

Ansolabehere & Iyengar, "The Withdrawal of the Voter,"  
*Going Negative: How Pol Advertisements Shrink &  
Polarize the Electorate* (NY:Free Press, 1995)

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# THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE VOTER

There has been no shortage of hand wringing and outrage over the depths to which campaigns have sunk. The rhetoric of political advertising is often vicious, strident, and shallow; the candidates and their consultants are unaccountable for the kind of campaigns they have chosen to run.<sup>101</sup> The toll on the electorate has been considerable. The cost of political advertising, however, is not that people cast uninformed votes or that they are tricked into voting for someone with whom they generally disagree. Rather, political advertising—at least as it is currently practiced—is slowly eroding the participatory ethos in America. In election after election, citizens have registered their disgust with the negativity of contemporary political campaigns by tuning out and staying home.

California, 1986. The day after the Republican primary, Democratic Senator Alan Cranston began pounding away with ads that attacked his opponent, Representative Ed Zschau, for flip-flopping. One of the Cranston ads featured two photos of Zschau, one on the left half of the screen, the other on the right. "Compare two candidates. . . . One says clean up toxic waste. The other voted against it. Funny thing is, both candidates are named Ed Zschau." The assault never let up: four months of continual attack advertisements. Zschau also got into the act, labeling Cranston a liberal and calling attention to the Senator's opposition to both the death penalty and tough drug

laws. The electorate, though, never really learned who Ed Zschau was, and in the end, they lost sight of Alan Cranston as well. Turnout was low, fully eight percentage points below the 1982 turnout, and though Cranston won by a narrow margin, neither candidate could attract a majority of votes.

New Jersey, 1988. The Senate contest between Republican House member Peter Dawkins and Democratic Senator Frank Lautenberg started harmlessly, with Dawkins spending nearly \$2 million on a feel-good ad in which Dawkins proclaimed his admiration and devotion to New Jersey. After Labor Day, the defoliants hit the Garden State. Lautenberg's first advertisement replayed the audio part of Dawkin's feel-good commercial. "I've lived in a lot of places. But . . . I never found a single place that had as good people or as much promise as I've found right here in our Garden State." Meanwhile, the video displays, in bold letters, "Be real, Pete." Dawkins quickly went into the dirt as well, alleging that Lautenberg "personally pocketed tens of thousands of dollars trading stocks of companies that do business with the government. . . . He'll deny anything to get elected. As long as he can make some money on the side." Then from Lautenberg the voters heard that Dawkins "misled us about when he moved here. His campaign lied about his being wounded in Vietnam. He's a hypocrite because he's financed by polluters. . . . He'll move anywhere, say anything to get elected." And so went the months of September and October in New Jersey. On election day, the voters told the candidates what they thought. Lautenberg won, but turnout was down sharply. In fact, 120,000 New Jersey voters—6 percent of those who went to the polls—cast ballots for president, but chose to leave the Senate column blank.

New York, 1992. Senator Alfonse D'Amato defended his turf with a barrage of attacks on his challenger, Robert Abrams. "Abrams never met a tax he didn't like—except his own." "Abrams demanded a \$6 million a year luxury office suite." During the final month of the campaign, D'Amato aired 18 separate advertisements in the state; 12 of them attacked Abrams. Abrams perished by the sword, but also lived by it. He had beaten Geraldine Ferraro and Liz Holtzman in a nasty three-way race for the Democratic nomination, and Abrams relent-

lessly slammed D'Amato as "Senator Sleaze" and for allowing "his office to be systematically misused for personal gain." In the end, it was the New York electorate who paid the price. Only 43 percent of the voting-age population (fully 8 percent less than the national average) decided to vote in the 1992 New York Senate election. Of those who did go to the polls, 430,000 voters cast a ballot for one of the presidential candidates, but couldn't stomach voting for D'Amato or Abrams.

Alabama to Wyoming, New York to California—across the country candidates have taken the "attack dog" tenor, and their bark has kept many voters away from the polls.

