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Symposium: Democracy and Its Development 2005-2011

Title

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Permalink

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Publication Date

2005-05-31

Do politicians use the press to get free advertising?

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1. Introduction

The 2004 election has been called one “of the most relentlessly negative political campaigns in memory” (Hook 2004). A Los Angeles Times headline read, “In Rhetoric, Candidates Hit Below the Beltway.” Due in part to the high level of animosity between Democrats and Republicans, the House of Representatives cancelled their bipartisan retreat. Why had this campaign been so negative? Lau and Pamper (1999 p.852) write, “Both practitioners of negative advertising and its harshest critics believe that it works.” But why? While many different hypotheses on negative campaigning’s effectiveness have been explored, many are still surprised at the high levels of negativity in elections. For this reason, it is possible that there are other ways negative campaigning can be effective. In this spirit, I study the media as a catalyst by which negative campaigning could change the outcome of an election.

All forms of media, newsprint, television, and Internet, form the lens through which voters view candidates. As candidates communicate to the media, the media changes some of their message. Specifically, there is a process by which the media determines what candidates and issues to cover and by how much.

The primary hypothesis tested in this paper is that issues and candidates featured negatively will receive more press coverage than those featured positively. More specifically, I analyze the effect of *televised* political advertising on the level of news coverage candidates and issues receive. News coverage is measured as the number of *newsprint* articles written on particular candidates and issues featured in a *televised* advertisement. The fundamental question is whether candidates and issues featured in negative ads receive more coverage than candidates and issues featured in positive ads. The basic idea is that the media prefers more confrontational stories to less confrontational stories. Because negative campaigning is more confrontational than positive campaigning, candidates and issues in negative advertisements should receive more coverage than their positive counterparts. I call this bias towards conflict the “media conflict bias.”

In the sections that follow I discuss the potential costs and benefits to negative campaigning. Then I outline my empirical study of negative advertising by discussing the data and methods, the empirical model, and the results. The final section concludes.

2. Why run negative ads in a campaign - a cost-benefit analysis

¹ Department of Economics, University of California-Irvine. I would like to thank Don Saari, Michelle Garfinkel, David Brownstone, Stergios Skaperdas, Russ Dalton, Jun Ishii, Marty Wattenberg, Nicole Cohrs, Jacqueline Chattopadhyay, Ken Small, Amihai Glazer, Jason Kronewetter, Sandy Sharma, Ivy Li, and Mike Jensen for helpful comments.

2.1 Newsworthiness and benefits of negative ads

Asay-Saari (2004) study a situation where the election has settled into what is known in game theory as a “core.” The core is a unique position or region that cannot be defeated. If for some reason, perhaps ideological, one candidate cannot get to the core position, then that candidate would be better off without the core. Asay-Saari (2004) show how adding a new issue can break a core. However, for an issue to truly break the core, it must be raised in a way that resonates with voters. For this reason, negative campaigning becomes more attractive because of the possibility of higher levels of press coverage. However, actually getting an ad on the news is a separate problem, and the focus of the following discussion of newsworthiness.

Newsworthiness is the relative appeal of an event or story to the media. Some political strategists suggest that a campaign ad can be created such that it is “newsworthy.” Roger Ailes², Bush’s media advisor during the 2000 election says, “You get a 30 or 40% bump out of getting your ad on the news (quoted in Hess 2000).” If this is true, then it would be interesting to know what type of advertisement can attract news coverage. Some reporters will explain that news should be “new.” Others might reply that news should be something that grabs the reader. Although a completely objective definition of newsworthiness is difficult if not impossible to derive, stories that appear in the news share common characteristics. From these observations, we can make some inference on what the media deems important and newsworthy. Here I examine two political advertisements that aired on the news in the 1988 presidential election - the Dukakis Tank Ride and Willie Horton.

