permission.

Abstract

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 paper, 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 websites, 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.

There is little doubt that the Internet has transformed the way citizens interact with one another and with ruling elites. Yet, the speedy proliferation 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: 26). In this paper, 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.

We explore negative campaigning on the Web with data from a representative sample of over 700 congressional candidate websites, 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 website 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 medium (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 website operators, website 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 and Iyengar 1995, Lau and Pomper 2004, Kahn and Kenney 2004, Geer 2006, Mark 2006, Buell and Sigelman 2008, Lau and 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 and 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: 23) as voters commonly treat congressional races as a referendum on the incumbent (e.g., Mondak 1995: 1045, Herrnson 2008: 198-201, 246).¹ Third, all else constant, voters favor incumbents (Gronke 2000: 140-141). This manifests itself in the well-known benefit from incumbency that provides incumbents with up to a 10 percentage point advantage (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2004: 487, Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006). These three assumptions imply that candidates who are not advantaged—i.e.,

¹ Jacobson (2004: 23) adds, “nearly everything pertaining to candidates and campaigns for Congress is profoundly influenced by whether the candidate is an incumbent...”.

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, and MacKuen 2000, Druckman and 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 and Grofman 1995, Theilmann and Wilhite 1998, Kahn and Kenney 1999, 2004, Herrnson 2008: 217). Consistent with this prediction is the idea that advantaged incumbents avoid active advocacy (for fear of appearing insecure about the campaign). Jacobson (2004: 97) 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...” (also see Trent and Friedenberf 2008: 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 and Kenney 1999: 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*

² The motivation to engage voters in more deliberative decision-making may also apply to other traditionally disadvantaged candidates such as those who are female, under-funded, and/or representing the minority party in their district. We focus on candidate status (e.g., incumbent, challenger) because it remains the primary determinant of advantage/disadvantage in congressional campaigns (see, e.g., Jacobson 2004: 23, Herrnson 2008: 246).

increase; and as competition increases, the aforementioned challenger-incumbency disparity in going negative will shrink and/or disappear (also see Kahn and Kenney 2004: 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 and Kenski 1990, Lau and Pomper 2001, 2004), candidate and/or district partisanship (Lau and Pomper 2001, 2004, Peterson and Djupe 2005), candidate gender (Kahn and Kenney 2004: 36, Lau and Pomper 2004: 32-33), office (i.e., House or Senate) (Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, and Ridout 2008), and whether the opponent goes negative (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995: 120, Haynes and Rhine 1998, Lau and Pomper 2001, 2004, Kahn and 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 match or differ 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: 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 and Schneider 2006: 169; also see Margolis and Resnick 2000, Graber 2001: 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

³ The behavior of open-seat candidates likely depends on other factors (see Jacobson 2004: 98-99), including the candidate's ability to tie him/herself to the incumbent, district partisanship, and the candidate's standing in the race.

be a problematic assumption for candidate websites. Engaged supporters visit candidates' websites with much greater frequency than do other voters and, as a result, may serve as the sites' primary targets (e.g., Bimber and Davis 2003: 101-124, Cornfield 2004, Foot and 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, and Gaeth 1998), volunteer (e.g., Hansen 1985), and donate funds (e.g., Miller, Krosnick, Holbrook, and Lowe 2007). Trent and Friedenber (2008: 403) 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" (also see Bimber and Davis 2003: 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 and White 2001: 1; also see, e.g., Klotz 2003, Wicks and Souley 2003, Chadwick 2006: 155-156, Kaid 2006: 71-72, Warnick 2007: 87, Trent and Friedenber 2008: 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 website operators to get a sense of how campaigns view

⁴ Although, see Goldstein (2004) on targeting with television advertising.

⁵ Websites, in contrast to television ads, also provide virtually limitless space to attack without having to sacrifice other parts of a candidate's message.

their website audiences. We then investigate patterns of online negativity with a novel content analysis of over 700 House and Senate websites from 2002, 2004, and 2006.⁶ To compare negativity across media, we link our website data to television advertising data from the Wisconsin Advertising project.⁷

Survey of Website Designers

As explained, underlying the expectation of relatively more online negativity is the premise that websites target engaged supporters so as to recruit volunteers, garner donations, and mobilize participation. To test the veracity of this assumption, we conducted a survey of individuals involved in the design of congressional campaign websites during the 2008 campaign (N = 137). We identified potential respondents by assessing the universe of U.S. Senate and House campaign websites in 2008. We contacted the 716 campaigns that provided workable email addresses or online inquiry forms, up to three times during the course of the campaign (from October 17th to November 5th). We asked that an individual involved in the creation and/or updating of the campaign's website 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

⁶ While ours is not the first content analysis of negativity on congressional websites, it is, to the best of our knowledge, the only dataset that includes campaigns post-2002, which is often cited as the year in which “e-campaigning...entered a new phase. While the Web was once the province of the cybersavvy politico, it is now a critical part of any candidate’s strategy” (Chinni 2002: 1; also see Foot and Schneider 2006: 10). Earlier content analyses of negativity on Congressional campaign websites include Davis’ (1999) study of 1996 websites and Kamarck’s (1999) study of 1998 sites, both of which report modest levels of negativity. Klotz (1998, 2003) analyzes Senate websites from 1996 through 2002; he finds a substantial rise in negativity over this time period. (None of these studies include comparisons with television advertising or examinations of the determinants of negativity.) Of related interest are Wicks and Souley’s (2003) study of negative news releases on Presidential candidate websites in 2000, Schweitzer’s (2008) study of German party websites (also see Schweitzer (2009) who focuses on negativity), Foot and Schneider’s (2006) general analyses of candidate websites, and Ward, Owen, Davis and Taras’ (2008) cross-national analyses of election websites.

