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## Politics and Ethics

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**Politics and Ethics**

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## **Abstract**

Politics and Ethics seem to be strange bedfellows or in most cases mutually exclusive. The question is why should they be? This paper tries to address the issue by looking at the effects of negative campaigning and the influence of a political strategist. It asks the question: Does negative campaigning adversely or positively affect the electorate? Seven past elections and their strategies are examined, to see the effects of negative campaigning on the electorate and the election outcomes. The research on negative and positive campaigning is at best inconclusive, as it relates to effects on the electorate. There are no cold hard facts to support whether negative campaigning motivates voters to turn out to vote nor demotivates others to the point, they stay home and do not vote. The results of negative campaigning are usually interpreted differently, depending on whether you are the victor or the loser in an election. There are no established boundaries nor agreement on what constitutes ethical campaigning or ethical behavior, but this paper suggests eight common sense guidelines to promote ethical behaviors and strategies, when campaigning for political office.

**Keywords:** Politics, ethics, campaigning, elections, behavior

## Introduction

There is a new movie being released called “Our Brand is Crisis” and it epitomizes negative campaigning, political consultants and the winning at all cost attitude, which is prevalent in our political system. The movie depicts the 2002 Bolivian presidential campaign of Pedro Gallo and Victor Rivera, fictional characters based on real events. Both candidates hire top American political consulting firms to help them win the election. After assessing the campaigns and each candidate, both formulated a campaign strategy. Victor Rivera’s is 28 points behind in the polls. He is viewed as arrogant, brutish and not in touch with the people. So decisions are made to soften his image and to employ a negative campaign strategy against his opponent. Sandra Bullock, who played his lead campaign strategist, says it best as she addressed her campaign team. She states, “Wake up this is war, there is only one thing wrong in this losing”. We will do what is necessary to win including spying on the opponent, smearing and mudslinging, etc. There is no pretense at all of being ethical or working within ethical boundaries. Although this is a movie based on real events, we see this very attitude throughout our political system and throughout time. Candidates when in trouble or behind in the polls employing negative strategies to attack opponents and trying to make themselves appear better or the better of the two candidates to sway voter behaviors. They employ the strategy or concept stated by Vince Lombardi, “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.”

I am not opposed to negative campaigning or suggesting it be eliminated. It has been a strategy from the earliest campaigns and has only increased over time. Negative campaigning has become big business. Not only are candidates and their political consultants/strategists using negative campaigning but also Political Action Committees (PACs) have gotten into the picture and spend thousands of dollars in support of their candidate and party. Choma, at the Center for

Responsive Politics, wrote that the presidential election of 2012 was the most expensive election ever, with total expenditures in excess of \$6.3 billion of which over \$1 billion was spend by nonprofits and Super-PACs. Of this amount, it is reported that 70% was spent on negative advertising (Wesleyan Media Project, May 2, 2012). The definition for negative advertising used by the Wesleyan Media Project was just mentioning the opponent's name.

The questions I propose are: Are there ethical issues when running a negative campaign? Does employing a negative strategy work? Is there a line, which should not be crossed, and what are the effects on voters? This paper attempts to address these issues by looking at existing research, campaigns past and present, and suggesting some campaign guidelines and ethical boundaries. We will not agree or reach consensus on ethical boundaries, when it comes to campaigning, because it would take creating new norms and bucking the current norms and behaviors, we have come to accept and, in some cases, tolerate. Therefore, you can call this one man's opinion.

## Background

Before reviewing some historic political campaigns, let's review a few definitions for some background, clarification and so we are on the same page. The definitions represented are for the purposes of this paper only and not research definitions. First, ethical behavior is characterized by honesty, fairness and equity. It is doing what is right and true, regardless of the circumstances or outcomes. Positive campaigning is telling the voters what makes you the best choice for a specific office, your attributes and qualifications. Finally, negative campaigning can be classified or defined in two ways. First, a generic and simple definition of negative campaigning is just mentioning your opponent by name and his or her lack of qualification or why you are more qualified. The other definition is called mudslinging. According to the dictionary, mudslinging is the "act of making hateful statements or comments about someone, malicious attacks against an opponent usually a political opponent". An example of mudslinging according to, Your Dictionary is what opposing politicians say about each other in smear campaigns. The Collin Dictionary states "mudslinging" is political campaigning in which a politician or party focuses on criticizing another politician or party rather than emphasizing their own positive qualities.

