Keeping it Professional: The Influence of Political Consultants on Candidate Attitudes toward Negative Campaigning

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Conventional wisdom suggests that political consultants encourage candidates to "go negative" and to accept the ethos of winning election at any cost. However, recent studies indicate that some campaign professionals draw ethical distinctions between different forms of negative campaigning. While there is a growing literature on campaign consultants, less is known about their influence on those running for political office. Using a nationwide survey of candidates, we find that those who wage professional campaigns are more likely than those who wage amateur campaigns to consider it acceptable to use negative campaign tactics and to find it appropriate to raise issues against an opponent concerning legal infractions. However, contrary to conventional wisdom, we find that candidates' acceptance of personalized attacks, which critics judge to be most harmful to democracy, are not attributable to consultants, but rather to other factors and incentives inherent in the U.S. electoral system.

Candidates for public office often face difficult strategic and tactical choices during a political campaign. While all candidates desire to win, not all agree on what constitutes fair play in a campaign. Is it acceptable to publicize an opponent's youthful indiscretions? Should a candidate raise an opponent's drunk-driving conviction or failure to pay taxes? The decisions and choices that candidates make when campaigning for office are important because they affect the quality of political discourse. Criticisms of an opponent that are dishonest, based on rumor, or invade the private life of a candidate on matters irrelevant to holding office are considered by many to be illegitimate and harmful to U.S. democracy (Maisel 2002; Rourke, Saucier, and Krumme 2001). At worst, such attacks heighten political cynicism, depress voter turnout, and reduce political efficacy (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Simon 1999; Ansolabehere *et al.* 1994).

However, a healthy democracy also requires that candidates hold their opponents accountable for their performance in office. Comparative appeals, for example, typically foster a vigorous public debate about both policy issues and candidates' abilities to perform the duties of the office sought (Jamieson 1992). Moreover, some contend that the controversial nature of negative campaigning often generates public interest in elections and can result in increased voter turnout (Djupe and Peterson 2002; Finkel and Geer 1998; Freedman and Goldstein 1999; Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Wattenberg and Brians 1999). Research further suggests that negative advertisements provide important information to voters (Finkel and Geer 1998; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Mayer 1996), help draw clearer distinctions between candidates (Garramone *et al.* 1990), and improve voters' recall of information and memory of the ad (Brians and Wattenberg 1996; Newhagen and Reeves 1991).

Although the literature has come full circle on the *effects* of negative campaigning, there is curiously almost no research on the *causes* of negative campaigning. Conventional wisdom on the subject often points to political consultants as a primary cause for negative campaigning given the central role that they play in the candidate-centered system of U.S. elections. The popular perception of consultants is that they encourage "dirty politics" because they believe that negative campaigning wins elections. However, recent scholarly evidence suggests that campaign consultants have ethical standards and may not be the "bane of the U.S. electoral system" (Dulio 2004, 186; Thurber, Nelson, and Dulio 2000, 27-31). In fact, because consultants provide candidates with expert advice and strategic assistance, many likely discourage candidates from the types of negative personal attacks against an opponent that can backfire with the electorate. Indeed, given that negative campaigning can have different effects, as the literature has confirmed, it seems plausible to suspect that consultants—who have the resources and technical skills to understand and shape public opinion—may encourage negative campaigning in some contexts, but not in others.

Yet little is known about how consultants, or even how other influences, shape candidates' attitudes toward negative campaigning. To fill this gap in the literature, we examine the following questions: What influence do consultants and other factors have on a candidate's

acceptance of different negative campaign tactics? What influence do consultants and other factors have on a candidate's acceptance of attacks against an opponent on issues of public record that could provide information about a candidate's ability to govern with integrity? What influence do consultants and other factors have on a candidate's acceptance of raising private or personal issues against an opponent, such as marital infidelity?

To examine these questions, we utilize a nationwide survey of more than 2,900 candidates who ran for various public offices. We chose to solicit opinions from those running for political office because the decision to "go negative" ultimately rests with the candidate. As research confirms, consultants typically defer to candidates when ethical dilemmas arise about campaign strategy (Garrett 2004). However, despite the candidate's primary role in the campaign, a candidate-centered approach to studying negative campaigning is virtually absent in the literature. Given that the perspectives of the candidates are important, if not crucial, in understanding the causes of negative campaigning, our extensive candidate survey and research design make a new and important contribution to the extant work on negative campaigning.