⁷ Others have explored negativity in television advertising including Kahn and Kenney (1999, 2004) and Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, and Ridout (2008). We are not aware of any prior work, however, that engages in comparative analyses. Also, Lau and Pomper (2004) investigate negativity in Senate campaigns with campaign statements contained in newspapers (also see Sigelman and Buell 2003). The main downside of this approach concerns the use of a mediated source (e.g., Lapinski 2004: 10).

⁸ We thank Jennifer Stromer-Galley for advice (see Stromer-Galley, Howard, Schneider, and Foot 2003, Foot and Schneider 2006: 225).

2008: 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-seat).

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 is 6.51 (std. dev. = 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 website, 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.”

Website Data

We began our website 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’ websites in our sample by following links from the *National Journal*’s website (www.nationaljournal.com) and using search engines such as Google. We were careful to identify only candidates’ personal *campaign* websites, excluding official congressional websites and websites sponsored by other groups or individuals. We were able to identify almost all Senate candidate websites and nearly 95% of House sites in our sample. This suggests that while not all candidates had websites, clearly the overwhelming majority did, substantially

⁹ Our sample includes independent Bernard Sanders of Vermont who was a 2002 House incumbent and 2006 open-seat Senate candidate. We also included incumbent Democrat turned Independent Joe Lieberman in 2006.

outnumbering candidates who produced television advertisements (see Foot and Schneider 2006: 7-11). Our sample consists of a total of 736 websites 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 websites. All coding was conducted in the ten days preceding Election Day; however, we also tracked a small sample of websites 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 website 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, etc.), to find material about the candidate's opponent that was negative or critical—either in tone or explicitly. Our approach follows Geer's (2006: 23) depiction that "negativity is any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign" (also see Buell and Sigelman 2008).

We opted for a dichotomous measure of negativity, rather than a count across the entire website, 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 sub-sample of 41 sites, we counted the number of distinct pages (e.g., the 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

¹⁰ The list of all sites coded is available from the authors.

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 website sample, we obtained data—from the Wisconsin Advertising Project—on whether the candidate produced one or more television advertisement(s) and the tone of the ad(s). Of particular interest is whether a given advertisement was coded as “attacking” the opponent (see Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, and Ridout 2008: 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 robust to instead using 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 are available only for 2002 and 2004.¹⁴

Results

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

Campaign Website Audience and Objectives

¹¹ In our sub-sample, the average number of negative statements, across the website, is 2.07 with a standard deviation of .46.

¹² We also investigated the effect of overall website size by accounting for the number of pages on each candidate’s website. The website size variable did not significantly relate to the likelihood of going negative and also is not significant in any of the analyses reported below.

¹³ To assess the reliability of the coding, we randomly sampled approximately 30% of the sites and had one of two reliability coders re-code them. We found a very high reliability level of above .90 (adjusting for chance agreement) for our negativity measure (see Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 1998: 131, Neuendorf 2002: 143).

¹⁴ In 2006, the project only coded a small subset of campaigns in the Midwest, and these data are not publicly available (personal communication, Wisconsin Advertising Project, January 27, 2009).

Results from our survey of campaign website 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 target audiences. These two groups register significantly greater priority scores (on our 7-point scale) than all other groups (e.g., comparing “undecided voters” to “journalists” gives $t_{123} = 3.86, p < .01$ for a two-tailed test). This matches Stromer-Galley, Howard, Schneider, and Foot’s (2003) survey of website producers, implemented in 2002-3, which also finds “undecided voters” to be the top-rated audience.

[Figure 1 About Here]

Interestingly, the respondents recognize that “voters in general” and “undecided voters” visit less frequently than all other groups. Instead, they believe “highly engaged voters” access the site most often, even though these voters are not the primary target of the site (e.g., comparing the frequency question for “highly engaged voters” to “undecided voters” gives $t_{112} = 8.97, p < .01$ for a two-tailed test). This accentuates the importance of *not* confounding the frequency with which particular voters visit websites with the intentions of those designing the sites (e.g., certain groups may be more important even if they visit less often) (c.f., Trent and Friedenber 2008: 402-404).¹⁵

[Figure 2 About Here]

As mentioned, we asked respondents to rate the importance of various goals for the site using a 7-point scale with higher scores indicating increased importance. The results, displayed in Figure 2, show that the sites are created, first and foremost, to inform and persuade voters, with fundraising, volunteer recruitment, and mobilization (i.e., getting out the vote) being significantly less important (e.g., comparing “persuading undecided voters” to “fundraising” gives $t_{115} = 2.98,$

¹⁵ The importance of “journalists” is interesting since they often visit the site to obtain information that they then use in writing stories that reach broad audiences (e.g., Bimber and Davis 2003: 68-72, Semiatin 2005: 166-167).

