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*A Spot Check: Casting Doubt on the Demobilizing Effect of Attack Advertising**

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Theory: Recent research contends that campaign "attack" advertising demobilizes the electorate, with particularly strong effects among political Independents. We dispute this claim, arguing instead that there is little reason to expect a powerful relationship between the tone of campaign advertising and voter turnout. Attack advertising may depress turnout among some voters, but it is likely to stimulate others by increasing their store of political information about the candidates, by increasing the degree to which they care about the election's outcome, or by increasing ties to their party's nominee.
Hypothesis: The amount of a campaign's attack political advertising will be unrelated to overall voter turnout and to turnout among Independents.
Methods: We employ a multi-method research design, combining a systematic content analysis of presidential campaign advertisements from 1960 to 1992 with aggregate data on turnout and the pooled National Election Studies survey data set. Correlational, linear, and logistic regression analyses are performed.
Results: Controlling for other variables known to influence turnout, we find that attack advertising does not influence either overall turnout rates or individual self-reported votes. Similarly, we find no demobilizing effect for negative advertisements among Independent voters. Further survey analyses show that the effect of attack advertisements on voter withdrawal is weakest among individuals who are most highly attentive to the mass media, and thus who are most likely to have read about or seen the negativity of the campaign.

In recent years, scholars in the fields of political science, psychology, and communication studies have turned increasing attention to assessing and evaluating the effects of political advertising (Biocca 1991; Garramone et al. 1990; Jamieson 1992a, 1992b; Kahn and Geer 1994; Kern and Just 1995; Mayer 1996; West 1993, 1997). These studies have examined a number of dependent variables and have employed a variety of research designs,

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Replication Note: Geer will make the data set on political advertising available upon request in April 2000. Prior to that date, individuals interested in specific variables can contact Geer.

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including laboratory experimentation, survey analysis, and examination of trends in aggregate election results. Surely the most interesting and potentially important finding to date has come from Stephen Ansolabehere, Shanto Iyengar, Adam Simon, and Nicholas Valentino's 1994 article "Does Attack Advertising Demobilize the Electorate?," and in the subsequent Ansolabehere-Iyengar book *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate* (1995). As the titles of these works suggest, Ansolabehere et al. (hereafter AISV 1994, and AI 1995) claim that "attack" political advertising significantly depresses voter turnout. They claim further that these effects are strongest among political Independents, whose lack of attachment to the political process is reinforced by the negative tone of many contemporary campaigns. These findings have significant implications for contemporary debates about the effects of political advertising, as well as the more general controversy over the effects of the news media and other aspects of contemporary campaigns on the American voter (Bartels 1993; Finkel 1993; Holbrook 1996).

AISV (1994) and AI (1995) support these important claims through a multi-method research design. In a series of experiments undertaken during the 1990 California Governor's race, the 1992 California Senate primaries and general election contests, and the 1993 Los Angeles mayoral race, AISV (1994) show that exposure to a negative political advertisement, one in which a candidate attacks an opponent's integrity or views on issues, produced an average decline of approximately 2.5 percentage points in respondents' reported intentions to vote. Conversely, exposure to a positive advertisement where candidates promoted their own issue stands or personal qualifications led to a 2.5 percentage point increase in intentions to vote, thus producing an overall 5 percentage point difference in turnout that could be attributed to the tone of the advertisement. AI (1995) extended these findings by including experiments from the 1992 presidential elections, and by showing that exposure to negative advertising among political Independents led to an "astounding" 11 point drop in vote intentions (AI 1995, 111).

To guard against the possibility that these experimental effects may have "been magnified by some aspect of the research design" (AISV 1994, 833), the authors extended their investigations beyond the laboratory by analyzing the Senate elections of 1992. Their research strategy was to examine the "tone" of the various Senate campaigns through content analysis of the news media and correlate the degree of negativity with the state's aggregate level of turnout, and with "roll-off" from turnout in the presidential to the Senate contest. They find that negative campaigns led to a 2 percentage point drop in aggregate turnout while positive contests witnessed a 2 point rise. These results seemed to confirm nicely the experimental findings of an approxi-

mately 5 percentage point swing in vote intentions that could be attributed to advertising tone.

This convergence of the experimental and correlational findings led AISV (1994) and AI (1995) to conclude that "campaign advertising has contributed significantly to the disappearance of the nonpartisan voter," (146), that "negative campaigns contribute to the general antipathy towards politicians and parties," (113) and that negative advertising poses "a serious threat to democracy" (12). They followed these empirical and normative claims with prescriptive solutions to these problems; namely, that the content of political advertising should be subjected to more extensive congressional and state regulation (AI 1995, 150–4; AISV 1994, 835–6).

These are serious issues that raise important questions, not only about how political advertisements affect individual voters, but also about how the negative political discourse in contemporary campaigns affects the integrity of the overall electoral process. We believe, however, that it is premature to accept the negativity-demobilization hypothesis. Our goal in this paper is to *cast doubt*, both theoretically and empirically, on the claims made by AISV (1994) and AI (1995).

We start by discussing why there is little theoretical reason to expect a powerful, systematic relationship between advertising tone and voter turnout. Although AISV (1994) and AI (1995) offer several plausible reasons why negative advertising may depress turnout, they neglect to consider equally plausible reasons why negativity may *stimulate* some voters to participate. We then critique AISV's (1994) external validation of the negativity-demobilization hypothesis in the 1992 Senate elections, arguing that tests of the effects of advertising on "real world" turnout rate *must be conducted with content analysis of the advertisements themselves*. Next, we present the results of our empirical analyses of turnout in presidential elections. Using a combination of aggregate turnout data, survey data from the National Election Studies (NES), and a detailed content analysis of all campaign advertisements from 1960 to 1992, we show that the tone of political advertising in a particular campaign has a negligible effect on both aggregate trends in turnout and on individuals' self reported vote during that time period. We also find no demobilizing impact of negative ads on the participation rates of Independents, nor any decline among those who were most likely to have seen campaign advertisements. Overall, our results show little support for AISV's claim (1994, 835) that "the secular decline in presidential...turnout since 1960 . . . may be attributed, in part, to the increasingly negative tone of national campaigns." We conclude with a call for more research on the topic, and with some recommendations for how scholars can improve upon our work and that of AISV-AI to place this debate on even "firm(er) social scientific footing" (Bartels 1996, 461).