Our findings demonstrate that candidates who wage "professional" campaigns (those who employ at least one paid consultant) are more receptive to using negative campaign tactics and profess a greater willingness to attack an opponent on issues concerning an opponent's professional conduct or legal infractions.[1] However, contrary to popular perceptions, we find that candidates who wage professional campaigns do *not* profess a greater willingness to attack an opponent on issues concerning an opponent's personal private life. This latter result is important because it suggests that candidates who wage professional campaigns are not more likely to accept the politics of personalized attacks that some judge to be most harmful to U.S. democracy.

Negative Campaigning

Negative campaigning, often defined as claims that discredit, criticize, or publicize the deficiencies of the opponent (see e.g., Ansolabehere *et al.* 1994; Lau and Pomper 2001, 2004; Mayer 1996) has a long history in U.S. elections. Opponents of Thomas Jefferson's

presidential campaign in 1800 warned that his election would result in "our wives and daughters [becoming] the victims of legal prostitution" (Jamieson 1992, 43). The enemies of Abraham Lincoln gave him the pejorative nickname "Ignoramus Abe" (Jamieson 1992). A more recent example includes the 1998 Senate race in New York where Republican Senator Alfonse D'Amato referred to his opponent, Democratic Congressman Charles Schumer, as a "putzhead" (Swint 2006, 23). Schumer, in turn, described D'Amato as "a bully, a fake, pathetic, and sleazy" (Hardt and Birnbaum 1998).

While personal slurs against political opponents are certainly not new in U.S. elections, some contend that political attacks have become even more prevalent in recent years (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Pfau and Kenski 1990; West 1997). One possible explanation for the rise of negative campaigning is the increased role of political consultants in U.S. elections. In the United States' candidate-centered system, candidates are the *primary* actors in campaigns. Most are self-recruited, assemble their own campaign organizations, and communicate their own messages to voters. With so much independence from political parties, candidates have come to rely on paid consultants to help them wage their campaigns (Dulio 2004; Herrnson 2004; Kolodny 2000; Medvic 2000; Moncrief 1998; Sabato 1981).

Although consultants play crucial roles in many elections, there are still many "amateur-run" campaigns that do not hire any professionals. One of every three congressional candidates, for example, relies on unpaid staff for assistance with the management of their campaigns (Herrnson 2004). For state and local offices, amateur campaigns are even more common (Salmore and Salmore 1996). Amateur campaigns are at a comparative disadvantage when compared to professional campaigns. The best-funded campaigns, for example, often hire an entire team of strategists, which may include a general consultant, a campaign manager, a media consultant, a pollster, and a direct-mail specialist. There are also campaign specialists who assist campaigns. These professionals provide services in areas such as fundraising, candidate and opposition research, media buying, voter contact, and speech writing. An additional tier of consultants includes vendors such as Web site developers, mailing list and printing firms, and media tracking and voter file firms (Johnson 2000, 39-40). In the absence of professional pollsters and strategists, amateur campaigns are left

guessing as to which issues will resonate most with the electorate and how best to reach their base and swing voters.

Campaign consultants are also likely to have insights into negative campaigning, including the types of attacks that can be beneficial or harmful to a candidate. Some scholars argue that political consultants encourage candidates to wage "dirty" campaigns to enhance their election prospects (Lau *et al.* 1999; Perloff and Kinsey 1992), thereby increasing the negativity of political communications. Kahn and Kenney (1999) argue for a more nuanced understanding. They point out that "[t]he experts who produce negative ads are well aware of the fine line between legitimate criticism and harsh and shrill information that is only tangentially related to governing" (878). This suggests that candidates who have the benefit of consultants' expertise may be more judicious in their use of negative advertising than candidates who wage amateur campaigns.

Of course, all negative attacks are not the same. Criticisms of an incumbent's voting record, for example, are healthy elements of a democracy because they encourage political accountability. However, negative campaigning can become harmful when attacks that are personal dominate election coverage. Popkin (1994), for example, warns about "Gresham's law," referring to instances in which a "small amount of personal information can dominate a large amount of historical information about a past record" (79). This leads voters to focus less attention on hard-to-assimilate political information involving more substantive issues.

We therefore distinguish between generic negative campaigning, such as using "push polls" and using negative ads to decrease voter turnout, candidate attacks that involve personal or private behavior, and candidate attacks that concern legal infractions or professional shortcomings. Personal attacks enter a "zone of privacy" (Maisel 2002). They might include marital infidelity or a candidate's youthful indiscretions, such as experimentation with drugs. Legal/professional infractions focus on topics that question an opponent's professional suitability to hold office and involve adult violations of the law (Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Kahn and Kenney 1999), such as the hiring of an illegal immigrant or an allegation of sexual harassment. We use these classifications to examine the factors that influence candidates' attitudes about these various forms of negative campaigning.