$p < .01$ for a two-tailed test).¹⁶ This again mimics the results from Stromer-Galley, Howard, Schneider, and Foot's (2003) survey, which reported even larger differences between providing information and volunteering and fundraising (also see Klotz 2003: 76, Foot and Schneider 2006: 170). In sum, campaigns do not appear to primarily use their websites as a tool for targeting supporters to volunteer or donate. These results call into question the expectation of increased online negativity, since, as mentioned, an underlying premise of the prediction concerns the primacy of targeting supporters to benefit from the Web's opportunities for fundraising, volunteer recruitment, and mobilization.¹⁷ Instead, it appears that candidates see their websites as a medium for communicating with voters in general, much like other media. This evidence, then, is more consistent with the normalization hypothesis (rather than the innovation hypothesis). We now turn to our direct examination of campaign negativity.

Negativity on the Web and in Television Ads

We begin by comparing our website and television advertising samples. Since virtually all candidates launch websites, our web sample closely mimics the full population of campaigns.¹⁸ This is not the case for television advertisements, which tend to be produced only by well-funded candidates in close races. We find that 47.75% (212/444) of the candidates in our 2002 and 2004 website sample did not produce a single television advertisement (at least as

¹⁶ We asked respondents to rate a few other goals, as well, but none of these registered high scores. These include things like publicizing campaign events and distributing campaign material. Details are available from the authors.

¹⁷ The year of our survey (2008) does not match the years of our website data (2002, 2004, 2006). However, we take comfort in the consistency of our survey results with Stromer-Galley, Howard, Schneider, and Foot's (2003) 2002-3 survey.

¹⁸ Since we take a near census of Senate campaigns (e.g., excluding only the few candidates who did not have sites), this part of our sample almost perfectly matches the population in terms of incumbency and competitiveness. Our House sample contains 46% incumbents, 43% challengers, and 12% open-seat candidates which mimics the respective population totals of 49%, 40.5%, and 10.5%. In terms of competitiveness—according to Cook's non-partisan ratings (www.cookpolitical.com)—our House sample ended up slightly over-representing toss-up campaigns with 9% being toss-up, 18% being leaning or likely, and 73% being solidly in favor of one candidate compared to respective population figures of 5%, 14%, and 81%. The small over-representation of competitive races stems, in part, from our regional stratification that inadvertently resulted in multiple races from some states with relatively few congressional districts that happen to regularly be competitive (e.g., New Mexico). It also stems slightly from us retaining some districts in our sample in each election cycle so as to allow researchers to follow candidates over time.

available from the Wisconsin project).¹⁹ Moreover, the television advertising sample is highly skewed towards more competitive Senate races. For example, whereas 68% of the candidates in our website sample participated in the least competitive races—as classified by Cook’s non-partisan ratings (see footnotes 18 and 23)—only 47% of candidates with television advertisements did so. Similarly, as noted, 26% of our website sample comes from Senate candidates whereas nearly 40% of the television advertising sample comes from the Senate. As we will later discuss, the *under*-representation of less competitive and House races in the television sample truncates variation on chamber and competitiveness measures. (We base all subsequent television advertisement analyses on the sample of candidates who produced at least one ad.)

Despite these differences in samples, when we turn to direct comparisons of the negativity across media, we see very similar likelihoods of going negative. Forty-eight percent (351/732)²⁰ of candidates went negative on the Web compared to 55% in their television advertisements (128/232). Candidates thus are *not* more likely to go negative on the Web and, in fact, are slightly more likely to go negative on television (a difference of proportions test gives $z = 1.86$, $p < .10$ for a two-tailed test). While the greater negativity in advertisements may stem from overrepresentation of competitive races in the television sample, there is still no clear evidence that candidates are aggressively using the opportunities provided by the Web to attack their opponents.

We also observe similar over-time trends towards negativity in both media with the likelihood of negativity increasing on the Web—in 2002, 2004, and 2006—from 38% to 45% to 57%, and in television advertising—in 2002 and 2004—from 51% to 59%. Finally, in both

¹⁹ It is important to note that the Wisconsin project does not monitor the full universe of media markets (i.e., it is restricted to the 100 largest markets, which includes 86% of viewing households; Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, and Ridout 2008: 47). Thus, it is plausible that some candidates in our website sample produced ads that simply were not picked up by the Wisconsin project (as they fall out of the project’s sample of markets) and thus were excluded from our calculations.