Campaigning doesn't have to be like that. In an earlier era, when parties relied heavily on grass-roots organizing, campaigns were won and lost according to who was better at mobilizing the electorate. Political campaigns weren't clean and debate wasn't high-minded, but politicians had every incentive to get the voters to the polls, and they ran their campaigns accordingly. In the days before broadcasting, it wasn't cost-effective to reach the supporters of one's opponents; even partisan newspapers were bought only by partisans. In the age of television, can campaigns still energize voters?

Yes and no. Our experiments, and corroborating evidence from actual Senate election results, reveal that high-tech advertising campaigns can stimulate people to vote and instill a sense of confidence in government, but only through *positive* campaign messages. In the 1992 Idaho Senate race, for example, the lines between the candidates were sharply drawn over water rights and land use, but the candidates focused on their own positions on those issues. The race was a drawing card: turnout was up in Idaho, and more Idahoans voted in that Senate race than even voted for President!

Unfortunately, Idaho is not the norm. As we will demonstrate throughout this chapter, the practice of attack advertising, which has become the dominant message of modern political campaigns, alienates people, especially nonpartisans, from politics and actually depresses intentions to participate in the electoral process. It is through political participation that negative advertising can truly distort the representative process.

## ADVERTISING TONE AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Attack politics are widely thought to turn people off. Editorial writers disparage the practice. Consultants brag about using negative advertising to depress turnout, when higher turnout may hurt their candidate. Pollsters increasingly find a public that is angry about the tenor of political campaigns and at the enmity within government.<sup>102</sup>

Quite apart from the hostility of campaigns, many observers fear that campaigning on television destroys the participatory spirit of the public.<sup>103</sup> Television is an inherently passive medium, and it may breed a passive electorate. One recent psychophysical study found that watching television takes less concentration than eating a bowl of cereal, and at the same time, it increases the stress felt by the viewers. Others have concluded that television stifles thought, and if people do learn from television, it is learning without involvement.<sup>104</sup> This is hardly the civics book vision of democracy, nor is it entirely accurate.

Our one-advertisement studies reveal that whether political advertising depresses or stimulates voting depends on the tenor of the message. The essence of these experiments was that we could manipulate the tone of the experimental advertisement while *keeping all other features identical*. Consider, for instance, the positive and negative versions of the advertisements created for Dianne Feinstein in the 1992 Senate primary election experiment. The video track was the same for both advertisements. The positive version of the text read:

FOR OVER 200 YEARS THE UNITED STATES SENATE HAS SHAPED THE FUTURE OF AMERICA AND THE WORLD. TODAY, CALIFORNIA NEEDS HONESTY, COMPASSION, AND A VOICE FOR ALL THE PEOPLE IN THE U.S. SENATE. AS MAYOR OF SAN FRANCISCO, DIANNE FEINSTEIN *PROPOSED* NEW GOVERNMENT ETHICS RULES. SHE *REJECTED* LARGE CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS FROM SPECIAL INTERESTS. AND DIANNE FEINSTEIN *SUPPORTED* TOUGHER PENALTIES ON SAVINGS AND LOAN CROOKS.

CALIFORNIA *NEEDS* DIANNE FEINSTEIN IN THE U.S. SENATE.

In the negative version of this Feinstein spot, the text was modified as follows:

FOR OVER 200 YEARS THE UNITED STATES SENATE HAS SHAPED THE FUTURE OF AMERICA AND THE WORLD. TODAY, CALIFORNIA NEEDS HONESTY, COMPASSION, AND A VOICE FOR ALL THE PEOPLE IN THE U.S. SENATE. AS STATE CONTROLLER, GRAY DAVIS *OPPOSED* NEW GOVERNMENT ETHICS RULES. HE *ACCEPTED* LARGE CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS FROM SPECIAL INTERESTS. AND GRAY DAVIS *OPPOSED* TOUGHER PENALTIES ON SAVINGS AND LOAN CROOKS.

CALIFORNIA *CAN'T AFFORD* A POLITICIAN LIKE GRAY DAVIS IN THE U.S. SENATE.