Negative campaigning is not a new phenomenon. It has been around from the days of our founding fathers and the early elections. Political Scientist, John G. Geer, Vanderbilt University, states that 70% of the statements in the Declaration of Independence are negative campaigning and attacks on England and George III. Statements like "He has obstructed the Administration of Justice", "He has dissolved Representative Houses" and "He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people" these and other negative statement and campaign help to start the revolution and the founding of our nation

(page 8). Geer goes on to state that “without such negativity, the argument for establishing a new nation that ‘derived it’s just powers from the consent of the govern[ed]’ would not have been possible”. As you can see for Geer’s comments, negative campaigning does have its place and played a part in the birth of our country.

I propose that there are two types of negative campaigning; both are attack campaigning in nature. The first is concerned with challenging an opponent’s qualifications, political views and platform. The other is challenging or attacking the person, his or her family members, it is a personal attack. Its mudslinging, making false statements, character assassination, lying, stretching the truth, etc. The last type of negative campaigning does not add value to our political process nor does it provide helpful information about the candidate who is being attacked. It only clouds the picture and can frustrate the electorate. Whereas questioning the qualifications of an opponent to hold a political office, his or her voting record, their stand on issues and whether they have flip-flopped on issues. A candidate’s character and integrity should be fair game as long as it relates to their ability to carry out their duties as an elected official and to represent their constituents. Questioning and giving up whether a candidate at age 18 smoked marijuana or have had a minor juvenile infraction should not be considered a question of character or integrity, assuming these types of youthful infractions did not continue into adulthood. Questioning like this tends to be more of an attempt at character assassination than anything else. When candidates use these types of tactics it becomes negative campaigning and personal attacks.

As stated earlier, negative campaigning is not new it has been around for many years and can be seen in many of our famous and not so famous political campaigns. Below I have

reviewed seven political campaigns and their use of negative, positive and mudslinger campaign tactics.

#### Thomas Jefferson v. John Adams

One of the earliest recorded negative campaigning was in 1800 during the Thomas Jefferson-John Adam presidential race. The Connecticut Courant, a pro-Adams newspaper, wrote that if Jefferson won, “murder, robbery, adultery and incest will be openly taught and practiced, the air will be rent with the cries of the distressed, the soil will be soaked with blood, and the nation black with crimes” (Swint, 2006, p. 183). Rumors were circulated about Jefferson and his slave Sally Heming. Jefferson’s party did their share of mudslinging as well. John Adams was called a fool, a hypocrite, a criminal, and a tyrant. He was accused of planning to marry off one of his sons to one of King George’s daughters to reunite America with Britain (Swint, 2006). Adams was also accused of being a womanizer. It is easy to see that these attacks were personal, attacking the person not questioning his leadership skills or qualifications.

#### Andrew Jackson v. John Quincy Adams

The campaign between Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams is possibly the dirtiest campaign in American history. The campaign from the onset was about personal attacks on each other by the candidates and their people. Andrew Jackson was called “a murderer, a drunkard, adulterer, a petty thief, and a liar”. John Quincy Adams was called “a tyrant, a gambler, a spendthrift, and a pimp. The name calling started before the newspapers got involved” (Swint, 2006, p. 213). The negative campaigning in this campaign was not limited to attacks on the candidates. The candidates’ families were fair game. Jackson’s mother was called a “common prostitute, brought to this country by British soldiers” (Swint, 2006, p. 215). Because of a simple



and honest mistake in the timing of Jackson's marriage to his wife, the Adams' camp and the newspapers to brand Jackson an adulterer used it. These allegations dogged Jackson and his wife throughout the campaign. Shortly after Jackson was elected, his wife died. Although she was in poor health, he believed the negative campaigning and personal attacks were partially responsible for poor her health and ultimately her death (Swint, 2006). This was a case where the opponent and his supporters twisted the facts and situation, to benefit them politically. You can say this was negative campaigning at its' best.

#### Richard Nixon v. George McGovern

Richard Nixon and his team were perfect examples of negative campaigning, lawlessness and the "win at all cost" attitude. They are also a perfect example of a political organization operating with no ethical boundaries nor integrity. The Nixon team smeared and attacked their opponent, George McGovern and the Democratic Party. They set up a scheme to destroy and crush all Democratic opponents. This was done by using espionage, wiretapping, blackmail, forging documents, financial payoff, burglary, etc. (Swint, 2006, p. 133). This became known as the infamous Watergate scandal, named for the Watergate hotel where the Democratic National Committee headquarters was located, and broken into by burglars to wiretap phones and steal documents. This was approved by the office of the President and his administration. This was political dirty tricks at its best or, should I say, at its worst. It was also illegal and resulted in jail terms for some of the participants. Richard Nixon using dirty tricks and negative campaigning won the election in a landslide. Ultimately, his dirty tricks and lack of ethics caught up with him, and he resigned from office, and many of his advisors were convicted of crimes stemming from the Watergate scandal (Swint, 2006, p. 141).