Data and Methods

To perform our analysis, we conducted an extensive survey of candidates running for political office. This "candidate-centered" perspective is almost completely absent in the existing research on negative campaigning. This represents a significant gap in the literature because candidates ultimately make the final decisions about issues related to campaign ethics (Garrett 2004) and are therefore the ones who are primarily responsible for the quality of campaign conduct. By understanding the influences that affect how candidates perceive negative campaigning, we gain valuable insights into how the process of negative campaigning itself begins to take shape. By utilizing a candidate-centered approach, we are able to add a new and important dimension to the literature on negative campaigning.

Our survey includes candidates who ran for Congress, statewide office, state legislature, local office, and judgeships across the United States between 1996 and 1998. Unlike much of the previous research that has relied on a case study approach to study campaign ethics (see e.g., Faucheux and Herrnson 2002; Maisel and West 2004; Thurber 2001), our survey design has the advantage of allowing us to generalize more broadly about candidate attitudes and their ethical positions toward negative campaigning. The survey itself comprises responses from 2,946 candidates (see Table A-1 for breakdowns by office level, party, incumbency, and winners and losers). The respondents are representative of the underlying population on several key variables such as party, incumbency, and region (see Table A-2). The questionnaire solicited candidates' opinions about whether they believe it is acceptable, questionable, or unethical to employ the following campaign tactics: (1) push polls; (2) focusing on your opponent's negative characteristics; (3) making factual statements out of context; and (4) using negative advertisements to decrease voter turnout. We also asked candidates whether they believe it is appropriate or inappropriate to raise any of eleven ethically questionable issues: (1) using marijuana as a youth; (2) using cocaine as a youth; (3) failure to pay back property taxes; (4) failure to pay child support; (5) a documented allegation of marital infidelity; (6) a documented allegation of sexual harassment; (7) a recent bankruptcy; (8) a previously unpublicized homosexual relationship; (9) a driving under the influence

(DUI) or driving while intoxicated (DWI) (drunk driving) conviction; (10) an illegal immigrant employed in an opponent's home; and (11) an unproven allegation from a lawsuit (see the Appendix for question wording and for further information about the survey).

A careful reading of the questions indicates that they do not ask whether the candidates employed the tactics or raised any of the issues previously noted during their campaign. However, soliciting candidates' opinions on the acceptability of using these attacks has advantages over asking them whether or not they have actually engaged in them. Given that not every election affords a candidate the opportunity to raise charges related to an opponent's legal, financial, or private personal affairs, asking candidates which, if any, attacks they consider appropriate in the heat of a campaign is likely to provide more useful information than asking them whether or not they had the opportunity to make certain attacks and if they actually made them. Moreover, questions about attitudes are important because attitudes are more reliable predictors and have more explanatory power than do questions about individuals' behavior under a specific set of circumstances. As research on public opinion and voting behavior has demonstrated, party identification is a better explanation and predictor of an individual's propensity to support a party's candidates than is a vote that an individual casts for a specific candidate in a particular year (e.g., Campbell *et al.* 1960).

Of course, our survey has the same pitfalls as other surveys that ask questions that have some more socially acceptable responses than others. It may be that the overall number of socially acceptable responses is inflated somewhat; however, this should not seriously affect the validity of our findings. We checked for correlations between our survey data and actual incidents of candidate attacks. Using data for television advertising in House, Senate, and gubernatorial elections (Goldstein, Franz, and Ridout 2002), we found that there is a positive correlation between the survey data and the television advertising data.

Given the large number of indicators in the study, we use principal components factor analysis to test the hypothesis that negative campaigning has tactical, legal/professional, and personal/private dimensions. After presenting a descriptive overview of the data we use ordinary least squares regression to assess the factors most likely to

affect the number of ethically charged issues that the candidates believe are acceptable to use against an opponent. We test the hypothesis that candidates who wage professional campaigns are more likely than candidates waging amateur campaigns to find it acceptable to employ negative campaign tactics or to attack an opponent on legal/ professional infractions and on private personal matters. To do so we construct a professionalism measure that codes as 1 candidates who rely mostly on salaried staff or paid consultants for at least one of the following functions: (1) campaign management; (2) media advertising; (3) press relations; (4) issue or opposition research; (5) polling; (6) fundraising; (7) direct mail; (8) mass telephone calling; (9) get-out-the-vote activities; (10) legal advice; and (11) accounting. Candidates who did not hire at least one paid professional for those activities are coded 0 and represent "amateur" campaigns.