Since everything else about the videotapes was identical, any differences between the reactions of the participants who were exposed to the positive and negative versions of the experimental advertisement can be attributed to the tone of the message—and to no other factor. The results of the one-advertisement studies, in short, are unequivocal about the role of negative campaigning as a determinant of citizen involvement.<sup>105</sup>

Citizen involvement in politics, of course, has many elements, and no single measure can capture the nuances of public preferences. We examined three measures of participatory attitudes. First, and most basic, we asked our participants whether they intended to vote in the upcoming election. Second, we asked them to evaluate the electoral process. Do elections make government more responsive to the views of the people; are elected officials willing to tackle the problems facing the country; do candidates keep in touch with voters once they get elected; is the political process more attuned to “special interests” than to the public good? The average of these four responses provided an index of the viewers’ confidence in the electoral process.<sup>106</sup> Finally, we asked our participants to assess their own influence over the political process. Do ordinary people like them have any say about what the government does, and is politics too complicated and confusing for them to understand?<sup>107</sup>

On all three measures we found substantial differences between positive and negative campaign commercials. People exposed to the negative versions of the advertisements registered lower intentions to vote, expressed less confidence in the political process, and placed less

value on their own participation. These results appeared in simple statistical analyses and held up after we had controlled for a host of factors that social scientists have found to predict participation—such as age, income, partisanship, and past participation. Appendix B presents the statistical analysis that led to this conclusion. Here we discuss the basic findings.

Table 5.1 shows the difference between the positive and negative versions of the experimental advertisements for each of our measures of citizen involvement, pooling all of the experiments into one analysis.<sup>108</sup> The first row presents the effect of advertising tone on intentions to vote; the second row the effect on confidence in the process; the third row the effect on political self-confidence. The first column is the effect, the difference between the average response of those who saw the positive message and the average response of those who saw the negative message. The second column is the margin of error, which is commonly presented with public opinion data and can be used to gauge the statistical significance of the effects.<sup>109</sup>

The negative versions of our advertisements clearly lowered the participatory spirit among our audiences. Intentions to vote were 4.6 percentage points lower among those who saw a negative advertisement than among those who saw the positive version of the same spot. The percent expressing confidence in government was 2.8 points lower among those who saw the negative versions of the ads. And the fraction who felt that their own vote counted were 5.2 points lower among those who saw the negative versions of the ads. The relatively small margins of error for each effect indicate that the difference be-

TABLE 5.1  
*Effect of Advertising Tone on Participatory Attitudes*

Measure of Citizen Involvement	Effect	Margin of Error
Intentions to vote	4.6	± 1.8
Confidence in the process	2.8	± 1.2
Political self-confidence	5.2	± 1.3

tween positive and negative advertising for all three measures is highly significant in statistical terms.<sup>110</sup>

The magnitude of these effects is cause for considerable concern. Since 1960, voter turnout in presidential elections has dropped 10 percentage points, from 62 percent of the voting-age population to 52 percent in 1992. The public's sense of its own effectiveness has taken an even more dramatic dive. In 1960, nearly 75 percent of the American public felt confident in the capabilities of government and their own efficacy; today only 40 percent do.<sup>111</sup> Our experimental data suggest that the tone of political campaigning contributes mightily to the public's dwindling participation and growing cynicism.

Our experiments show that advertising has an upside, as well. Just as negative advertising turns people away from the electoral process, positive advertising can bring them back. The data in Table 5.1 reflect the difference between positive and negative television advertising. To isolate the effects of positive and negative advertising on citizen involvement, we compared the reactions to those positive and negative versions of the advertisements by those people who saw no political advertisement—the control group.