## Charles Robb v. Oliver North

The campaign for the U.S. Senate, Virginia, between Charles Robb and Oliver North was about two men both with a lot of political baggage and/or personality issues. According to author, Kerwin Swint both were damaged goods, politically speaking (Swint, 2006, p. 113). There were allegations that Charles Robb was very active on the Virginia Beach party scene. At these parties, there was cocaine and other drugs. However, there was no proof that Charles Robb used drugs. However, the mere speculation was enough to taint his political career. He was involved in a sex scandal with Tai Collins, a former Miss Virginia. Finally, he was involved in illegally wiretapping conversations of Douglas Wilder, former Virginia governor, an opponent. Robb was not indicted, but several of these former aides were indicted and convicted on minor charges.

On the other hand, there was Oliver North who was involved in the Iran-Contra scandal, where arms were sold to Iran to help secure the release of American hostages held in Lebanon. A portion of the funds from the arms sale was diverted to fund anti-Sandinista and anti-communist rebels in Nicaragua. Oliver North led the team that formulated the plan, which was illegal and violated our arms embargo. Oliver North was indicted, arrested, and convicted of three crimes: accepting illegal gratuity, aiding and abetting in the obstruction of a congressional inquiry, and ordering the destruction of documents. Because he testified, he was granted immunity from prosecution, therefore his convictions were overturned (Swint, 2006, p. 117). Oliver North was viewed as a very hard and heartless individual, and not very personable. As you can see, both candidates had a number of issues to address and needed a public relations makeover. Both campaigns spent the majority of their time and energies trying to change and create a better public image. As they got closer to the election the tenor of their campaign

changed. They went into attack mode and aired each other's dirty laundry. Robb portrayed North as a liar, a cheat and untrustworthy. North attacked Robb's history of partying, alleged drug use, and infidelity. In the end, both campaigns went negative and resorted to mudslinging.

#### George H. Bush v. Michael Dukakis

The 1988 presidential campaign between George H. Bush and Michael Dukakis provides two good examples where negative campaigning can force an opponent to respond to innuendo, misinformation and half-truths, instead of focusing on legitimate issues. Neither Bush nor Dukakis were viewed as very strong presidential candidates, yet both won their party's nomination. There were little or no major world nor political issues at the time, no wars, larger economic issues, etc. Therefore, the focus of their campaigns was on social and cultural issues such as the death penalty, furloughs for state prisoners, etc. (Swint, 2006, p. 156). Both candidates used negative campaign strategies, but the Bush campaign was far more adept at it than Dukakis' team. For example, the Willie Horton ads and Michael Dukakis riding on a tank. Willie Horton was a prisoner who had committed murder, and was granted a furlough under the Massachusetts prison furlough program. While he was on furlough he kidnapped a couple, assaulted the man (stabbed him) and raped the woman. To show that Dukakis was soft on crime, the Bush campaign ran ads highlighting the Willie Horton story (Swint, 2006, p. 157). Stories like this play on the voters' emotions, fears and their prejudices. It also evokes feelings of who can we hold responsible for this situation. The Bush campaign essentially hung it around Michael Dukakis' neck, by running thirty-second TV sound bites featuring Willie Horton's picture. It did not matter that the furlough program had a 99% success rate and the Willie Horton story was an aberration (Mead, Jan 15, 1991).

Another area George H. Bush hammered Michael Dukakis was that he was soft on defense. The reality is Dukakis was against testing and developing nuclear weapons and missile systems. He advocated more spending on conventional weaponry like tanks (Swint, 2006). To combat Bush's attacks he was filmed riding a tank to show his support. The tactic did not work. Instead, it looked more like a publicity stunt, and made Dukakis look like a desperate man. You could say he looked like a caricature, a small man wearing a large helmet riding a big tank. It was comical. The Bush team took full advantage of the opportunity and use the film clip to bolster their position that Dukakis was soft on defense.

In this case, Michael Dukakis did not respond appropriately to Bush's negative attacks. In some instances he ignored them or responded to slowly, other times, he seem to over respond, i.e. the tank ad. In any case, he appeared ineffective and unprepared to defend himself and his positions. These were positions no one wants to see their leader and commander and chief in, they want to see appropriate actions and a confident leader. The Bush campaign effectively used negative campaigning, half-truths and manipulation tactics to derail and defeat Michael Dukakis.