Our analysis controls for institutional and political factors, candidate characteristics, and district conditions that create incentives for candidates to attack their opponents. Candidates for higher office may be among the most inclined to rationalize the use of attack politics. Winning a seat in the U.S. Congress or a statewide office, such as governor, offers the candidate the reward of great political power. Research on morality and ethics demonstrates that people are most likely to lie, cheat, or compromise their own ethical standards when the reward for doing so is greatest (Reder 1979). Conversely, some offices, such as judgeships, may encourage candidates to wage less attack-oriented campaigns. While elections for judgeships have become "noisier, nastier, and costlier" (Schotland 1985, 76), judicial candidates often have more stringent ethical guidelines to follow when campaigning than do candidates running for other offices (McFadden 1990). We expect candidates for judgeships to be the least likely to find it acceptable to raise issues about an opponent's personal indiscretions during a campaign.

The model measures office level using four separate dummy variables: (1) *U.S. Congress*, (2) *statewide office*, (3) *state legislature*, and (4) *judicial office* (with candidates running for local office, including city council, county executive, or other municipal positions serving as the basis of comparison). Congressional candidates are those who ran for the U.S. House or the U.S. Senate. Those who ran for governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state, comptroller,

and other state-level positions are coded as candidates for statewide office. Candidates for state legislature are those who ran for the State House or State Senate. Judicial office refers to candidates for judgeships at the district or circuit court level.

We also control for incumbency. Incumbents run on their record of accomplishments and are likely to be the frontrunners in an election (Skaperdas and Grofman 1995). Incumbents may avoid attacking an opponent because it can convey desperation (Kaid and Davidson 1986). Challengers, by comparision, need to convince voters that they should oust the incumbent and are more inclined to conduct opposition-oriented campaigns (Herrnson 2000). Some challengers may criticize incumbents beyond their public record and attack them on personal issues. Open-seat candidates are likely to fall somewhere in the middle. Many have previously held elected office and behave like incumbents in that they publicize their own record (Jacobson 2001). However, because open-seat contests are often highly competitive they can become very negative (Kahn and Kenney 1999).

During the primary phase of an election, candidates sometimes use negative campaigning to try to separate themselves from what is often a large field of candidates. Frontrunners, by the very nature of the leads they enjoy, are probably the least likely to resort to negative tactics. Thus, we expect that primary winners are less likely to engage in attack politics than primary losers. To control for the effects of incumbency and the primary phase of the election we include three separate dummy variables: (1) *general election incumbent*, (2) *general election challenger*, and (3) *general election open-seat* (with primary losers serving as the reference category).

We control for a candidate's party affiliation. Theilmann and Wilhite (1998) report that "consultants who work for Republicans are more open to attack strategies" (1059). We use dummy variables to measure the impact of being a *Republican* or a *Democrat* (with minor-party, Independents, and nonpartisan candidates as the basis of comparison).

Candidates' life experiences may also influence their ethics. Women evaluate morality differently than men (Gilligan 1982) and report being more empathetic than men (Eisenberg and Lennon 1983). They may follow different campaign strategies because voters often use gender as a voting cue to assess a candidate's potential performance in office

(McDermott 1997, 1998). Women are more likely to emphasize policy proposals rather than personal qualities in their campaigns (Johnston and White 1994; Kahn 1996). This suggests that differences may exist along gender lines in evaluating campaign ethics. A dummy variable, *female*, controls for candidate gender.

Candidates who have previously run for office, and perhaps have been attacked in the past, could be more willing to accept negative campaigning as a normal part of the election process. We control for this possibility using the dummy measure *previously ran for elected office*. Electoral conditions can further affect political strategy and tactics. Candidates in competitive districts may believe that attacking an opponent could shift the outcome of an election. To control for this, we compute the absolute value of the percentage of registered Democrats in the candidate's district subtracted from the percentage of registered Republicans. As the margin of one-party dominance grows, the likelihood of raising ethically questionable issues against an opponent decreases. We label this measure *lack of district competitiveness*.

Lastly, candidates may be inclined to use attack politics if they believe their constituents are generally uninformed about politics. As Linda Fowler (1995) explains, "[c]itizens compensate for their ignorance by employing past private acts as predictors about future public acts" (203). We include a five-point measure for candidates' beliefs about their constituents' political knowledge. A high score (5) equals "very poorly informed" and a low score (1) equals "very informed." We label this measure *constituents' lack of political knowledge*.

Before presenting our results, two important caveats are in order. First, our models focus solely on political variables to the exclusion of psychological factors. A candidate's psychological makeup undoubtedly has an impact on the strategic and ethical decisions he or she makes in the heat of a campaign and a candidates' willingness to accept the advice of others, including political consultants. Nevertheless, it would have been impossible to obtain the information needed to uncover a candidate's psychological predispositions in a mail questionnaire. Our model, therefore, focuses on political variables that may influence campaign ethics.