²⁰ Coders failed to classify four websites.

media, Senate candidates are more likely to go negative; the respective Senate and House percentages for the Web are 60% (114/191) and 44% (237/541) ($z = 3.78, p < .01$ for a two-tailed test), and the television percentages are 61% (56/92) and 51% (72/140) ($z = 1.42, p < .20$ for a two-tailed test). That the chamber comparisons significantly differ only for the Web may, again, stem from the competitiveness and Senate skew in the television sample. Overall these trends suggest similarities across media as the normalization hypothesis predicts.²¹

Determinants of Going Negative

The evidence thus far suggests, consistent with the normalization hypothesis, that candidates are not more likely—and are, in fact, slightly less likely—to go negative on the Web than in television advertising. We next explore whether the determinants of negativity also cohere across media as we would expect given that campaigns seem to view their websites as a venue for communicating with voters in general. We also test our hypotheses that competition engenders negativity, challengers are significantly more likely to go negative, and the challenger-incumbency distinction diminishes as competitiveness increases. To do this, for each of these media, we regress negativity on candidate status and competition, and then we add interactions between the two. As mentioned, we also need to include control variables posited in other work (e.g., Kahn and Kenney 1999, Lau and Pomper 2004).²²

We use dichotomous variables to identify challengers, open-seat candidates, Senate candidates (as opposed to House candidates), the candidate's political party (i.e., if the candidate is a Democrat), and gender (i.e., if the candidate is a woman). We also include dummy variables for year (i.e., 2004 or 2006) since we found evidence of a trend toward negativity. To measure competitiveness, we use the ratings by non-partisan political analyst Charlie Cook, where higher

²¹ If we re-run our web data on the sub-sample of campaigns that produce an ad, the results are similar. Specifically, with that sample, 46% of candidates went negative overall, 41% did so in 2002, 49% did so in 2004, 51% in the Senate did so, and 42% in the House did so.

²² Unless otherwise noted, our data come from *The Almanac of American Politics*, complemented by the *National Journal's* website.

scores on the four point scale indicate increased competitiveness.²³ We also include measures of campaign resources, which is the per capita amount of money each candidate raised (in millions of dollars) as reported by the Federal Election Commission, and “District Partisanship,” which is the percentage of votes in the district (or state) cast for George W. Bush in 2000 (for our 2002 and 2004 data) or 2004 (for our 2006 data) (Lau and Pomper 2004).²⁴ Finally, we created a dummy variable to identify candidates whose opponent went negative in the given medium since candidates might respond to one another (or uniformly respond to district demands) (e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995, Lau and Pomper 2004).²⁵ We standardized all variables on a 0 to 1 scale.²⁶

[Table 1 About Here]

We present the results in Table 1. The first two columns offer strong support for our competition and challenger hypotheses for both the Web and television advertising data. In both cases, the variables are highly significant and substantively meaningful (also see Kahn and Kenney 1999, Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, and Ridout 2008: 57). In the least competitive races

²³ Specifically, the four point scale is coded such that 0 equals solid Democratic or Republican, 1 represents likely Democratic or Republican, 2 equals leaning Democratic or Republican, and 3 equals a toss up. The Cook scores are a common measure of competitiveness (e.g., Sulkin 2001, Goldstein and Freedman 2002), and have the virtue of being largely exogenous to the race itself (e.g., Gronke 2000: 100-101).

²⁴ Prior work, particularly when focused on presidential campaigns, often includes a variable indicating whether the candidate is a front-runner (e.g., Skaperdas and Grofman 1995, Buell and Sigelman 2008). We do not include it, however, because, in congressional elections, it so highly correlates with incumbency status (leading to extreme multi-collinearity). Indeed, computing front-runner status based on vote totals yields a correlation with incumbency of .78 ($p < .01$). A regression of front-runner status on the other independent variables results in an R^2 of nearly .8.

²⁵ Inclusion of the opponent’s negativity variable creates an endogeneity issue. Lau and Pomper (2004: 146-147), in their newspaper analyses of Senate candidates, address this by using two-stage least squares. Their key instruments are negative campaigning by the opposite party candidate in the *prior* election and the polling firm and media consultant working for each candidate. Unfortunately, data on polling firm and media consultants are not readily available for the years of our data. We also do not have access to prior election data (e.g., from 2000 or for several years in the case our House sample, since not all districts were in the sample every year). Moreover, while the use of an instrument is statistically preferable—if strong instruments can be found (which we were not able to do)—it does not allow one to determine whether significance of the opponent variable reflects actual responsiveness to the opponent or both candidates responding to district/state demands. (Kahn and Kenney 1999 also do not use two-stage least squares and Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, and Ridout 2008 exclude the opponent negativity variable entirely.) Despite these issues, we include the opponent negativity variable in our models given its prominence in past work (see, e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995, Lau and Pomper 2001, 2004, Kahn and Kenney 1999).

²⁶ We use one-tailed tests since our main predictions, as well as those from prior work (e.g., our control variables), have clear directional content (Blalock 1979: 163).

on the Web, the (average) likelihood of going negative is .37 (standard error = .03); this increases at each level of competitiveness, respectively, to .52 (.03), .67 (.04), and .79 (.04).²⁷ The analogous television ad probabilities are .52 (.06), .58 (.04), .64 (.05), and .70 (.08).²⁸ The challenger effect is evident on the Web such that the average challenger has a .82 probability (.03) of going negative, compared to .20 (.03) for the average incumbent. On television, these probabilities are .73 (.06) and .40 (.06).