Why Attack Advertising May Depress (and Stimulate) Voter Turnout

After AISV (1994) and AI (1995) present their findings, they evaluate three reasons why negative advertising may reduce turnout. First, individuals exposed to negative advertisements may withdraw support from candidates who were attacked. The idea here is that supporters of the candidate under attack become less likely to turn out as negative spots provide reasons not to support their choice. AISV (1994, 834) test the merits of this explanation by comparing the vote intentions of supporters of the candidates who were the source and the target of the attack ad, and find little difference in intentions to turn out between the two groups.

The authors then consider a second explanation for the demobilization effect: "a plague-on-both-your-houses" effect, whereby attack advertising "generates blanket negativity towards both candidates" (AISV 1994, 834). According to this view, there is a backlash against the sponsor of the advertisement, as well as fallout for the candidate under attack. Their analyses again fail to confirm this explanation, as they find that the experimental subjects generally rated the target candidate less positively, but did not penalize the attacking politician.

AISV (1994) finally settle on a third explanation, arguing that attack advertising demobilizes voters by affecting more general attitudes about the political process. They suggest that:

> Negative advertising may affect voting intent by conveying cues not about candidates but about the nature of political campaigns and the political influence of ordinary citizens. Perhaps the act of attacking another candidate in a 30-second advertisement denigrates the entire process (AISV 1994, 835).

This idea led to the hypothesis that exposure to attack advertising may decrease individuals' sense of political efficacy or sense of governmental responsiveness. In bivariate (AISV 1994, 835) and multivariate (AI 1995, 200) tests, the authors find that exposure to negative advertising was associated with significant declines in both "external" and "internal" political efficacy, leading to the conclusion that negative political advertising depresses turnout by making voters "disenchanted with the business of politics as usual," and by weakening "confidence in the responsiveness of electoral institutions and public officials" (AISV 1994, 835).

The notion that exposure to attack advertising may influence the electorate's sense of external efficacy or feelings of governmental responsiveness is certainly reasonable. Moreover, we agree with AISV and AI that this process could explain why some individuals' abstain from voting in a given campaign. However, there are equally compelling reasons why attack

advertising may *stimulate* voter participation, and a significant shortcoming of AISV's (1994) and AI's (1995) argument is that they fail to consider theoretically why negative ads might encourage some people to vote.

There are at least three reasons to believe that negative spots will stimulate voter participation. First, as several scholars have reported (Brians and Wattenberg 1996; Joslyn 1986), negative advertising conveys a significant amount of policy and retrospective performance information to voters, and it is a truism that more knowledgeable voters are more likely to participate (Erikson and Tedin 1995, 255; Neuman 1986). AI (1995) themselves find a significant educative effect of exposure to both negative and positive advertising, leading to the expectation that, on the basis of information gain alone, advertising in general should have a mobilizing effect on the electorate.

Second, there is evidence that negative information is given more weight in political information processing, as it provides individuals with unexpected, "non-normative" data that can be used to evaluate politicians (Lau 1985). Therefore, negative advertising may be more likely to provide the kind of information with which voters can discriminate between the issue positions or other attributes of the candidates. According to Garramone et al.(1990, 301):

> By facilitating candidate image differentiation and attitude polarization, negative political advertising may aid voters in feeling more confident about their voting decisions and may intensify their involvement in political races.

Conversely, positive advertisements may be associated with *less* perceived differentiation between the candidates for the average voter than negative ads, and hence lead to more abstentions as a result of voter indifference. In fact, West (1993) has shown that as issue appeals in political advertising become more positive, they also become less likely to mention the specific policy proposals of the candidates.

Third, negative advertisements may produce stronger emotional and affective responses than positive ones. These reactions could augment turnout by arousing the voter's enthusiasm for his or her preferred candidates, or by increasing the degree to which the voter cares about the outcome of the election. The emotional response to negative ads also may be one of increased anxiety, which may then stimulate further learning about candidates' personalities or issue positions in order for the voter to make a more informed decision (Marcus and MacKuen 1993).

For all these reasons, we believe that negative advertising may be just as likely to stimulate turnout as to depress it. The causal process suggested by AISV (1994), that negative advertising decreases efficacy which decreases turnout, may be offset by alternative processes whereby negative advertising

spurs turnout by increasing political knowledge and concern about the election's outcome. More plausibly, negative and positive advertising may lead to differential effects on different voters, resulting in a weak net effect of advertising tone on individual participation. And this impact will likely be even weaker in the context of a fully-specified model of voter turnout that includes not only the effects of campaign advertising, but also the effects of other demographic and attitudinal variables known to influence the decision to vote.

Testing the Effects of Attack Advertising Outside the Laboratory

As mentioned earlier, AISV (1994) and AI (1995) extend their investigations of the negativity-demobilization hypothesis beyond the laboratory, noting that experimental effects may sometimes be "magnified" (AISV 1994, 833). The reasons for such concerns may be the short-term nature of the experimental stimulus and measured response, or possibly because the dependent variable in the laboratory was *intention* to vote, as opposed to turnout *per se*. Whatever the concern, their demonstration of a 4% difference in *actual* turnout between "negative" and "positive" 1992 Senate campaigns gave real bite to their experimental findings, and seemed to indicate that the negativity-demobilization hypothesis held in the "context of the world of actual campaigns" (AISV 1995, 833).