The second caveat is that we infer the role of consultants from the responses of candidates rather than drawing information directly from the consultants. Ideally, we would have drawn information from both

consultants and candidates. However, this type of information would have required us to conduct a second parallel survey of consultants, which was not possible given our time and budget constraints. Nevertheless, we maintain that our candidate-centered approach still marks an important new step for researchers to replicate and build upon in any future studies on negative campaigning.

Candidates' Perceptions of Negative Campaigning

An overview of the data shows that there are some differences in candidate attitudes about negative campaigning. Candidates who wage professional campaigns are slightly more likely than those with amateur campaigns to believe that it is ethical to use push polls, although it should be noted that strong majorities in both camps oppose this tactic (see Table 1). Candidates who wage professional campaigns are also more likely to believe that it is ethical to focus on an opponent's negative characteristics and to use negative campaign ads to decrease turnout.

In addition, a majority of all candidates report that it is appropriate to raise issues involving legal or financial infractions, such as the opponent's failure to pay back property taxes, failure to pay child support, a documented allegation of sexual harassment, a DUI/DWI conviction, and a recent bankruptcy. There are also significant differences on these issues separating candidates who waged professional campaigns and those who waged amateur campaigns. The results indicate that candidates who wage professional campaigns are more likely to find it acceptable to raise attacks on these issues than those who did not hire a paid consultant.

However, more than half of all candidates find it inappropriate to raise other issues such as an opponent's hiring of an illegal immigrant, cocaine or marijuana use as a youth, marital infidelity, a previously unpublicized homosexual relationship, and an unproven allegation from a lawsuit. There are no significant differences on these issues separating candidates who ran professional and amateur campaigns. This result runs contrary to the popular perception that consultants influence candidates to wage private and personal attacks against their opponents.

Table 1. The Percentage of Candidates Who Believe It Is Appropriate to Raise Ethically Questionable Campaign Issues against an Opponent

	Campaign Professionalism		
	All candidates	Amateur	Professional	Chi-Square Value
Using push polls	9%	8%	12%	16.024*
Making factually true comments out of context	4%	4%	3%	2.719
Using negative ads to decrease turnout	5%	4%	7%	30.077*
Focusing on opponent's negative characteristics	24%	20%	32%	64.900*
Failure to pay child support	82%	80%	88%	28.372*
Failure to pay back property taxes	78%	74%	85%	36.078*
Documented allegation of sexual harassment	67%	64%	73%	20.608*
DUI or DWI conviction	67%	64%	74%	22.774*
Recent bankruptcy	53%	50%	62%	35.482*
Illegal immigrant employed in opponent's home	49%	49%	48%	.865
Using cocaine as a youth	35%	35%	34%	.088
Documented allegation of marital infidelity	28%	28%	27%	.720
Previously unpublicized homosexual relationship	27%	27%	26%	.163
Using marijuana as a youth	22%	23%	21%	2.281
Unproven allegation from a lawsuit	5%	6%	5%	.549
Approximate N	2,816	1,962	854	

Note: Numbers reflect the percentage of respondents who answered "acceptable" or "appropriate" to the above questions. Respondents include candidates who ran for public office between 1996 and 1998. The Ns vary from question to question because some respondents did not answer all items. The approximate N reflects the typical number of responses for the above questions. Chi-Square values are based on the differences between candidates who waged amateur campaigns with no paid professionals and candidates who waged professional campaigns with at least one paid professional.
* p < .001.

Multivariate Results

The multivariate analysis produces similar results. In this analysis, the dependent variables are based on factor scores derived from the questions about negative campaigning. The factor solutions load heavily on campaign tactics, legal/professional infractions, and issues involving private behavior (see Table A-3). The results indicate that candidates who wage professional campaigns are more likely to accept the use of negative campaign tactics (see Table 2). These candidates are more likely to raise questions about an opponent's legal or professional shortcomings than candidates with amateur campaign operations.

However, this is not the case when the subject of an attack is an opponent's private personal behavior. These results are consistent with what we might expect from the campaign consultant literature that says professionals know the "fine line" that separates appropriate from inappropriate attacks against an opponent. Thus, despite popular perceptions of consultants, the results indicate that campaign professionals do not appear to influence candidates to embrace attacks that focus on an opponent's private behavior. Indeed, they may even discourage them. As the third column in Table 2 makes clear, the coefficient for "professional campaign" is in a negative direction and is statistically significant. While the size of the coefficient is fairly modest (the estimated effect is 2.6 percent), this result is in the opposite direction of what conventional wisdom would predict. Thus, even this modest effect is important and noteworthy.