We found the effects of positive and negative advertising to be symmetric. On average, positive advertising increased each of the participatory attitudes by approximately the same amount that negative advertising depressed them.<sup>112</sup> Specifically, exposure to a positive advertisement raised intentions to vote by 2.3 percentage points over the baseline group who saw no advertisement, and exposure to a negative advertisement dropped intentions to vote by roughly the same amount. Exposure to a positive advertisement raised the percentage of people who expressed confidence in the political process by 1.4 points, while negative advertisements dropped them by a similar amount. And exposure to a positive advertisement raised the percentage of people who stated political self-confidence by 2.6 points, while negative advertisements dropped people's sense of efficacy by that amount.

Television advertising, then, can strengthen citizen involvement, but to do so, the messages must be positive. They must stress the sponsoring candidate's own accomplishments and abilities. Unfortunately, the trend in political advertising is in the opposite direction.

## 1992: THE BIG TURNOFF

Given the strength and magnitude of the experimental findings, one would expect to see sizable differences in participation across actual political campaigns. The anecdotes recounted at the outset of this chapter are suggestive and certainly not isolated cases, but is the relationship between negative campaigning and turnout as strong as these examples imply? Might other factors, like education, income, and the civic culture of the state, explain the exceedingly low turnout in highly negative elections? And is there evidence that positive campaigns actually stimulate participation, as our experiments suggest?

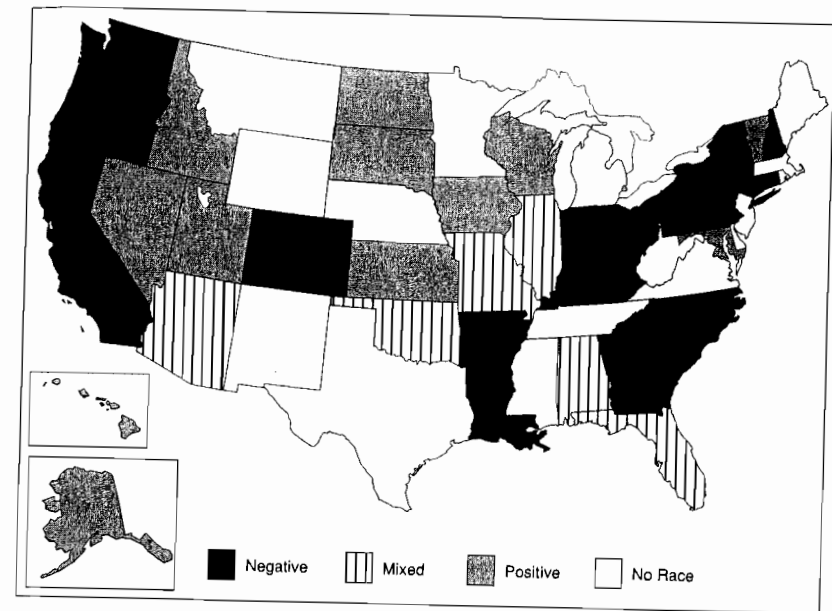
To answer these questions, we monitored each of the 34 U.S. Senate campaigns in 1992. Senate elections provide an especially good test of our claims, since Senate candidates rely heavily on advertising and since many of our experiments dealt with the two California Senate campaigns during the 1992 elections.

We recorded whether the tone of the overall campaign in the state was negative, mixed, or positive. Our assessment of campaign tone was based on a systematic analysis of news coverage of the various Senate races and on the opinions of two campaign consultants, who were actually involved in several of the races. A race was negative if both candidates in the general election relied heavily on attack advertisements. A race was positive if both candidates largely avoided personal or issue-based attacks and, instead, focused on reasons to vote for the candidates. A handful of campaigns were at neither extreme. A race had mixed tone if one candidate relied on positive and the other on negative messages or if both candidates used a fairly even mix of positive and negative messages. Figure 5.1 shows the tone of the 1992 Senate elections. States with negative campaigns are black; mixed campaigns are gray; and positive campaigns are white.