The effects of the other variables are quite similar across media: negativity increases with open-seat candidates, year, female candidates, and funds raised.²⁹ There are, however, three notable differences. First, candidate partisanship, for reasons that are not entirely clear to us, differs with Democrats being more likely to go negative on the Web but less likely to do so on television. Second, opponent negativity triggers a response only for television advertising, possibly reflecting the greater reach of television and the need to respond. Third, Senate candidates exhibit a greater likelihood than House candidates of going negative on the Web (with respective predicted probabilities of .59 (.05) and .44 (.03)) but this is not the case in television ads (with respective predicted probabilities of .61 (.06) and .57 (.05)). The lack of the Senate television effect likely stems from the aforementioned sample bias (and not necessarily pure media differences). In short, chamber differences in campaign styles likely differ across the full population of campaigns, but this fails to surface with the truncated television sample.³⁰

²⁷ We compute these and other probabilities using *Clarify* (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 1999). We set all other variables to their mean values.

²⁸ The one notable difference when we run the television analyses with a proportional dependent variable (i.e., proportion of negative ads) instead of a dichotomous one is that, with the proportional data, we do not find a significant competition main effect. We suspect this stems from the lack of variance on competition in the television sample.

²⁹ We examined the Web data separately for each year; we find two significant year interactions with 2004 interacting with party identification (i.e., Democrat is not significant in 2004) and district partisanship (Republican districts are significantly less negative in 2004). The results suggest that minority party status (i.e., Democratic) might only matter in midterm election years since during presidential election years, the partisan status of Congress is often a secondary consideration in a voter's mind, relative to the presidential vote. Instead, minority party status is replaced by the extent to which the district opposes the more recognizable incumbent president.

³⁰ If we re-run our web data on the sub-sample of campaigns that produce an ad, the Senate effect falls to insignificance (but the positive Democrat effect remains).

The last two columns of Table 1 add interactions between competition and the candidate status variables. The Web results support our hypothesis that the challenger-incumbent differential in negativity declines as the race becomes more competitive (as indicated by the significant interaction). However, this is not evident in the television data, as the interaction is insignificant (c.f., Kahn and Kenney 1999: 94). The truncated television sample—with few non-competitive candidates producing ads—may again lie behind this non-effect (although see note 32). The Web sample results suggest the existence of two distinct political universes: a non-competitive one in which challengers and incumbents behave differently and a competitive one where their behaviors resemble one another. Interestingly, the significant interaction between competition and open-seat status suggests that open-seat candidates might act similar to challengers (for further discussion, see Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin n.d.).

The web-television differences are intriguing on two counts.³¹ First, they suggest some small media differences, particularly with regard to opponent response.³² Second, they reveal the limits of using a television sample skewed toward the Senate and competitive races. That said, the overall message of our results is that candidates go negative online with similar likelihoods and under analogous conditions as they do in their television advertisements (e.g., as predicted by the normalization hypothesis).³³

Conclusion

³¹ Further analysis reveals that 32% (73/229) of the candidates did not go negative on either of the media, 13% (30/229) went negative on their websites but not in their television ads, 22% (51/229) went negative only on television (and not on their websites), and 33% (75/229) 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 previously discussed endogeneity issues with the opponent negativity measure, we re-ran 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 re-run 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, for both media. The results, which are available from the authors, mimic what we find with overall negativity.

While journalists, pundits, and scholars have spent a substantial amount of time discussing and debating the role of the Web in political campaigns, there exist few systematic analyses of how the Web is used. We address this gap by offering an extensive analysis of negativity on a representative sample of Congressional candidate websites over three election cycles. Thus, we offer the most updated and comprehensive analysis of online negativity and, as far as we know, the first comparison with television ads.

Our results show that, while candidates frequently go negative online, they do so with similar likelihoods of going negative in their television ads. We find further support for the normalization hypothesis both in terms of trends and determinants, albeit with a few differences—most notably the differences in opponent response on television and Democrats being more negative on the Web. Overall, our results show that candidates see their websites as targeting the general voting population and thus need to be motivated by their political situation (e.g., challenger, competitive race) before going negative. That the behavior on the Web largely mimics that found on television is intriguing, given the tremendous amount of speculation about how the Web will change politics. Of course, other types of changes are possible, although we would submit that, to date, there is scant evidence of dramatic changes (see, e.g., Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin 2007, n.d.). The implication is that analysts should take caution in asserting that the Internet has transformed politics, at least until systematic evidence exists.

Our analysis also highlights the potential benefit of the Web for studying campaign behavior. Unlike television ads that typically only capture competitive and well-funded campaigns, websites exist for virtually all Senate *and* House candidates. Consequently, researchers can study campaign strategy using a representative sample of competitive and non-competitive races, and do so using an unmediated and holistic (e.g., candidates can post copious information on their sites) picture of the campaign. Thus, one of the Web's most important contributions may come from how it changes the way scholars study campaign behavior.