Most of the other control variables are statistically significant or in their expected direction. There are, however, some additional differences worth noting. Judicial candidates are less likely to believe that it is appropriate to raise issues concerning private behavior. However, they are not less likely to feel that way about legal or professional issues because these are directly pertinent to serving as a judge. The findings also suggest that incumbency has no effect on candidates' acceptance of raising issues concerning legal infractions, but the results indicate otherwise for private behavior. Here we find that incumbents and open-seat candidates who competed in the general election are less likely than challengers and primary losers to find it appropriate to raise issues of private behavior against an opponent. Most incumbents have cultivated positive public images with their

Table 2. Candidates' Approval of Raising Legal or Private Issues against an Opponent

		Campaign tactics	Legal infractions	Private behavior
Professionalism	Professional campaign	.268*** (.048)	.265*** (.048)	-.095* (.048)
Office level	U.S. Congress	-.043 (.082)	-.064 (.081)	-.086 (.082)
	Statewide office	.022 (.102)	-.029 (.101)	-.063 (.102)
	State legislature	-.037 (.057)	-.104* (.056)	-.169** (.057)
	Judicial office	-.023 (.086)	.036 (.085)	-.171* (.086)
Candidate Characteristics	General election incumbent	-.095 (.067)	.060 (.066)	-.142* (.067)
	General election challenger	.068 (.066)	.089 (.066)	-.073 (.066)
	General election open seat	-.040 (.072)	.060 (.071)	-.170** (.072)
	Democrat	.079 (.063)	.131* (.062)	-.146** (.063)
	Republican	.127*** (.065)	.210*** (.064)	.132* (.065)
	Female	-.265*** (.056)	.107* (.055)	-.085 (.056)
	Previously ran for elected office	-.010 (.048)	-.105* (.047)	.053 (.048)
District Conditions	Lack of district competitiveness	.003** (.001)	-.001 (.001)	.002* (.001)
	Constituents' lack of political knowledge	.050* (.025)	.023 (.025)	.047* (.025)
	Constant	-.279 (.118)	-.215 (.117)	.036 (.118)
	N	2,104	2,104	2,104
Statistics				
	F =	5.776***	4.416***	5.384***
	Adj. R^2 =	.03	.02	.03

Note: Dependant variables are factors scores derived from factor analysis in Table A-3. Table entries are ordinary least squares coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. Some cases were dropped because of missing information.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

constituents and are somewhat reluctant to undermine these images by attacking an opponent. Open-seat candidates may consider it inappropriate or counterproductive to raise issues concerning an opponent's private behavior out of a recognition that such charges may lead to unfavorable media coverage and voter backlash. Challengers and candidates who never made it beyond their primary, however, may believe that it is useful to employ personal attacks to drive a wedge between their opponents and voters. Because these candidates tend to be less competitive, have less political experience, and attract less media coverage than others, they may be more willing to adopt an "anything goes" approach to campaigning.

As anticipated, Republicans are more likely than others to find it acceptable to use negative tactics and to raise both private and legal issues against an opponent. Many private issues—such as marital infidelity, homosexuality, and drug use—have been defined by traditional conservatives as "moral" or "character" issues. Socially conservative voters often find these issues to be important, which probably explains why Republicans are more likely to believe that it is acceptable to raise these issues during an election (Hertel and Hughes 1987). Democrats, however, consider it appropriate to raise professional issues or those concerned with legal infractions, but not those involving personal private behavior. This undoubtedly comports with the views of many Democratic voters.

The results further indicate that gender is not a significant predictor of whether or not the candidate finds it appropriate to raise private issues against an opponent. Nevertheless, women are somewhat more likely to consider it acceptable to raise issues involving legal infractions. This is not surprising given that these infractions include sexual harassment. Women are also less likely to believe that it is acceptable to use negative campaign tactics (which include push polls and other measures designed to decrease turnout). This finding is consistent with recent work on the subject (Herrnson and Lucas 2006).

A lack of district competitiveness also has a positive effect on the acceptance of using negative campaign tactics and raising issues concerning private behavior against an opponent. As previously noted, candidates in the least competitive races are the most desperate to make gains in the polls and the most accepting of attacks against an opponent for private behavior. Finally, a candidate's opinion of his or her

constituents' political knowledge appears to influence attitudes about negative campaigning. Candidates who believe that their constituents are poorly informed are more likely to find it acceptable to use negative campaign tactics and to raise private issues against an opponent.

Discussion and Conclusions

The belief that political consultants have contributed to negative campaigning in U.S. elections is commonplace. However, our systematic assessment of the impact of consultants shows that they do not promote indiscriminate attacks on opponents. Specifically, we find that candidates who hire professionals are slightly less likely to consider it appropriate to attack an opponent on private personal matters but are more likely to consider it proper to raise legal or professional transgressions that are more directly related to holding public office. Candidates who wage professional campaigns are also more likely to find it appropriate to use some negative tactics designed to depress support for an opponent; however, candidates who hire professionals are slightly less likely to find it acceptable to emphasize issues about an opponent's personal or private behavior.