Although 1992 was “the year of hope and change,” the tenor of the 1992 Senate campaigns was overwhelmingly negative. Positive campaigns occurred in twelve states: Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Nevada, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, and Wisconsin. While these states accounted for a third of the Senate races, they contained only 13 percent of the nation’s voting-age population. The rest of the electorate feasted on negative advertising. Six

FIGURE 5.1

*Tone of the 1992 U.S. Senate Campaigns*



states, containing a quarter of the electorate, had mixed campaigns: Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Missouri, and Oklahoma. Fifteen states, with 62 percent of the voting-age population, had full-blown negative campaigns: Arkansas, California (two Senate seats), Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Washington.

Aside from the fact that the negative campaigns tended to occur in the more heavily populated states, attack politics have scattered widely and evenly across the United States. Negative campaigning was not limited to the Republican side of the ticket. Nor did it seem to be a uniquely male activity. Two women (Barbara Mikulski in Maryland and Charlene Haar in South Dakota) were engaged in positive campaigns, and the tone of the contest between Carol Mosely-Braun and Richard Williamson was mixed. But Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein were both involved in highly negative campaigns in California, as

were Lynn Yaekel in Pennsylvania and Patty Murray in Washington. The best single predictor of campaign tone, it turns out, is the closeness of the race. The tighter the contest, the meaner the campaign.<sup>113</sup>

The hostility of the 1992 Senate campaigns drained the electorate as much as it wore down the opposition. The positive Senate campaigns in 1992 averaged high turnout rates—57.0 percent of the voting-age population. Turnout in the mixed-tone races was almost five percentage points lower, 52.4 percent, and turnout in the negative races was down even further, to 49.7. These differences are significant using conventional statistical tests,<sup>114</sup> and they hold up after controlling for the sense of civic duty in the state, past rates of participation, the dollar volume of the campaign (amounts spent), the closeness of the race, and the age and income of the electorate. After removing the effects of these other factors, the difference in turnout between the positive and negative races was 4.5 percentage points—strikingly similar to the size of the effect produced by our experiments.<sup>115</sup>

An even more stringent test of the demobilizing effects of negative campaigning in 1992 is ballot rolloff. Ballot rolloff occurs when people vote for offices high up on the ticket, but ignore less important elections. This happens, naturally, in almost every election. The top of the ticket—every four years the presidency, otherwise often a Senate or governor's seat—typically involves the best-known politicians in the election, and some voters turn out simply to vote for one of those people. More obscure offices, like city auditor, are often sought by people who are unknown to even well-informed voters. Negative campaigning affected not only how many people went to the polls, but how many voters cast a vote for one of the Senate candidates once they were in the voting booth. In the positive Senate races in 1992, 3.3 percent of those who voted for President did not vote for Senator. In the negative Senate races, the rate of ballot rolloff was 6.0 percent. As with the simple turnout rate, the effect of negative campaigns on rolloff was statistically significant and remained so after controlling for other things that affect participation.<sup>116</sup>

A couple of percentage points in turnout or rolloff may seem trivial, but they correspond to millions of votes. Holding all other factors (such as the intensity of the campaign) constant, we estimate that if all of the Senate campaigns in 1992 had been positive 6.4 million more

people would have gone to the polls. Rolloff would have also been cut substantially, leading 1.2 million people who voted for President to make their voices heard in the Senate as well.<sup>117</sup>

## THE MEANING OF THE PUBLIC'S DISCONTENT

The act of not voting often sends as potent a signal to politicians as the preferences expressed by those who do go to the polls. A candidate who wins a narrow majority in a low-turnout election is vulnerable in two ways at the next election. The opposition may be able to persuade enough of the *voters* to switch. Alternatively, the opposition may be able to convert some nonvoters to voters, mobilizing enough people to win, and when turnout is low, a little mobilization goes a long way.<sup>118</sup> What is the message of nonvoting engendered by attack advertising, and how might more positive campaigns change the contours of the active electorate?

Negative campaigning may keep people away from the polls for three different reasons. First, negative advertising may discourage supporters of the candidate who is attacked. Campaign consultants often state that their objective in using negative campaign commercials is to “drive up the opponent’s negatives.” Attack advertising might defuse partisan support for the opposition, just as advertising in general reinforces partisan preferences. For a supporter reacting to negative information, dropping out may be easier than switching to the attacker. Candidates might air negative advertisements with the objective of systematically reducing turnout among those intending to vote for the opposition. Accordingly, the demobilizing effects of negative campaigns should be concentrated among the ranks of the target candidate’s partisans.