References

- Abramowitz, A. I., Alexander, B. & Gunning, M. (2006). Incumbency, Redistricting, and the Decline of Competition in U.S. House Elections. *The Journal of Politics* 68: 75-88.
- Ansolabehere, S., & Iyengar, S. (1995). *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Ansolabehere, S., & Snyder, J.M. (2004). Using Term Limits to Estimate Incumbency Advantages When Officeholders Retire Strategically. *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 29: 487-515.
- Bimber, B., & Davis, R. (2003). *Campaigning Online: The Internet in U.S. Elections*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Blalock, Jr., H.M. (1979). *Social Statistics*. 2nd Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Buell, Jr., E.H., & Sigelman, L. (2008). *Attack Politics: Negativity in Presidential Campaigns Since 1960*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- Chadwick, A. (2006). *Internet Politics: States, Citizens, and New Communication Technologies*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Chinni, D. (Oct. 29, 2002). How the Web is Changing Election Campaigns. Christian Science Monitor (on-line edition). Accessed on 8/2/2007 from <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/1029/p02s01-uspo.html>.
- Cornfield, M. (2004). *Politics Moves Online: Campaigning and the Internet*. New York, NY: The Century Foundation Press.
- Couper, M.P. (2008). *Designing Effective Web Surveys*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Davis, R. (1999). *The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Druckman, J.N., Kifer, M.J., & Parkin, M. (2007). The Technological Development of Congressional Candidate Websites: How and Why Candidates Use Web Innovations. *Social Science Computer Review* 25: 425-442.
- Druckman, J.N., Kifer, M.J., & Parkin, M. (n.d.) Campaign Communications in U.S. Congressional Elections. *American Political Science Review*. Forthcoming.
- Druckman, J.N. & McDermott, R. (2008). Emotion and the Framing of Risky Choice. *Political Behavior* 30(3): 297-321.
- Foot, K. A., & Schneider, S. M. (2006). *Web Campaigning*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Franz, M.M., Freedman, P.B., Goldstein, K.M. & Ridout, T.N. (2008). *Campaign Advertising and American Democracy*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

- Geer, J. G. (2006). *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Goldstein, K.M. (2004). What Did They See and When Did They See It? In Goldstein, K.M. & Strach, P. (eds.) *The Medium and the Message*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Goldstein, K.M., & Freedman, P.B. (2002). Campaign Advertising and Voter Turnout: New Evidence for a Stimulation Effect. *The Journal of Politics* 64(3): 721-740.
- Graber, D.A. (2001). *Processing Politics: Learning from Television in the Internet Age*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gronke, P. (2000). *The Electorate, the Campaign, and the Office: A Unified Approach to Senate and House Elections*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Hansen, J.M. (1985). The Political Economy of Group Membership. *American Political Science Review* 81: 79-96.
- Haynes, A.A., & Rhine, S.L. (1998). Attack Politics in Presidential Nominating Campaigns: An Examination of the Frequency and Determinants of Intermediated Negative Messages Against Opponents. *Political Research Quarterly* 51(3): 691-721.
- Herrnson, P.S. (2008). *Congressional Elections: Campaigning at Home and in Washington*. Fifth Edition. Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Howard, P.N. (2006). *New Media Campaigns and the Managed Citizen*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ireland, E. & Nash, P.T. (2001). *Winning Campaigns Online: Strategies for Candidates and Causes*. Second Edition. Bethesda, MD: Science Writers Press.
- Iyengar, S., & Kinder, D.R. (1987). *News That Matters*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Jacobson, G. (2004). *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. Sixth Edition. New York, NY: Pearson Longman.
- Kahn, K. F., & Kenney, P. J. (1999). *The Spectacle of U.S. Senate Campaigns*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kahn, K. F., & Kenney, P. J. (2004). *No Holds Barred: Negativity in U.S. Senate Campaigns*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, Prentice-Hall.
- Kaid, L.L. (2006). Political Web Wars: The Use of the Internet for Political Advertising. In Williams, A.P., & Tedesco, J.C., (eds.) *The Internet Election*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kamarck, E.C. (1999). Campaigning on the Internet in the Elections of 1998. In Kamarck, E.C. & Nye, J.S., Jr. (eds.) *Democracy.com: Governance in a Networked World*. Hollis, NH: Hollis Publishing: 99-123.

- Kinder, D.R. (1998). Opinion and Actions in the Realm of Politics. in Gilbert, D.T., Fiske, S.T., & Lindzey, G. (eds.) *The Handbook of Social Psychology*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill: 778-867.
- Klotz, R. (1998). Virtual Criticism: Negative Advertising on the Internet in the 1996 Senate Races. *Political Communication* 15: 347-365.
- Klotz, R. (2003). *The Politics of Internet Communication*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lapinski, D. (2004). *Congressional Communication: Content & Consequences*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Lau, R. R., & Pomper, G. M. (2001). Negative Campaigning by U.S. Senate Candidates. *Party Politics* 7(1): 69-87.
- Lau, R. R., & Pomper, G. M. (2004). *Negative Campaigning: An Analysis of U.S. Senate Elections*. New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Lau, R.R., & Rovner, I.B. (2009). "Negative Campaigning." *Annual Review of Political Science* 12. Forthcoming.
- Levin, I.P., Schneider, S.L., & Gaeth, G.J. (1998). All Frames Are Not Created Equal. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 76 (November): 149-188.
- Marcus, G. E., Neuman, W. R., & MacKuen, M. (2000). *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Margolis, M. & Resnick, D. (2000). *Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace 'Revolution'*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mark, D. (2006). *Going Dirty: The Art of Negative Campaigning*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Miller, J.M., Krosnick, J.A., Holbrook, A., & Lowe, L. (2007). The Impact of Policy Change Threat on Financial Contributions to Interest Groups. Unpublished Manuscript, University of Minnesota.
- Mondak, J.J. (1995). Competence, Integrity, and the Electoral Success of Congressional Incumbents. *The Journal of Politics* 57(4): 1043-1069.
- Neuendorf, K. A. (2002). *The Content Analysis Guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Peterson, D.A.M., & Djupe, P.A. (2005). When Primary Campaigns Go Negative: The Determinants of Campaign Negativity. *Political Research Quarterly* 58(1): 45-54.
- Pfau, M. & Kenski, H.C. (1990). *Attack Politics: Strategy and Defense*. New York, NY: Praeger.
- Riffe, D., Lacy, S., & Fico, F.G. (1998). *Analyzing Media Messages*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