Upon closer examination, it is evident that there are problems with AISV's external validation of the negativity-demobilization hypothesis (see also Bartels 1996). One could quarrel with AISV's specification of their aggregate turnout model, in particular the absence of 1988 *roll-off* as a control in the 1992 roll-off equation, and the absence of measures of the state electorate's average age or minority population. In addition, we question why their measure of "tone" in the campaign is trichotomized into "negative," "mixed," and "positive" categories when the underlying theoretical construct, as well as their initial measurement of the variable, is an interval-level continuum. Most important, however, is the fact that *their measure of tone does not rely on a direct assessment of the actual advertisements that were used in each of the Senate campaigns*. As described by AISV (1995, 833 and Appendix B), the measure of "tone" was constructed from a content analysis of newspaper and newsmagazine articles "bearing on the Senate campaigns in general and the candidates' advertisements in particular." Thus the measure, correctly labeled "Campaign Tone" in the aggregate analysis, reflects the press coverage that the campaign received, and not necessarily the tone of the advertisements used by the candidates. Yet no consideration is given to the possibility, discussed most recently in Patterson (1993) and Lichter and Noyes (1995), that the press may be reporting the campaign in a more negative way than the candidates are conducting it, and that the press'

behavior, not political advertisements, contributed to the differential turnout rates in the various states.

We endorse AISV's (1994) general research strategy of combining content analysis with measures of voter turnout in order to test the negativity-demobilization hypothesis in actual campaigns. But it is critical to use the content of actual advertisements in the tests—just as they did in the laboratory. In the next section, we analyze such measures for political advertisements used in the nine presidential elections from 1960 to 1992, and examine the relationship of advertising tone on both aggregate and individual-level indicators of voter participation. We recognize that presidential elections differ in important ways from Senate contests, and that our analysis thus does not represent a direct replication of all of the AISV and AI studies. But AI (1995) argue that their findings apply beyond senatorial elections, and, as noted earlier, they include the 1992 presidential election in their experimental design. And recall that AISV (1994, 835) claim that the decline in presidential turnout since 1960 is due partially to the increasingly negative tone of national campaigns.

Measuring Advertising Tone

Our measure of advertising tone for each presidential election relies on Geer's (1998) content analysis of ads 60 seconds in length or shorter that are contained in the Julian P. Kanter Political Commercial Archive at the University of Oklahoma.[1] Specifics on the content analysis can be found in Geer (1998), and we provide a brief overview here. The goal of the content analysis was to gather as much detail as possible about the concerns and appeals raised in the ads. First, the content of all appeals made in a given ad were coded. For example, rather than coding references to general economic policy, specific economic issues such as inflation or unemployment were coded. Geer then recorded whether the reference was positive (i.e., the candidate's policies had lowered inflation), or negative (i.e., the opponent's policies would trigger higher inflation). For trait appeals, specific mentions about a candidate's compassion or his opponent's tendency to "flip-flop" were scored. These procedures yielded detailed measures of candidates' positive and negative appeals.[2]

[1]The archive does not claim to have every political advertisement run since 1960, but the founder of the archive, Julian Kanter, believes to have close to a complete set from most elections and all the ads in some of them. This invaluable resource has been used by a number of previous scholars (e.g., Kaid and Johnston 1991; West 1993, 1997).

[2]Positive appeals are ones that candidates offer to promote themselves on some issue or trait. Negative appeals are attacks leveled at the opposition. We do not differentiate between the intensity of the negative or positive appeal. This strategy follows closely that employed in previous work (see Kaid and Johnston 1991; Riker 1989; West 1993).

Our specific measure of tone is the difference between the percentage of positive issue and trait appeals and the percentage of negative issue and trait appeals made in advertisements run by the two major party candidates.[3] Specifically, we added the number of positive trait and issue appeals and divided that by the total number of appeals made by the candidate, and converted this into a percentage. We did that for both nominees, and averaged the two to produce the overall percentage of positive appeals. We followed the same procedure to calculate each candidate's share of negative appeals, and subtracted the negative percentage from the positive percentage to yield the measure we call "Advertising Tone."[4] Larger values on this measure indicate that, overall, the advertising in that campaign was more positive, while smaller values indicate a larger percentage of negative appeals. We conducted all subsequent analyses with an alternative measure of tone, the percentage of only negative appeals, and found no substantive differences in the results (as the two measures are correlated at –.86 for the years under study). We believe our difference measure is superior, as it captures the relative tone of advertising by balancing positive and negative appeals; moreover it parallels AISV's measure of "campaign tone" which combines positive and negative press coverage of the campaign into a single variable (see Appendix B for a complete listing of the values of the tone variables for each election year).

We have undertaken a number of steps to ensure that this measure is an accurate one.[5] Perhaps most telling is that this measure is very comparable to Kaid and Johnston's (1991) content analysis of presidential ads from 1960 to 1988. A central part of their coding was to assess the extent of negativity

[3]The third party bids of Wallace, Anderson, and Perot were excluded from this measure. Of the 655 total spots coded in the nine general elections, only 21 came from third party candidates and 15 of these from Perot alone.

[4]The total number of appeals include references to issues, traits, and values. Values were not explicitly coded as negative or positive, but they did contribute to the overall message of the campaign and hence were included in our denominator. We examined different denominators to ensure that our particular measure was consistent with other conceptualizations and no differences arose. We chose to average the set of appeals by the two candidates because nominees often aired vastly different numbers of ads in a given year. In 1988, for example, Geer coded 75 Dukakis ads and only 26 spots for Bush. As Geer (1998) argues, the number of ads created reflects the effort of the losing candidate to find some theme that might allow them to make inroads against the frontrunner. And since we did not have data on how often these ads were aired, we averaged the tone of each contender's appeals.

[5]First, a random sample of 20 ads from 1968 to 1988 was coded by Geer and a research assistant before the complete set of ads were analyzed. For these spots, the two agreed on the coding category 91% of the time. Second, efforts were made to make sure that the coding did not change over time. At the end of the data collection, Geer recoded some ads he had analyzed two weeks earlier, and agreement of over 90% was also obtained.

in presidential campaigns from 1960 to 1988. Kaid and Johnston also used the ads available at the Kanter Archive. And despite using a different coding scheme for their content analysis, their results yielded a very similar proportion of negative advertising to that obtained by Geer. In fact, their measure of negativity correlates with our final measure of Advertising Tone at a remarkably high level of .91. In addition, Alger (1996, 374) examines a number of studies of political advertisements and finds that Geer's data squares well with the findings of previous scholars. Such confirmation gives us much confidence in the accuracy of our measure.