The Dukakis Tank ride was a Bush ad that used footage of a Dukakis media event. The event featured Dukakis riding in a tank and was designed by the democrats to show that Dukakis supported increasing the number of tanks in the US Army. However, Bush strategists took footage from the appearance and created a negative ad that presented Dukakis as weak on defense. More importantly, the ad was able to capture the attention of the media as described by Kathleen Jamieson. “By the campaign’s end, the tank ride had appeared in the news, the news footage had appeared in a Bush ad, the Bush ad had appeared in a Dukakis ad, and the Bush and Dukakis ads had appeared in the news ... [the ad] showed the extent to which the traditional genres of campaign discourse are being reduced to visually evocative ads, with boundaries between news and ads blurring (1992, p. 3-10).” In effect, the ad generated so much news that it stole the media agenda. This brings up an important secondary effect of negative advertising, the possibility of agenda setting. Press coverage is important because it can change the importance voters attach to issues via agenda setting. Agenda setting refers to the process by which issues and events are transmitted to the public and that those issues and events that appear in the news are regarded by the public as the most important. The concept has a long history and was first hypothesized by Walther Lippman in 1922. Later McCombs and Shaw (1972) found that the weight individuals attached to issues was directly correlated to the weight the corresponding news source attached to the issues.³ Iyengar et. al. (1982) verified experimentally that the news salience of an issue was positively related to the

² Roger Ailes was also the chief executive of FOX News Corporation.

³ McCombs et. al. updated their study in 1998.

public's perception of that issue's importance.⁴ In addition, Dalton et. al. (1998) find that a newspaper's editorial content is highly correlated with voter preferences, implying that the media could influence voter preferences.

Another advertisement, dubbed "The Willie Horton ad" was also an ad that featured Dukakis negatively. Willie Horton was a black man convicted for murder. He was serving a life sentence in a Massachusetts prison where prisoners were allowed furloughs. During one of his furloughs Horton escaped, kidnapped a couple, and ultimately stabbed the male and raped the female. Because Dukakis was the Governor of Massachusetts the Willie Horton advertisement suggested that Dukakis's crime policy was weak. More importantly the ad garnered an unprecedented level of news coverage. As Jamieson (1992) writes, "Bush had been telling the story on the stump since June, in the second week of September 1988, the Horton story broke in the form of a National Security Political Action Committee advertisement (p. 17)."

Both of the above advertisements were negative or attack ads. A scholar might ask why these ads received so much attention given the other advertisements run during the campaign? Perhaps not coincidentally, both ads attacked the opponent, in this case Dukakis, and promoted the sponsor, Bush. Thus each ad was a negative. But there was more to the advertisement than just the negativity. Jamieson (1992) points out, "the personal, dramatic, conflict ridden nature of the Horton case eased it into the news in 1988 (p. 28)." Here Jamieson brings up a fundamental attribute of both ads- their *confrontational* nature. Groeling (2001) also suggests that the news media is, holding all else constant, more likely to report confrontational stories than non-confrontational.

While the choice of the content in the Horton ad was devious and described as "sinister" by many, the primary focus here is on the ads' effectiveness in getting on the news and why that is the case.⁵ One component of newsworthiness is conflict - an easy way to add conflict is to make the advertisement negative. Both the Tank Ride and the Horton ad were presented by the news media as "negative" ads and thus added conflict to the content of the ad and arguably made each ad more newsworthy.

2.2 Costs to negative campaigning

While negative ads might lead to more news coverage, negative campaigning can be costly. First, Garramone (1984) studies the "boomerang effect" which states that voters are less likely to vote for a candidate who uses negative campaigning because it is seen as "un-ethical." There are many empirical studies confirming this effect, some recent works include Hitchon et.al. (1997) King et. al. (1998) and Pinkleton (1997, 1998). Another study found that the target of a negative ad is liked less King et. al. (1998).

Second, it is possible that negative campaigning lowers the turnout associated with an election. Ansolebehera and Iyengar (1994, 1999) find, in an experimental setting, that voters who view negative ads are less likely to vote than those that are exposed to positive ones. However, this finding has been subject to a large debate within the literature. In fact, Wattenberg and Brians (1999) use aggregate data to find the

⁴ Some research suggests that the news can determine what individuals think about events or issues. The literature on framing or priming studies how the media's attention to certain components of a story can determine public opinion. See Nesbitt-Larking (2001) for more details about framing.

⁵ For theoretical implications of issue choice, see Asay-Saari (2004).

opposite relationship. Also, the most recent presidential election had high levels of negativity and a large turnout.

