take a stance against the overwhelming plethora of “surveys” by which we are supposed to be measured. While this was not its goal, for me this book is a timely reminder of what happens when you pay peanuts for your survey design tool.

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Kyle Mattes and David P. Redlawsk. The Positive Case for Negative Campaigning. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2014. 256 pp. $75.00 (cloth). $25.00 (paper).

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For decades, many political scientists have argued that one reason American voters avoid political activity is that they detest negative campaign ads. It is easy to imagine why this may be the case. Negative ads are, by definition, critical. They highlight a candidate’s weakness and describe, often in stark terms, exactly why the candidate is unsuitable for elected office. While many (if not most) negative ads critique candidates on issues, the most memorable negative ads often hinge on a candidate’s (alleged) character flaws.

In turn, journalists, pundits, and even some politicians view negative campaign ads as a problem for American democracy. Negativity, former Democratic Senator Tom Daschle once noted, is “the crack cocaine of politics.”1 This sentiment points to a clear idea: without negative campaigning, politics would somehow be better.

Modern campaigns, however, have not allowed us to observe this counterfactual of a purely positive campaign. National campaigns have grown more negative over the past two decades, and the trend shows few signs of slowing down. In fact, as of this writing, about six months away from the start of the presidential primary season, a campaign television ad has already described Republican candidate Rand Paul as “wrong and dangerous.” The nascent campaign season’s first negative ad seems a sign of things to come, a highly negative campaign that CNN has already predicted to be “bruising.”2

What is the appropriate response to this coming deluge of negativity? In their book The Positive Case for Negative Campaigning, Kyle Mattes and David Redlawsk make a convincing case that the most appropriate response is “So what?” (203).

The effect of campaign negativity has been one of the most researched topics in political communication. The amount of work published on this topic could

1. Quote included in Geer (2006).
fill countless volumes. Indeed, the sheer breadth, depth, and variety of research on campaign negativity could suggest to a naïve reader that scholars have already said everything there is to possibly say about negative ads. Mattes and Redlawsk challenge this conclusion, casting a novel lens on the role of negative ads in the political process. Relying on a diverse set of methods, the authors make a nuanced and elegant case about the benefits of negative advertising.

*Positive Case* begins by challenging the idea that voters intensely dislike campaign negativity. Relying on a series of experimental studies, Mattes and Redlawsk show that voter opposition to negativity has been overstated. People, the authors show, may actually be quite open to negative campaign ads. The fact that previous surveys show a hatred of negativity may be a function of question wording: it should not be surprising that people will reject something that a survey question dubs to be “negative.” In short, the very measures scholars and pollsters have used to capture individual responses to these types of ads have stacked the deck against campaign negativity.

This, of course, is not to argue that all negative ads are treated equally. As V. O. Key (1966) famously wrote, “voters are not fools.” People, Mattes and Redlawsk demonstrate in experiments that utilize real campaign ads, are capable of distinguishing between different types of negative ads. They are capable of determining which ads are critical but informational and which ads are largely “defamatory” (99). “Voters,” Mattes and Redlawsk write, “are smart enough to assess the ads on their own merits” (99).

What is especially unique about this book is its approach to analyzing the informational value of negative ads. While Mattes and Redlawsk use experimental studies to analyze individual response to negative ads, they rely on a formal model to consider why and when negative ads are especially useful. In addition, the authors test this formal model with an experiment.

Relying on the formal model leads the authors to an important insight about the role of negativity. Voters, Mattes and Redlawsk argue, benefit when they know both the good and bad points of each candidate. A candidate is unlikely to reveal his or her own flaws; therefore, the only way voters can learn the most information about their political choices is through negative ads.

The use of the formal model is an important point. Often scholars analyze candidate strategy and voter behavior in isolation. Certainly we’ve gained a good deal of insight about both topics through these approaches, but both areas of scholarship can be (at times) limited by our tendency to study candidates and voters separately. After all, voter opinions and behaviors are often responses to candidate strategy and, in turn, candidates design their strategy with these voter responses in mind. The work in Mattes and Redlawsk brings us closer to bridging these theoretic gaps.

Although the book is methodologically innovative and makes a critical theoretic contribution to the research on negative advertising and campaigning...
at large, in some ways the most important arguments are in the implications. The book stands as an important reminder of a simple point people (even political scientists) often forget—or, at least, undervalue. Campaign advertising is not designed to be informational or helpful; it is carefully designed to persuade voters to behave in a specific way that benefits one candidate at the expense of another.

Sure, not all negative ads are truthful and credible—a point that Mattes and Redlawsk analyze directly. Certainly some negative ads include lies and unfair accusations, but, as the authors remind us, just because an ad is positive does not necessarily make it truthful, nor does it make it useful. Positive ads, too, can be manipulative, and positive ads, too, are designed to influence voter behavior.

Even more importantly, as Mattes and Redlawsk underscore, a campaign with only positive ads may be significantly worse for voters than a campaign with some negative ads. The success of challengers, Mattes and Redlawsk remind the reader, is based on their ability to point out to voters why they should not vote for an incumbent. This is something that is largely impossible to do with only positive ads. A campaign with no negativity, then, would be the “ultimate in incumbent protection” (202).

The Positive Case for Negative Campaigning is both engaging and important. In casting a more nuanced lens on one of the most maligned forms of political communication, this book should lead scholars to new agendas and research questions. Moreover, as more pundits, journalists, and politicians suggest that negativity will lead to the imminent demise of the American democracy, this book is a useful reminder that these fears may be vastly overstated. In an era when the first negative ads of a presidential campaign air many months before the primaries even begin, this is both an important and a necessary reminder.

References


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