#### Barack Obama v. John McCain

The Obama vs McCain campaign epitomized an example of how even men of strong character can be seduced into using negative campaigning tactics to try to win an election. John McCain has always been known as being a man of character, ethics and integrity, and a straight shooter. He was also an advocate and spoke about the need for civility in politics. I can remember an example of his civility, he was holding a town hall meeting in the mid-west, a woman stated that Mr. Obama was a Muslim, which was not true. McCain immediately stopped the woman and stated that Mr. Obama was not a Muslim. This happened at a time when his running mate, Sarah Palin, and others in the party were happy labelling Mr. Obama a Muslim,

which could create fear and suspicion in the voters mind. This showed the character of John McCain to address the issue and not take advantage of incorrect information. As the campaign moved on Mr. McCain and Mr. Obama both resorted to using more and more negative campaigning tactics and negative ads. There were accusations of Mr. Obama playing the race card, and being a Hollywood starlet such as Brittany Spears and Paris Hilton (Knowlton and Rutenberg, 2008). Mr. Obama's camp charged Mr. McCain of being out of touch with the people and not being concerned with the economy, and the plight of the middle and lower classes. According to Jonathan Freedland of the Guardian (2008), negative campaign and attacks on Mr. Obama by the McCain camp were John McCain's undoing. Freedland wrote that the voters viewed his campaign as being too negative and not addressing their issues. What his campaign strategists did not factor in was the current financial crisis, and the voters concern with keeping their jobs and paying their bills. In the end, the McCain camp did not offer any solutions to the financial crisis and did not address how and why the financial crisis happened. The McCain camp spent too much time painting Mr. Obama in a negative light that they did not adequately address the needs and real concerns of the voters.

#### Barack Obama v. Mitt Romney

The Obama Romney election campaign was another example of negative campaigning at its' best. Mitt Romney was what I would call a little known presidential candidate. He was known in politics circles, but not much was known about him as a person. Being a private person is not necessarily a bad thing unless you are running for President of the United States. Because little was known publicly about Mr. Romney, and his campaign team did not initially produce any positive ads, painting a picture of who he was this gave Mr. Obama's team the ability to cast him in any light they wanted, and they did. Mitt Romney was portrayed as being

super wealthy and paid a small amount of taxes compared to his wealth. Mr. Obama's team ran several television ads questioning whether Mr. Romney paid taxes. The first ad stated "Makes you wonder if some years he's paid taxes at all" and another commercial spot stated "Romney's used every trick in the book" (Zeleny, 2012). These ads cast Romney as a person who cannot be trusted, and has nothing in common with the average voter nor does he care about the average person. Mr. Obama's team also portrayed Mr. Romney as a corporate raider, who during his tenure at Bain Capital shipped jobs overseas (Zeleny, 2012). Mr. Romney did not hold back either, a large portion of his ads were negative and attacked Mr. Obama on the weak economy, job creation, poor leadership, etc. The problem with this strategic was Mr. Obama's team had done a great job in portraying Mr. Romney as wealth, secretive and a corporate raider. Mr. Romney should have taken the opportunity to address his image and work experience with positive ads. Instead, he continued the negative campaigning, to his detriment.

These specific campaigns show that negative campaigning can be viewed by some as effective, alive and well, and will continue. Each campaign took a different or slightly different tactic in using negative campaigning. All resulted in personal attacks against the opponent, his or her family, and their political party. Some demonized and portrayed their opponent as something they were not. There is also an example where positive campaigning can benefit a candidate more than negative campaigning. I do not have a problem with negative campaigning, if it is used appropriately. I have a problem with "mudslinging" because it obscures real issues. It enables politicians to deflect the hard questions; where do you stand and what do you stand for. If your opponent's plan is wrong, what is your plan? Political candidates need to be accountable and stand up, and answer the hard questions not skirt the issues by attacking the opponent.

What does the research say about the effectiveness of negative campaigning?

The research on negative campaigning appears to show that it is effective, and has influenced numerous elections. The examples cited above show how effective negative campaigning can be. The research asked whether negative campaigning effects voter turnout, which can ultimately effect election results. Some research supports the theory that negative campaigning mobilizes voters. According to Paul S. Martin, Department of Political Science, University of Oklahoma (2004), negative campaigning mobilizes voters (2004). He proposes that negative campaigning stimulates problem awareness, stimulates anxiety about candidates and make people perceive political races as closer. Essentially, his research states that negative campaigning makes voters aware of problems, causes voters to question candidates and then act by voting for their candidate, to ensure their vote counts and they are heard. A number of other research projects support this theory, as well (Sonner, 1998). There are just as many other researchers and research projects, which support the theory that negative campaigning demobilizes the voters, which result in lower voter turnout, mistrust in the political system and manipulation of the electoral process. Researchers Stephen Ansolabehere, Shanto Lyengar, Adam Simon and Nicolas Valentino (1994) wrote that negative campaigning and specifically negative advertising “extracts a toll on electoral participation”. In their study, there was a 5% drop in voting when voters viewed attack advertising instead of positive advertisement. An important implication of this study and similar studies is that using negative campaigning and with sufficient resources, candidates can keep people from voting (Griffin, 2012) and therefore manipulating the vote in their favor.