An alternative explanation is that negative advertising makes the public disenchanted with both candidates. The electorate may curse a “plague on both houses.”<sup>119</sup> The fact that a candidate has stooped to negative campaigning may make people disparage the attacker, and the content of an attack ad may lead people to dislike the candidate who has been attacked. By this account, candidates unintentionally depress turnout among their own supporters by using negative advertising. If this were true, the effects of negative advertising would set in

equally among the ranks of both the candidates' supporters and non-partisans.

Finally, negative campaigning may diminish the power of civic duty and may undermine the legitimacy of the entire electoral process. Viewers may learn from the mudslinging and name-calling that politicians in general are cynical, uncivil, corrupt, incompetent, and untrustworthy. Campaigns that generate more negative than positive messages may leave voters embittered toward the candidates *and* the rules of the game. By this account, negative advertising is likely to engender the greatest disenchantment among those whose ties to the electoral process are weakest—the nonpartisans and the poorly informed. Partisans, on the other hand, are generally immune to the opposition's messages and are reinforced by their own candidates.

This third form of voter alienation was borne out in our experiments.

The first two arguments depend on whether voters penalize the attacker and whether partisan groups exhibit different rates of demobilization. The evidence cuts both ways. On the one hand, while voters do learn the negative messages about the candidates, they do not seem to penalize the attackers. To test this idea we examined participants' ratings of the personal traits of both the sponsors and the targets of attack advertisements. In addition, we tallied the number of negative comments about the sponsors and the targets offered by viewers in response to an open-ended question asking them to list what they like and disliked about each of the candidates. Using either approach, our results indicate that the targets generally suffered as a result of negative advertising. The targeted candidates had considerably lower trait ratings and were more intensely disliked when the commercials attacked them than when the commercials promoted the opposition.<sup>120</sup> The exception was Dianne Feinstein in the 1992 Senate race, in which John Seymour's attacks consistently failed to raise Feinstein's negatives. Viewers, however, ascribed no additional negative traits to the attackers. The difference in the sponsor's trait ratings between the positive and negative versions of the advertisements was almost exactly zero.

On the other hand, negative advertising did not produce significantly different rates of demobilization between the partisan groups.

If the first argument discussed above—that advertising discourages partisans—is true, then Democrats should exhibit disproportionately lower intentions to vote and lower levels of efficacy when they see Republicans attack, and vice versa. No such asymmetry resulted among our respondents. Partisans exhibited the same degree of demobilization regardless of the sponsor. Democrats and Republicans do not drop out differentially depending on whether their candidate is the “victim.”

However, this is not evidence that the second argument—a plague on both houses—is correct either. In our experiments, negative campaign messages produced an overall decline in participatory attitudes. All partisan groups showed lower levels of confidence in government, lower levels of confidence in their own activity, and lower intentions to vote. These effects were largest among nonpartisans. Intentions to vote showed the clearest evidence that Independents are particularly sensitive to attacks. Among partisans (Republicans and Democrats alike), the drop in turnout produced by negative advertising was 3 percentage points. Among nonpartisans, the decline was an astounding 11 points.<sup>121</sup> This pattern is most consistent with the third account of how negative advertising depresses voting. People infer from negative advertisements that the entire process, not just the targeted candidate, is deeply flawed.

The strikingly different reaction of partisans and nonpartisans to attack advertising highlights the fundamental difference between the processes of reinforcement and mobilization. Reinforcement is often a matter of moving people from being undecided to decided. Mobilization typically means moving people from nonvoting to voting, or at least increasing the likelihood that they will vote.

Advertising is primarily a matter of loyalty for partisans. They're likely to vote regardless of the tone of the message; the question is for whom. While partisans generally abide by their affiliations, many still require reinforcement. The sponsor and the tone of the advertisement strongly affect how partisans vote, but these features of the advertisement have little effect on whether partisans vote.