The latter finding is especially important because it highlights how the popular tendency to blame campaign consultants for the shortcomings of modern elections has not only been misplaced, but also misdirected. Indeed, our results suggest that the office level of the contest and the candidate's incumbency status play a significant role in influencing the acceptance of raising issues involving an opponent's personal or private behavior during the election. Perhaps most interesting are the political factors that contribute to the acceptance of private attacks against an opponent. In particular, the results make clear that party affiliation matters. Republican candidates are significantly more likely, and Democrats significantly less likely, than others to perceive attacks against an opponent for private indiscretions as acceptable during a campaign. Although many political observers have cast personal attacks as harmful to U.S. democracy, this normative claim clearly lacks a bipartisan consensus among candidates running for political office and may explain why personal attacks remain a continuing feature of U.S. elections.

Of course, this is not to suggest that only Republicans are guilty of making personal attacks during election campaigns. There are certainly numerous examples of candidates from both parties attacking their opponents on private and personal matters. Nevertheless, our results hint at the possibility that Republicans are more prone to raise personal issues against their opponents given their ethical views on negative campaigning. While earlier research has already reported that Republican candidates for the U.S. Senate are more likely than Democrats to employ negative campaign tactics (Lau and Pomper 2001), future studies should systematically examine whether or not this is indeed the case across other levels of office.

The results also indicate the importance of district conditions. Our findings confirm that uncompetitive races create conditions for losing candidates to consider drastic tactics to disrupt the election. This has implications for partisan and incumbent gerrymandering in which district lines are deliberately drawn to create safe seats. Although political scientists have found that gerrymandering increases the likelihood of ideologically extreme candidates winning office and of lower voter turnout (Lublin 1997), our findings suggest that gerrymandering, by making elections less competitive, may further affect the quality of election debate.

Finally, the results indicate that candidates' opinions of their constituents' political knowledge have a significant effect in increasing the likelihood that a candidate will accept raising personal issues against an opponent. Candidates who have a poor opinion of their constituents' political knowledge have likely concluded that discussing substantive policy issues will do less to attract attention to their campaigns than raising tabloid-style issues. This appears to be yet another factor that has an impact on campaign discourse.

Our findings, therefore, lead us to conclude that there are a multitude of factors that shape a candidate's decision to accept negative campaigning. Political consultants are one important influence, but their effect on candidates' attitudes toward negative campaigning is more nuanced than what is commonly believed. Indeed, as our results indicate, their recommendations do not appear to support the personal attacks that many deem the most harmful to democracy. While we willingly concede that consultants may be motivated more by winning elections than by improving the nation's

political dialogue, the two often complement one another. Most consultants have the resources to determine through public opinion surveys or focus group research where the electorate draws the fine line between legitimate and unfair negative criticism of an opponent. By contrast, amateur campaigns run by unpaid staff lack the resources to make similar sound judgments, and the results can often lead to very ugly elections. Given the very small number of professionally run campaigns for most elections, as well as the many other factors and incentives inherent in the U.S. electoral system, it seems probable that personalized attacks are likely to remain a continuing part of U.S. elections across virtually all levels of office.

Acknowledgments

Appendix

The survey that we used in this study was part of the Campaign Assessment and Candidate Outreach Project funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts. In May 1999, we sent questionnaires to 17,000 candidates who came from a pool drawn primarily of major-party candidates who faced major-party opposition in the general election. There were responses from 2,946 candidates for a return rate of 17 percent. The response rate is lower than those typically reported for public opinion surveys, although the survey respondents are representative of the actual candidate population on several key variables, such as party, incumbency, and region (see Table A-2). Moreover, it should be noted that response rates have been in decline in recent years. For example, the Annenberg National Election Study and the National Election Study (2002) reported response rates of 31 percent and 35 percent, respectively (Burns, Kinder, and the National Election Studies 2003; Waldman 2004, 15). More information about the survey and the Campaign Assessment and Candidate Outreach Project is available online at http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/herrnson.outreach.html

Question Wording

(1) Do you believe the following campaign practices are acceptable, questionable, or clearly unethical?

	Acceptable	Questionable	Unethical
Using push polls	3	2	1
Focusing on your opponent's negative characteristics	3	2	1
Making factually true statements out of context	3	2	1
Using negative ads to decrease voter turnout	3	2	1

(2) Regardless of the impact on campaign strategy and winning, do you think that publicly raising the following subjects against a political opponent is appropriate or inappropriate?