As you can see, there is research on both sides of the argument for supporting and decrying negative campaigns. I can provide many studies and examples arguing that negative

campaigning is effective and provide the same amount saying it is not effective. There are a number of factors in determining if negative campaigning is effective. It will depend on the candidates themselves, economic conditions, party affiliation, Super-PACs involvement, the concerns of the voters at that specific time, financial and other resources, etc. These are just a few of the possible factors, there are many others which need to be considered. To truly determine how effective negative campaigning is, it will require more targeted research studies. Reviewing anecdotal results or situations are not a substitute for hard cold facts.

### **Boundaries for Negative Campaigning**

As a society, I do not believe we are ready to draw hard boundaries nor rules for ethical campaigning. We cannot and will not agree on whether specific actions or behaviors are ethical or not. We tend to avoid or make excuses rather than say something is wrong. We also make allowances for behaviors that benefit our position, our party or us. As a society, we must get past partisanship and what benefits us individually before we can accept and see real change in our political system and campaigning. Whether we are willing to admit it or not, deep down, we know unethical behavior when we see it. We know when a politician crosses that invisible line and their behavior is unethical, whether it is outright lying, manipulating the truth or situation, or attacking an opponent's family members unjustly. The question is, will we continue to tolerate it. In the meantime, I would like to propose some common sense guidelines, which should be acceptable to anyone who is interested in being ethical, interested in fair play and simply doing what is right. Below is my guidelines for ethical campaigning.

1. Tell the truth. Do not shade or color the truth to fit your situation or argument. There is no such thing as a half-truth. When you stretch the truth it becomes a lie.



2. Candidates should be accountable and responsible for all strategy decisions and directions taken during a campaign, including ads by PACs and other supporting groups. If you take their money and support, be a man or woman and say “I approve this message”, then be prepared to take the consequences.
3. Criticize the argument and political position, not the person. No personal attacks. Do not demonize the person.
4. If family members are not actively involved in campaigning, do not bring them into the discussion or debate. If they are involved, no personal attacks.
5. Question the candidate’s qualifications to hold office (leadership ability, voting record, representation of constituency, experience, etc.).
6. Stay within the law. No wiretapping, voter scams, untrue stories, etc. Some tactics are illegal and you should do to jail.
7. Do not make promises you cannot keep. You can ruin your reputation and good name.
8. Rise above the fray. Rather than join mudslinging. Defend yourself yet focus on your accomplishments and your plan for the future.

These are just a few examples of what I call common sense guidelines for running an ethical campaign. There are a number of other dos and don’ts that can be added, some less controversial and some more controversial. These are just my thoughts and a starting point for discussion. Some of the points would require some form of fact checking to verify the accuracy of the statements and facts stated by candidates. If a candidate violates a rule or guideline, they should be called out on it. Each candidate should be accountable for what they say and do. Accountability is one of the best ways to ensure change. The people, the voters should insist on

accountability for all candidates regardless of the public office they are seeking. If the voters do not take a stand, mudslinging and all forms of negative campaigning will continue, because right or wrong, candidates and their political strategists view it as effective.

### **Summary**

Negative campaigning, regardless of whether we call it mudslinging or not, has been around from the very beginning, and it appears it will continue. The reasons may be many and varied. The anecdotal research, and campaigns reviewed and discussed would suggest that it is effective. There is just as much research to suggest that it is not effective and adversely effects voter turnout. Because the current research is at best inconclusive, additional targeted research would be required to address how effective is negative campaigning. Because it appears, society is not ready to address the idea of setting boundaries for negative campaigning; I have suggested what I call eight common sense guidelines to ethical campaigning. The eight simple points are; tell the truth; be accountable; no personal attacks; do not attack family members; challenge the qualifications to hold office; stay within the law; do not make promises you cannot keep; and stay above the fray. These are guidelines candidates and campaigns can apply today. However, nothing will change until society, the voters, say they have had enough, and are ready to address the larger issue of negative campaigning, and its effect on our political system.

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