- Schweitzer, E.J. (2008). Innovation or Normalization in E-Campaigning. *European Journal of Communication* 23(4): 449-470.
- Schweitzer, E.J. (2009). Global Patterns of Mudslinging: Comparing the Use of Attacks on German and American Campaign Web Sites. Presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 2-5.
- Semiatin, R. (2005). *Campaigns in the 21st Century*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill
- Sigelman, L., & Buell, E. H. J. (2003). You Take the High Road and I'll Take the Low Road? The Interplay of Attack Strategies and Tactics in Presidential Campaigns. *The Journal of Politics* 65(2): 518-531.
- Skaperdas, S., & Grofman, B. (1995). Modeling Negative Campaigning. *American Political Science Review* 89(1): 49-61.
- Stromer-Galley, J., Howard, P.N., Schneider, S.M., & Foot, K.A. (2003). The New Political Campaign Position: A Survey of Web Site Producers and Managers. Presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, San Diego, CA, May.
- Sulkin, T. (2001). Explaining Campaign Intensity. *American Politics Research* 29(6): 608-624.
- Theilmann, J. & Wilhite, A. (1998). Campaign Tactics and the Decision to Attack. *The Journal of Politics* 60(4): 1050-1062.
- Thornburg, R. & White, B. (June 20, 2000). Going Negative. Slate.com. Accessed on 1/30/2009 from <http://www.slate.com/toolbar.aspx?action=print&id=84715>.
- Tomz, M., Wittenberg, J., & King, G. (1999). Clarify: Software for Interpreting and Presenting Statistical Results, Version 1.2.1. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, June 1. <http://gking.harvard.edu>.
- Trent, J.S. & Friedenber, R.V. (2008). *Political Campaign Communication*. New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Ward, S., Owen, D., Davis, R., & Taras, D. (eds.) (2008). *Making a Difference: A Comparative View of the Role of the Internet in Election Politics*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Warnick, B. (2007). *Rhetoric Online: Persuasion and Politics on the World Wide Web*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Wicks, R.H., & Souley, B. (2003). Going Negative: Candidate Usage of Internet Web Sites during the 2000 Presidential Campaign. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 80(1): 128-144.
- Zaller, J. (1992). *The Nature and Origins of Public Opinion*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