	Appropriate	Inappropriate
Using marijuana as a youth	2	1
Using cocaine as a youth	2	1
Failure to pay back property taxes	2	1
Failure to pay child support	2	1
A documented allegation of marital infidelity	2	1
A documented allegation of sexual harassment	2	1
A recent bankruptcy	2	1
A previously unpublicized homosexual relationship	2	1
A DUI or DWI (drunk driving) conviction	2	1
An illegal immigrant employed in an opponent's home	2	1
An unproven allegation from a lawsuit	2	1

(3) Did you have any of the following experiences prior to your most recent election?

	Yes	No
Running for the same or another office	2	1
Working on someone else's campaign	2	1
Serving as a party official	2	1
Holding an appointed government position	2	1
Working on the staff of an elected official	2	1

(4) Approximately what percentage of the registered voters in your district would describe themselves as . . . (Please fill in your answers, which should add to 100%.)

___ % *Democrats*
___ % *Republicans*
___ % *Independents*
___ % *Other parties*
= *100%*

(5) Overall, how informed about politics would you describe voters in your constituency?

1) Very informed 2) Well informed 3) Somewhat informed 4) Poorly informed 5) Very poorly informed

Table A-1. Office, Party, Incumbency, and Election Outcome Breakdowns of the Candidate Sample

	Survey Sample (%)
U.S. Senate	1%
U.S. House	10
Statewide office	6
State legislature	46
Judicial	10
Local	22
Other	5
(N)	(2,946)
Democrats	40%
Republicans	37
Minor-party, Independent, or non-partisan	23
(N)	(2,920)
Incumbents (general election)	34%
Challengers (general election)	29
Open-seats (general election)	19
Primary losers	18
(N)	(2,896)
General election winners	49%
General or primary election losers	51
(N)	(2,946)

Note: The N's vary because of incomplete information. Some respondents did not answer all questions, and information on several of the candidates who lost in the primary was not publicly available.

Table A-2. The Representativeness of the Candidate Sample

	Sample	Population
Party		
Democrat	49%	50%
Republican	51	50
Incumbency		
Incumbent	46%	52%
Challenger	32	30
Open-seat	22	18
Region		
Northeast	26%	21%
Midwest	27	26
South	25	33
West	22	20
(N)	(1,205)	(8,508)

Sources: Population figures were compiled by the authors. Population information for State House and State Senate candidates came from 1998 election returns provided by various state offices of the secretary of state, or board of elections. Population estimates for U.S. House candidates are based on information provided in the Federal Election Commission's candidate summary file for 1998.

Note: Population data include major-party general election candidates only, including incumbents in uncontested elections. Population estimates for local and judicial offices are not available. We did not include population estimates for the U.S. Senate or other statewide offices because they comprise less than two percent of the total sample. For consistency, sample figures exclude primary losers and include only State House, State Senate, and U.S. House candidates. Northeast, Midwest, South, and West are defined using U.S. Census classifications.

Table A-3. Factor Analysis of Issues to Raise Against an Opponent

	Campaign tactics	Legal infractions	Private behavior
Using push polls	.592	−.004	−.026
Making factually true comments out of context	.521	−.047	.063
Using negative ads to decrease turnout	.728	.048	.124
Focusing on opponent's negative characteristics	.715	.235	.005
Publicly raising opponent's failure to pay back property taxes	.077	.809	.047
Publicly raising opponent's failure to pay child support	.043	.832	.040
Publicly raising a documented allegation of sexual harassment made against opponent	−.008	.649	.204
Publicly raising an opponent's DUI/DWI conviction	.050	.648	.208
Publicly raising an opponent's recent bankruptcy	.049	.579	.220
Publicly raising an opponent's hiring of an illegal immigrant	.024	.508	.262
Publicly raising opponent's use of cocaine as a youth	.042	.229	.737
Publicly raising a documented allegation of opponent's martial infidelity	−.002	.253	.716
Publicly raising a previously unpublicized homosexual relationship involving opponent	.033	.208	.693
Publicly raising opponent's use of marijuana as a youth	.044	.150	.812
Publicly raising an unproven allegation from a lawsuit against an opponent	.066	.032	.432
Cumulative percent of variance explained	48.77%		

Note: The above factors are based on principal component solutions using orthogonal rotations.

Note

[1] We set the threshold for professionalism to one consultant because most state legislative and local campaigns that hire one campaign aide are considered professional. This enables us to accurately record the professionalism of these campaigns. The trade-off is that the bar for campaign professionalism is set rather low for congressional and statewide campaigns, which often hire several consultants.

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