By contrast, advertising tone pulls nonpartisans in two very different directions. Nonpartisans find negative advertising somewhat persuasive; it resonates with their pessimistic view of politics. But

unlike Republican viewers, Independents do not take attack advertisements as a call to take back their government. Instead, negative messages tend to alienate nonpartisans from politics further and to discourage their participation in a tainted process.

Thus, if candidates conducted more positive campaigns, they would not change the partisan balance of the electorate. They would, however, bring large numbers of nonpartisan voters back. How this might change electoral competition between the parties and the representativeness of government is a matter of speculation. We suspect that it would be an improvement. Nonpartisans tend to be more centrist than die-hard loyalists. A more Independent electorate is likely to pressure party leaders in government to seek common ground and compromise. That strikes us as a more sensible way of governing.

Beyond these partisan differences, our findings show that negative advertising demoralizes the electorate. It eats away at the individual's sense of civic duty, especially in those people whose connection to the political process is marginal. In the long-run, negative campaigns contribute to the general antipathy toward politicians and parties and the high rates of disapproval and distrust of political institutions.

## CONCLUSION

Our findings are likely to dishearten even the most optimistic observers of American politics. Negative campaigning has long been suspected to be antithetical to fundamental democratic values, but no one has suspected how much so. Negative advertising drives people away from the polls in large numbers. In our experiments the effect of seeing a negative as opposed to a positive advertisement is to drop intentions to vote by nearly 5 percentage points. The disillusionment engendered by attack politics goes much deeper than dissatisfaction with the candidates. Negative advertising breeds distrust of the electoral process and pessimism about the value of an individual's own voice. The 1992 Senate elections manifested the enormity of the public's discontent with attack advertising. The negative campaigns run by most Senate candidates in 1992 led over 6 million people to stay home and another 1 million voters to skip the Senate election.

Negative advertising is also fueling the polarization of American politics. Attack politics heightens the partisan flavor of political discourse by driving the Independent voter from the active electorate. Though the numbers of nonpartisans have grown in public opinion polls, Independents have not emerged as a great force in American politics because they do not vote in proportion to their numbers.<sup>122</sup> As we have demonstrated, the hostile tenor of political campaigns contributes in no small part to the disaffection of the Independent voter. In response to our negative advertisements, nonpartisans registered significantly lower intentions to vote and lower levels of political efficacy than did partisans. Advertising not only fails to resonate with nonpartisans, as we showed in Chapter 4, but the practice of negative advertising actually turns them off.

Polarization of electoral politics translates directly into greater polarization of Congress. Members of the House and Senate work very hard to represent their constituents—especially those who vote for them.<sup>123</sup> Legislators assiduously avoid casting votes that will alienate key interests in their electoral coalitions. As their bases of support become more partisan (or at least less Independent and centrist), members of Congress will work harder to represent those partisan interests. As campaigns become increasingly negative, Independents increasingly drop out and politicians will increasingly come to represent either one of the political opposites embodied by the parties.

There is a silver lining to this cloud. Positive campaigns, in which the candidates promote their own ideas, successes, and abilities, can rejuvenate the electorate, especially the nonpartisan voters. Exposure to positive television advertising, surprisingly, acts much the way old-fashioned forms of campaigning did. People become more public-spirited and politically energized by watching advertisements that promote the virtues of the candidates. In addition to boosting turnout, positive advertising strengthens the public's confidence in elections and in representative government. It is not the pervasiveness of broadcast advertising that spawns public cynicism; it is, instead, the tone of the advertising campaign. If campaigns were to become more positive, people would be less embittered about politics as usual and more willing to vote.

Unfortunately, the trajectory is downward. By all accounts, campaigns will only continue to become more negative and nasty. Many political consultants have come to believe that all Americans are cynical about their government and that the electorate responds only to negatives and, thus, that they must go negative.<sup>124</sup> We believe that this attitude is folly; it is dangerous, and it is very hard to reverse.