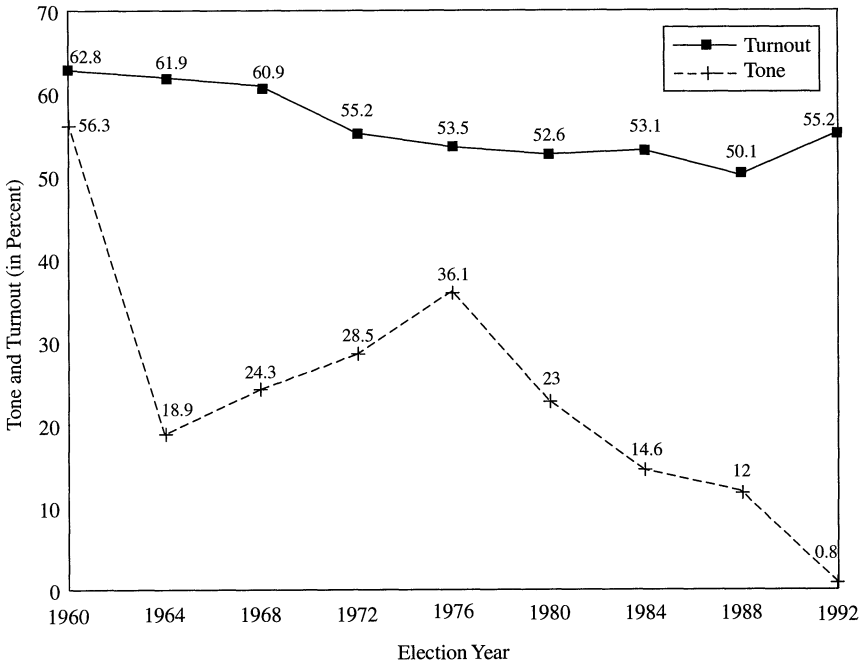
Results: Aggregate Level

Our initial tests of the AISV-AI hypothesis examined the relationship between Advertising Tone and voting turnout at the aggregate level in the nine presidential contests. The official turnout percentages for each election was obtained from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1992* and Census bureau figures for 1992 shown on Table 4-2 in Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde (1995, 102). The advantage of aggregate data is that they are not subject to possible distortions in self-reported turnout in survey data. The disadvantages, of course, are the small number of cases for analysis and the inability to control for many other variables that may influence turnout during that time period. Nevertheless, the results provide a preliminary test of AISV's claim that negative ads depress actual voter turnout.

We present a graph of both turnout and our measure of Advertising Tone from 1960 to 1992 in Figure 1. It should be noted that the values for Tone provide additional support for the validity of the variable, as the percentages obtained square with conventional wisdom regarding the negativity of these campaigns. While the 1960 measure reaches the highest value in the series of 56.3, the Johnson-Goldwater content four years later, with its infamous "Daisy" spot, shows a value of only 18.9. The campaigns in 1988 and 1992 are the most negative in the series, at 12.0 and .8 respectively, again confirming the impression that the last decade has seen a jump in the share of negative appeals in televised advertisements.

In general, it can be seen from the figure that both turnout and Tone have trended downward over the 32 year time period. Turnout and Tone both were quite high in 1960 and both fell substantially by the 1992 election. To this extent, the results are in line with the basic AISV hypothesis, and indeed the bivariate correlation between Tone and Turnout is a reasonable .48. On closer examination, however, this seemingly supportive bivariate relationship is a bit misleading. First, the declining trend in Advertising Tone is heavily influenced by one case, the extremely positive campaign of 1960. Eliminating this case from consideration results in an insignificant bivariate correlation between Tone and Turnout of .11. Throwing away data is not our

Figure 1. Advertising Tone and Turnout, 1960–92



point. Rather, it is simply premature to form a firm conclusion from the original correlation. A close inspection of Figure 1 also reveals several anomalous patterns in the data. For example, the 1992 campaign registered sharply higher voter turnout than the 1988 election, although it was also much more negative in overall tone. In fact, of the eight paired elections in the series (1960–64, 1964–68, 1968–72, etc.), Turnout and Tone move in *opposite* directions five times (1964–68, 1968–72, 1972–76, 1980–84, and 1988–92), and moved in the same direction only three times (1960–64, 1976–80, 1984–88). Even at the bivariate level, then, support for the AISV hypothesis is not overwhelming.[6]

Most important, though, is the obvious fact that other factors influence turnout at a given point in time, many of which may also account for the decline in presidential turnout. With only nine cases for analysis, we are unable to control for many other variables that might compete with Advertising

[6]West (1997, 61) finds a slight decrease from 1992 negative "prominent" ads aired during the 1996 presidential election while turnout also declined from 1992 to 1996. If this early reading of the 1996 campaign is accurate, it casts further doubt on AISV's hypothesis.

Tone in accounting for turnout levels over time. We can, however, introduce turnout at the prior election as a general control for omitted variables, following the strategy used by AISV in their aggregate analysis of 1992 Senate elections (AISV 1994, 833).[7] The results of this equation show a weak effect of the advertising variable (with standard errors below the coefficients and an adjusted R^2 of .45):

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{TURNOUT} = 17.14 + .672*\text{TURNOUT}(t-1) + .040*\text{ADVERTISING TONE} \\ \qquad\qquad\quad (15.89)\ (.30) \qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad (.09) \end{array}$$

The coefficient for the Tone variable, being less than half the size of its standard error, fails to reach statistical significance. This estimate, as implied in the above discussion, is influenced heavily by the 1960 election. Eliminating this case from the analysis yields an estimate of Tone on Turnout of –.156, with a standard error of .10 ($p = .19$). The fact that the coefficient changes signs during the 1964–92 period casts further doubt on AI-AISV's central hypothesis.

Although these results do not support the AISV-AI hypothesis, analyses with nine (or eight) cases need to be viewed with extreme caution. Other variables need to be included in this obviously misspecified model, and the inclusion of these other factors may either weaken or strengthen the effects found for Tone in these analyses. For example, the electorate's education level has increased over the 1960–92 time period, and once this factor is controlled, it may be that the negativity of recent campaigns exerts a stronger independent downward effect on overall turnout. In order to include more variables into our analysis and to determine the net effect of Advertising Tone on turnout, we turn to an analysis of survey data from the National Election Studies (NES).