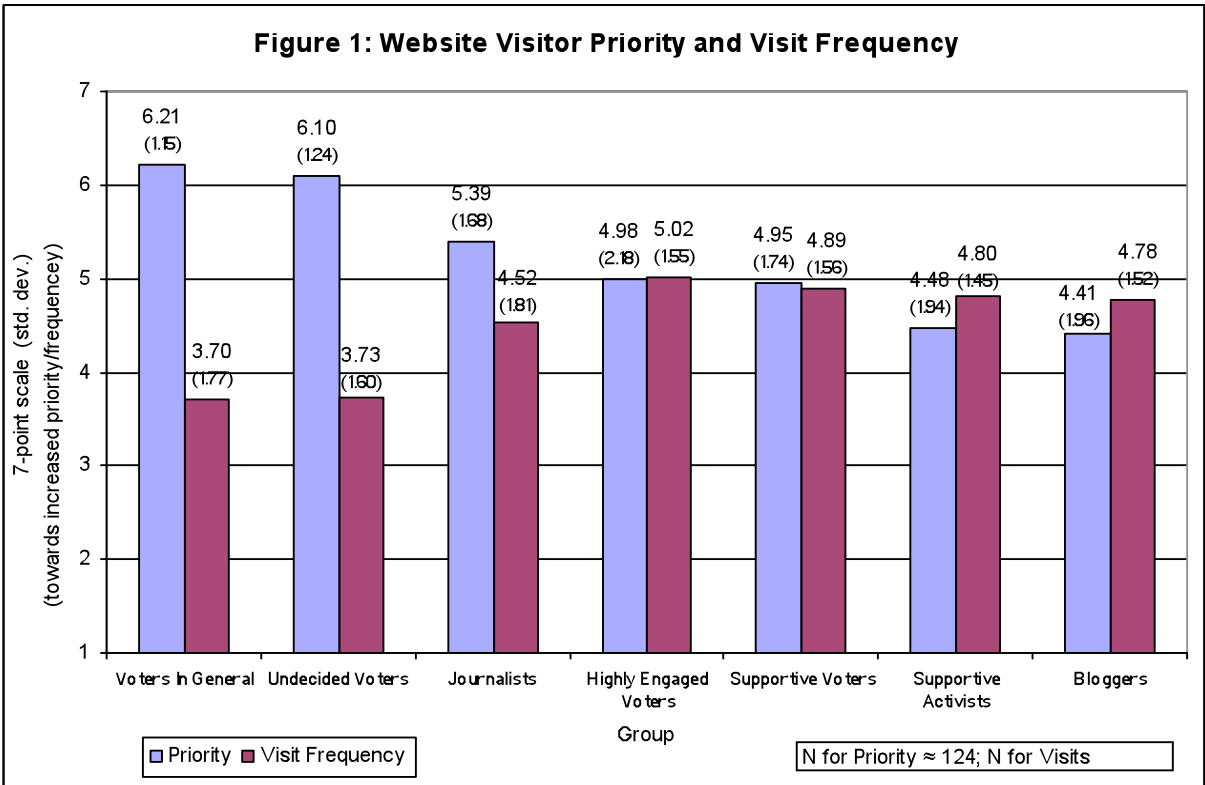


Figure 2: Website Goals

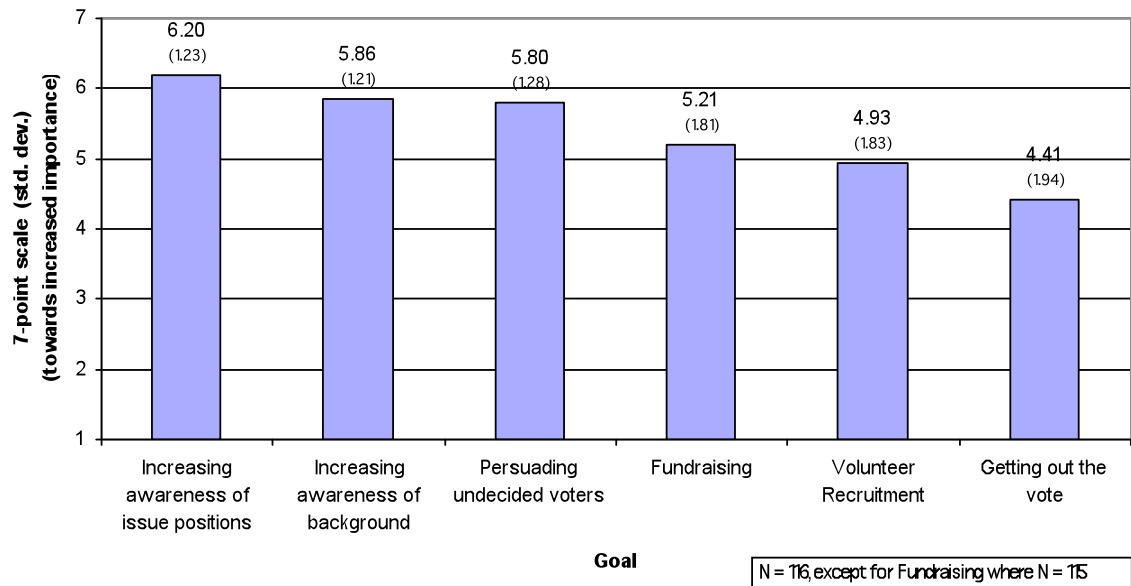


Table 1: Determinants of Negative Campaigning

Dependent Variable: Negative Campaigning; 0 = No Negativity and 1 = Negativity.

Independent Variable	Web	TV	Web	TV
Challenger	2.90*** (.26)	1.41*** (.42)	3.41*** (.31)	1.77*** (.54)
Open-Seat	.94*** (.30)	1.23*** (.46)	1.84*** (.41)	.98* (.68)
Competition	1.86*** (.32)	.79* (.50)	3.15*** (.47)	1.03* (.74)
Democrat	.46*** (.19)	-.47* (.33)	.53*** (.20)	-.45* (.33)
Funds	4.74*** (1.91)	6.62** (3.90)	4.60*** (1.99)	7.52** (4.02)
Female	.41** (.25)	.61* (.48)	.34* (.26)	.53 (.48)
Senate	.60*** (.22)	.16 (.36)	.67*** (.23)	.16 (.36)
District Partisanship (Rep.)	-.14 (.65)	-.66 (1.63)	-.09 (.68)	-.74 (1.64)
Opponent Negative	-.02 (.24)	1.33*** (.34)	.03 (.24)	1.33*** (.34)
2004	.61*** (.26)	.49* (.35)	.56** (.26)	.46* (.35)
2006	1.10*** (.26)	--	1.04*** (.26)	--
Competition X Open-Seat	--	--	-2.35*** (.69)	.33 (1.15)
Competition X Challenger	--	--	-2.56*** (.68)	-1.10 (1.09)
Constant	-3.17*** (.52)	-1.61 (1.28)	-3.58*** (.55)	-1.68* (1.30)
Log Likelihood	296.22	50.64	314.44	52.23
Number of Observations	714	205	714	205

Note: Entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *** $p \leq .01$; ** $p \leq .05$; * $p \leq .10$ for one-tailed tests.