Results: Individual Level

Our individual-level tests of the relationship between campaign advertising tone and voter turnout made use of the NES Cumulative Data File for the nine presidential elections between 1960 and 1992 (N = 15, 511 respondents interviewed in both pre and postelection waves). The file contains information on a variety of factors known to influence voter participation, including demographic variables (such as education, age, and income) and attitudinal factors (such as political interest and efficacy). We tested the AI and AISV hypotheses by examining whether the measure of advertising tone had a significant effect on the individual's likelihood of voting in a given

[7]As a further check, we also estimated a series of equations with Tone predicting turnout along with one other control variable, such as the electorate's strength of partisanship, political efficacy, etc. In no such equation did the effect of Tone on turnout attain statistical significance.

year, independent of the other variables specified in the model. This strategy allows the tone variable to account for any cross-election variation in turnout that is *not* accounted for by trends in other variables such as strength of partisanship, contact from political parties, and the like that have been linked to the post-1960 decline in voter participation (Rosenstone and Hansen 1992; Teixera 1987). The merging of election-specific information with pooled NES survey data has been employed frequently in previous research, for example in Markus' (1988) analysis of the effects of aggregate economic indicators on 1952–84 presidential voting behavior, and in Rosenstone and Hansen's analysis (1992) of the effects of the competitiveness of a campaign (as measured by the closeness of aggregate voter preferences for the two major party candidates) on 1952–88 voter turnout.

We specified one model that excludes variables such as campaign interest, efficacy, concern about the outcome and perceived closeness of the contest, as we did not wish to "control away" the effect of advertising tone by including variables, such as efficacy and concern about the outcome, that were hypothesized above to intervene between tone and turnout.[8] A second model was then estimated that included these variables to determine the net effect of advertising as well as the relationships between tone and the potentially intervening factors themselves. Finally, we estimated these same models for political Independents only, to test AI's hypothesis that advertising tone has led primarily to the withdrawal of the uncommitted portion of the electorate. The variables in all models were constructed by following closely the procedures outlined in Rosenstone and Hansen (1992), and details can be found in Appendix A.

In all of these models, the expectation from AISV and AI is that the coefficient for Advertising Tone will be *positive*, as campaigns with more negative ads will decrease the individual's probability of voting, while campaigns with more positive ads will increase the likelihood of going to the polls. The results provide little or no support for their hypotheses. As can be seen from equation (1) in the table, Advertising Tone has essentially no effect on turnout in the electorate, once strength of partisanship, standard demographic variables, and media exposure are controlled. When potentially intervening variables are introduced in equation (2), the effect of Advertising

[8]It might be suggested that partisan strength is determined to some degree by the negativity of political advertisements, and hence a control for this variable does not diminish the total effect of Advertising Tone. Although this process could occur, we agree with AI (1995) that it is far more likely that the increased negativity in recent presidential campaigns is the *result*, not the cause of the electorate's decreased partisanship. And a process whereby negative advertisements lead to political independence would contradict the notion advanced by AI (1995) and others that advertisements polarize the electorate in partisan terms, i.e., that they increase partisan loyalties and intentions to support their party's nominee.

Table 1. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Turnout, 1960–92

	All Respondents		Independents	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Advertising Tone	–.002	–.001	–.006*	–.004
	(.002)	(.002)	(.003)	(.003)
Media Exposure	.393*	.252*	.494*	.338*
	(.023)	(.024)	(.038)	(.040)
Education	.299*	.246*	.307*	.262*
	(.017)	(.018)	(.029)	(.030)
Age	.102*	.099*	.101*	.094*
	(.008)	(.008)	(.013)	(.014)
Age Squared	–.001*	–.001*	–.001*	–.001*
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Income	.957*	.886*	1.092*	1.048*
	(.010)	(.099)	(.155)	(.161)
Race	.257*	.264*	.322*	.304*
	(.069)	(.070)	(.125)	(.131)
Gender	.150*	.115*	.127	.138
	(.048)	(.049)	(.078)	(.081)
South	–.545*	–.567*	–.597*	–.639*
	(.049)	(.050)	(.082)	(.085)
Church Attendance	.231*	.214*	.211*	.185*
	(.015)	(.015)	(.024)	(.025)
Strength Partisanship[a]	1.259*	.907*	1.607*	1.128*
	(.071)	(.075)	(.237)	(.247)
Contact from Party	.661*	.615*	.544*	.510*
	(.063)	(.065)	(.102)	(.105)
Perceived Closeness	—	.117*	—	.090
		(.054)		(.090)
Campaign Interest	—	.844*	—	.966*
		(.072)		(.121)
Care About Outcome	—	.461*	—	.515*
		(.051)		(.083)
Political Efficacy	—	.640*	—	.744*
		(.059)		(.097)
Constant	–5.813	–6.623	–6.190	–7.102
Model Chi-Square (df)[b]	3303.20*(12)	484.09*(4)	1435.74*(12)	232.86*(4)
Percent Correctly Predicted	78.9	80.4	76.8	78.3
Null Prediction	73.8	73.8	64.6	64.6
N	(12252)		(4104)	

[a]For models 3 and 4, Strength of Partisanship is coded as 1 for "Independent leaner," 0 for "pure Independent."

[b]Model Chi-Square for equations 2 and 4 represent improvement over 1 and 3, respectively.

*$p < .05$.

Entries are logistic regression coefficients; standard errors in parentheses.

Source: NES 1960–92 Cumulative File.

Tone declines even further. Moreover, the correlations between Tone and the intervening variables are not always consistent with the demobilization hypothesis. Although campaigns with more negative Advertising Tone are associated with slightly lower levels of efficacy, negative Tone is also associated with higher levels of concern about the outcome of the election. These intervening effects are not only small in magnitude, but also cancel out to produce no net difference in the effect of Advertising Tone from equation (1) to equation (2).

Among Independents, the results are even less supportive of the AISV hypotheses. As Advertising Tone becomes more positive, turnout marginally decreases; that is, when controlling for other factors, campaigns with more negative advertisements have a slightly higher rate of turnout among Independents than more positive campaigns.[9] As in the full sample, any indirect effects also cancel one another for Independents, as concern about the outcome and perceived closeness of the election are both higher in years with more negative advertisements, while political efficacy is somewhat lower.[10]

Further Explorations

The results presented thus far show that there is no systematic relationship between turnout and a presidential campaign's Advertising Tone among either the general public or among political Independents. These findings, obtained from a direct measure of Advertising Tone, cast doubt on AISV and AI's aggregate level analyses of the effect of negativity on turnout rates in actual campaigns. Nevertheless, the experimental portion of their research design has certain advantages in regards to internal validity, since in the laboratory the researcher has control over two key factors, an individual's *exposure* to a political advertisement, and the exact *content* of the ad itself (cf. also Bartels 1993). The correlational design here cannot achieve the same degree of control as in the laboratory; however we can explore the

[9]When calculating the actual effect of Tone, the results imply for an Independent whose prior probability of voting is .5, an increase of 55.5 points in Advertising Tone negativity (i.e., the range from 1960 to 1992) would increase his or her probability of turning out to .58. On the surface, this effect does seem to be substantively large. But this estimate is the maximum *theoretical* effect of Tone on turnout. Most Independents do not have prior turnout probabilities of .5 and so any stimulating effect for the majority of individuals will be lower. Moreover, the range of Tone is heavily influenced by the extremely positive 1960 election; the increase in the probability of voting for a marginal ($p = .5$) Independent increases to .53 when an election becomes 20 points more negative—a much more likely shift in the relative tone of campaigns.

[10]We used a number of estimation strategies to validate our overall results. The findings in Table 1 are obtained from data weighted by each election study's recommended weight variable (v9 in the Cumulative Data set). The results are unchanged substantively if unweighted data are used. We also reestimated the models using White's heteroskedastic-consistent standard errors and found no change in the statistical significance of the variables.

effects of exposure and ad content more extensively using both the NES survey data and Geer's content analysis. The findings continue to raise doubts about the AISV and AI hypothesis.

We note first that the coefficients in Table 1 for media exposure in all models are strong and significant in the positive direction. This indicates that individuals who follow the campaign most closely in the media, and hence who are most likely to have been exposed to campaign advertisements, are those who are most likely to vote. Price and Zaller (1996) also suggest that political interest may be a surrogate for the reception of media messages, and its effect in Table 1 (as well as in AISV and AI's own analyses) is also strong and significant. These results indicate that presidential campaigns stimulate participation among individuals who are most attentive to them, regardless of the tone of the campaign's media advertisements. A more definitive test of the impact of ad exposure, however, is to examine whether the effect of Tone on turnout differs, depending on the individual's likelihood of having been exposed to campaign advertisements. These results are shown in Table 2 first for all respondents, and then for political Independents only.

We divided the sample into three categories of media exposure and three categories of campaign interest and re-ran the logistic regressions predicting turnout with Advertising Tone and the individual-level variables from the earlier analyses.[11] Table 2 reports only the unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors for the Tone variable (with the full set of results available from the authors upon request). As can be seen, the effects of Advertising Tone are statistically insignificant among all media exposure groups in the general public, except for one case. In that case (the full model for the high media group), the results are inconsistent with AI-AISV's hypothesis. Tone is also insignificant for individuals at low and medium levels of political interest, and is statistically significant in the opposite direction from that predicted by AISV and AI among individuals who are highly interested in the campaign. The same patterns can be seen for political Independents: negligible effects for different media exposure groups, and small effects in the opposite direction for highly interested individuals. We conclude that exposure to negative campaign advertisements has no demobilizing effect among the general public or among Independents. Attentive individuals in election years with relatively positive advertisements are no more likely to turn out (and in fact are marginally less likely) than attentive individuals in elections years with more negative ads.

[11]The exposure variable was coded as 1 if the individual attended to zero or one of the four campaign media, 2 for attending to two media, and 3 for attending to 3 or 4 media. Campaign interest had three response categories in the original variable (see Appendix A).

Table 2. The Effects of Advertising Tone on Turnout Among Individuals at Different Levels of Media Exposure and Political Interest

	All Respondents			Independents		
	(1)	(2)	N	(3)	(4)	N
Media Exposure						
Low	–.004	–.001	(2963)	–.007	.002	(1150)
	(.003)	(.003)		(.005)	(.005)	
Medium	.002	.004	(3693)	–.001	.002	(1196)
	(.003)	(.003)		(.005)	(.005)	
High	–.003	–.006*	(5596)	–.008	–.012*	(1758)
	(.003)	(.003)		(.005)	(.005)	
Political Interest						
Low	.005	.005	(2550)	.007	.008	(1060)
	(.003)	(.003)		(.005)	(.005)	
Medium	.001	.000	(5356)	–.006	–.005	(1866)
	(.002)	(.002)		(.004)	(.004)	
High	–.009*	–.011*	(4346)	–.013*	–.014*	(1178)
	(.003)	(.003)		(.006)	(.006)	

*$p < .05$.

Entries are logistic regression coefficients; standard errors in parentheses. For model specification, see equations (1) through (4) in Table 1.

Source: NES 1960–92 Cumulative File.

In the laboratory setting, AISV and AI were also able to manipulate the exact content of the advertisement to which an individual was exposed. For example, in the 1992 California Senate primary election study, some individuals were shown a positive spot that highlighted Dianne Feinstein's "integrity," while others were shown the identical ad with a negative voice-over attacking her opponent, Gray Davis, on the same dimension. Similar manipulations were conducted for ads highlighting the candidates' "competence" (1992 California Senate primaries), and candidate positions on issues such as crime and pollution (1990 California gubernatorial election) and unemployment (1992 California Senate general election and 1993 Los Angeles mayoral election). This degree of control is impressive, and allowed AISV and AI the ability to determine the experimental effect of ad content on vote intention with precision.

At the same time, by pooling all the experimental conditions and election contexts together, they lose the ability to test whether the subject matter of the ad (i.e., whether it concerns an issue or trait dimension) has more

Table 3. The Effects of Issue and Trait Advertising Tone on Voter Turnout

	All Respondents		Independents	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Full Sample				
Issue Tone	.013*	.009*	.009	.004
	(.003)	(.003)	(.004)	(.005)
Trait Tone	–.024*	–.016*	–.026*	–.014*
	(.003)	(.003)	(.005)	(.006)
(N)	(12252)		(4104)	
Media Exposure Groups				
Low				
Issue Tone	.017*	.014*	.014	.012
	(.005)	(.005)	(.009)	(.009)
Trait Tone	–.030*	–.020*	–.026*	–.013
	(.006)	(.006)	(.009)	(.009)
(N)	(2963)		(1150)	
Medium				
Issue Tone	.017*	.015*	.013	.011
	(.004)	(.004)	(.008)	(.008)
Trait Tone	–.022*	–.013*	–.020*	–.010
	(.006)	(.006)	(.009)	(.009)
(N)	(3693)		(1196)	
High				
Issue Tone	.007	.001	.007	–.004
	(.004)	(.004)	(.007)	(.007)
Trait Tone	–.021*	–.018*	–.034*	–.025*
	(.006)	(.007)	(.011)	(.011)
(N)	(5596)		(1758)	
Political Interest Groups				
Low				
Issue Tone	.015*	.013*	.010	.010
	(.004)	(.004)	(.008)	(.008)
Trait Tone	–.013*	–.009	.001	.005
	(.007)	(.007)	(.011)	(.011)
(N)	(2550)		(1060)	
Medium				
Issue Tone	.015*	.012*	.009	.005
	(.004)	(.004)	(.006)	(.007)
Trait Tone	–.021*	–.017*	–.025*	–.019*
	(.005)	(.005)	(.008)	(.008)
(N)	(5356)		(1866)	
High				
Issue Tone	.001	–.005	.005	–.003
	(.005)	(.005)	(.010)	(.010)
Trait Tone	–.024*	–.019*	–.038*	–.030*
	(.007)	(.007)	(.012)	(.012)
(N)	(4346)		(1178)	

*p <.05.

Entries are logistic regression coefficients; standard errors in parentheses. For model specification see equations (1) through (4) in Table 1.

Source: NES 1960–92 Cumulative File.

powerful effects on voter mobilization. Certainly much of the hand-wringing over the potentially destructive nature of negative ads has highlighted the mudslinging and personal attacks that allegedly turn voters away from the electoral process, and AI themselves (1995, 227, footnote 108) speculate that "character attacks may have bigger effects on participatory attitudes than issue attacks." This raises the possibility that the pooling approach obscures some important differences in the effects of different types of advertisements in much the same way that our global measure of Advertising Tone encompasses all sorts of issue, trait, and valence appeals (see note 4). To explore this further, we created two separate indices of ad content for each presidential election, one that corresponds to the net *issue* negativity between the ads for the two major party candidates and one to negativity on the *trait* dimension (see Appendix B). We re-ran the analyses of Tables 1 and 2 using these two indices instead of the overall Tone variable, and the logistic regression coefficients and standard errors of the two variables are shown in Table 3.

These results show an interesting pattern: for the overall sample, the effect of the tone of the ads' issue appeals on turnout is in the direction predicted by AI, but it is counterbalanced by a slightly greater effect in the opposite direction of the ads' trait appeals. Both effects, it should be noted, are small in substantive magnitude, but they indicate that issue negativity in advertisements has a slightly demobilizing effect on voters, while trait negativity appears slightly to energize the electorate. Among Independents and among those highest in media exposure and political interest, only trait negativity seems to matter, again in the opposite direction predicted by AISV and AI. We do not want to push this argument too far. But the results of these analyses indicate that, if there are *any* demobilizing effects of campaign advertisements, they are due primarily to issue attacks, which tend to be more than counterbalanced by a stimulating effect of trait negativity. And given that all campaigns air a mixture of advertisements that emphasize candidate traits as well as issue positions (Geer 1998), these findings support our general claim that there will be little net effect of advertising content on turnout in actual elections.

Conclusion

Presidential campaign advertisements have became more negative from 1960 to 1992. It is also true that voter turnout generally declined during that same time. What we dispute, however, is the hypothesis that these two trends are causally linked, i.e., that the decline in turnout can be attributed in any way to the negativity of recent campaign advertisements. Although AISV and AI found that exposure to negative advertisements depressed turnout, we found little support for this hypothesis in tests conducted on both aggregate turnout levels and on individuals' self-reported participation in the 1960–92

presidential elections.[12] Controlling for other variables known to influence turnout (and causally unrelated to advertising tone), we found no difference in overall turnout rates in campaigns with more negative as opposed to positive advertisements, and no demobilizing effect for negative advertisements among Independent voters. Further, campaigns with more negative advertisements were marginally associated with lower levels of voter efficacy, but also with higher levels of concern about the outcome, thus producing no net effect from these intervening processes on overall turnout rates. And the effect of negative advertisements on voter withdrawal was weakest among individuals who were most highly attentive to the mass media, and thus who were most likely to have seen or read about the negativity of the campaign. We conclude that, at least at the presidential level, there is good reason to doubt the claim that negative advertisements demobilize voters.

It is possible that the AISV and AI hypothesis holds, but not for presidential elections. Presidential contests, in contrast to congressional or state level elections, are high stakes, high stimulus affairs where the sheer volume of information available might mobilize voters, independent of marginal differences in the information's overall tone. Such an interpretation would be consistent with our overall findings, but it would have difficulty explaining why negative campaign advertisements do not demobilize Independents, who presumably have less prior political information than partisans and for whom there is likely to be less at stake in the given election. Nonetheless, the effects of negative campaign advertisements may be conditioned by the electoral context, i.e., that when voters have the lowest absolute levels of prior information, or in relatively low turnout contests, the effects of negative advertisements may be greater than we have seen in presidential contests.

These issues need to be explored in future research. It is, of course, obvious to call for more research, but given the many theoretical and empirical implications of the AISV-AI hypothesis, more work, both inside and outside the laboratory, needs to be done to settle this debate. Moreover, as it is logically impossible to "prove" that the null hypothesis (i.e., no effect of advertising tone on turnout) is true, future research should explore alternative explanations for our findings. It may be the case that our global measure of tone for each campaign does not capture the full effects of this variable, as campaigns may run different types of ads in different states at different rates. We also need better individual-level measures of exposure to campaign advertisements to facilitate more accurate tests of the negativity-demobilization hypothesis with survey data. And future research should explore more extensively the potentially differential effects of trait and is-

[12] We also found no positive effect of Advertising Tone on respondents' reported *intentions* to vote in the preelection wave of the NES surveys. This finding undermines the possibility that Tone might affect *intentions* to vote (as in the laboratory), while having weaker effects on turnout itself.

sue negativity on the electorate, and the potentially differential effects of press coverage and campaign advertisements on aggregate and individual-level turnout.

More practically, we believe our findings raise doubts about the recommendations of AISV and AI for regulating campaign advertising. In today's political environment where politicians are increasingly under attack and the public's trust in government has eroded, the recommendations of AI and AISV strike a responsive chord. But, as social scientists, we must guard against accepting too quickly a politically appealing hypothesis. In our view, much more definitive evidence is needed before we ask policymakers to make potentially unwarranted changes in existing electoral laws.

Finally, all of our arguments and evidence should not be taken as a sign that we favor the current trend towards attack advertising in political campaigns. No one wants to see campaigns dominated by mudslinging. It must be noted, however, that attack advertising *can* serve an important function in representative democracies (cf. also Mayer 1996). Such systems rest on the idea that competition between political candidates promotes the public good. It seems to us that effective competition requires the candidates to stress not only their own accomplishments, but also to point out the weaknesses of the opposition's political program and qualifications for office. Campaigns are not designed to be "feel-good" exercises; they are pitched battles for the control of government. A more important issue for the political system, we believe, is whether the claims in advertisements are true or untrue. Dishonesty is *not* confined only to negative appeals, as some observers often assume. Candidates can skirt the truth when stressing their own accomplishments as well. Whether positive or negative, patently false statements made by candidates certainly debase the democratic process, and may contribute to voter dissatisfaction with the conduct of contemporary campaigns. It is these issues—not the negativity of campaigns per se—that should be given more attention as the debate over the effects of political advertising unfolds in the future.

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APPENDIX A
Measurement of Individual-Level Variables from NES Survey Data

All variables were taken from the National Election Study Cumulative File for 1960-92.

Voted for President: Coded as 1 if respondent reported voting for the Republican, Democratic or other candidate for President; 0 for "didn't vote."

Education: "What is the highest grade of school or year of college you have completed?" Coded as 1 for 8 grades or less, 2 for grades 9–12, 3 for 12 grades, diploma or equivalency, 4 for 12 grades, diploma or equivalency plus non-academic training, 5 for some college, no degree, or community college degree, 6 for BA level degree, and advanced degrees.
Age: "What is the month, day and year of your birth?" Coding in years.
Income: Please look at this page and tell me the letter of the income group that includes the combined income of all members of your family living here in [year] before taxes." Coded 0 if 0–16th percentile, .25 if 17th–33rd percentile, .50 if 34th–67th percentile, .74 if 68th–95th percentile; 1 if 96th to 100th percentile.
Race: Observed by interviewer. Coded as 1 if white, 0 otherwise.
Gender: Observed by interviewer. Coded as 1 if man, 0 if woman.
South: Observed by interviewer. Coded as 1 if lives in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, or Virginia, 0 otherwise.
Church Attendance: 1960–68: "Would you say you go to church regularly, often, seldom, or never?" Coding: 0 for no religious affiliation, 1 for affiliation but no church attendance, 2 for seldom, 4 for often, 5 for regularly. 1972–92: "Would you say you go to (church/synagogue) every week, almost every week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, or never?"
Coded as 0 for no religious affiliation, 1 for never, 2 for a few times a year, 3 for once or twice a month, 4 for almost every week, 5 for every week.
Partisan Strength: "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" (If Republican or Democrat) "Would you call yourself a strong (Republican/Democrat) or not very strong (Republican/Democrat)? (If Independent, other, or no preference) "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?" Coding: 0 if Independent or apolitical, .33 if Independent leaning toward a party, .67 if a weak partisan, 1 if a strong partisan.
Contact from Party: "The political parties try to talk to as many people as they can to get them to vote for their candidates. Did anyone from one of the political parties call you up or come around and talk to you about the campaign? Which party was that?" Coded as 1 if contacted, 0 otherwise.
Perceived Closeness: "Do you think the presidential race will be close or will one candidate win by quite a bit?" Coded as 1 if close race, .5 if don't know or depends, 0 if will win by quite a bit.
Campaign Interest: "Some people don't pay much attention to the political campaigns. How about you, would you say that you have been/were very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in following the political campaigns (so far) this year?" Coded as 0 for not much interested, .5 for somewhat interested, 1 for very much interested.
Care about Outcome: "Generally speaking, would you say that you personally care a good deal which party wins the presidential election this fall, or don't you care very much which party wins?" Coded as 0 if don't care, 1 if care a great deal.
Political Efficacy: "Please tell me whether (how much) you agree or disagree with these statements: 'I don't think public officials care much what people like me think,' and 'People like me don't have any say about what the government does.'" Each statement

coded 1 for agree, 1.5 for neither agree nor disagree, 2 for disagree, and summary variable created by averaging the two responses.

Media Exposure: 1960–84, 1992: Count of number of media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television) respondent reports using to follow campaign. Coded 1 to 5 (Count total plus 1). Television campaign reliance was not asked in 1988, so the following substitute was used: "How many days in the past week did you watch the national network news on TV? ", coded as 0 for 1 day or less of viewing, 1 for 2 or more days of viewing. This was added to the count of the number of media (newspapers, magazines, radio) respondent reports using to follow the campaign to create the full media exposure variable, coded as in other years from 1 to 5.

APPENDIX B
Advertising Tone Variables by Election Year

	Overall Tone	Issue Tone	Trait Tone
1960	56.3	40.7	15.6
1964	18.9	15.0	3.9
1968	24.3	12.2	12.1
1972	28.5	21.7	6.8
1976	36.1	18.4	17.7
1980	23.0	7.9	15.1
1984	14.6	3.5	11.0
1988	12.0	6.5	5.5
1992	.8	7.1	–6.3

Source: See text for details of variable construction, and Geer (1998) for more information on the original content analysis.

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