While these costs may exist, campaigns still exhibit high levels of negative campaigning. Then there must be other factors that increase the propensity to campaign negatively. Skaperdas and Grofman (1995) find that losing candidates are more likely to campaign negatively. Harrington and Hess (1996) suggest that negative campaigning is related to the credibility of instigators and opponents and candidates with less credibility campaign more negatively. Aragonés (1994) studies how negative campaigning can increase the level of ambiguity associated with an opponent, making the opponent less attractive. Glazer (2002) studies how parties use generic campaigning in the direction to attract the most votes. The research I outline here compliments the past literature by allowing for an additional benefit to negative campaigning, the possibility to get *free* news coverage. In the next section I present my empirical analysis.

3. An empirical study of negative advertising

3.1 Data and methods

I obtained data from the 2000 Election Survey (Goldstein et. al 2002). The 2000 Election Survey and supported materials were based on data from the Campaign Media Analysis Group and work supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts under a grant from the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University and a subsequent sub-contract to The Department of Political Science at The University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The data come from a comprehensive set of all political ads aired during the 2000 election.⁶ For each ad a storyboard was provided. Each storyboard, with a small number of exceptions, contained images from the ad and all the audio, recorded as text. The data also incorporates several other variables including, the estimated cost of the ad spot, the date the ad aired, the time the ad aired, what language the ad was in, the sponsor of the ad, and some political demographic variables. Given the number of offices and seats up in contention, the amount of advertising was enormous. To make the project feasible, I cut the data set down to all advertisements run in the state of California or 192 advertisements.⁷ California was not a contested state; however, the Bush campaign invested a large amount of its campaign funds there. Also, we can still learn about the media coverage of political advertisements run California.

By only examining television advertisements, I ignore other elements of the campaign. However, television ads have become the most important and expensive campaign activity. For instance, in the 2000 election, 970,410 ads were aired. From June 1st to November 7th, 160 days, there were 23,497,270 seconds, or 6,527 hours, or 271.95 days of advertising, or 1.7 ads per second (Goldstien 2004). Television advertisements allow candidates to fully control their message in a way not possible with other forms of campaigning. In the 30 seconds of an ad, the candidate owns the television screen of a large number of potential viewers.

⁶ This includes all state races. For all intensive purposes the data set includes all advertisements because it contains all ads aired in the top 80% of the nations media markets.

⁷ *Advertisements without storyboards were eliminated from the sample.*

Adding to the importance of advertising is the incredible amount of campaign resources devoted to the activity. The majority of campaign “war chests” are solicited and used to fund advertisements. In the 2004 elections, over 1.45 billion dollars was spent on television advertising and 546.6 million was spent on the presidential election (TNSMI/CMR 2004). Given this expenditure, an advertisement will contain the most important elements of the campaign – without fluff. Advertising is also dynamic and changes over the course of the campaign, allowing ads to reflect current events and up-to-date campaign strategies. For this reason it makes sense to analyze television advertising as a proxy for campaign strategy.

Because it is expected that campaigning in the primary is different than campaigning in the general election I eliminated ads run for California’s primary election. This reduced the sample to 144 observations. Table 1 provides a summary of the data in the sample.

The data is identified at the day level. To construct the coverage variable I first conducted a content analysis of all campaign advertisements to record the issues and candidates featured in the ad and the tone of the ad. Then I picked a time interval to search Lexis-Nexis and Newsbank for the issues and candidates featured in the ad. Examples of issues include health care, gun control, education, crime, the environment, taxes, and social security.

The definitions of negative and positive campaigning are subject to debate - many have argued for different definitions of negative or attack campaigning (Jamieson 1992). Although there is little agreement on the definition of the term, the scholarly consensus is that some forms of negative campaigning are important facets of the political process.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Coverage after ad	43.17	112.59	0	920
Coverage before ad	40.86	103.38	0	770
Change in coverage	2.31	19.95	-91	150
Weeks until election	5.12	6.66	0	30
National	0.27	0.45	0	1
Negative	0.52	0.50	0	1
National negative	0.10	0.31	0	1
Spanish	0.08	0.27	0	1
Expenditure per week (000s)	168.59	267.56	0	1,844
Total expenditure (000s)	274.71	420.98	0	2,408
Spots per week	120.68	121.04	1	1,031
Expenditure per spot (000s)	1.23	1.14	0	6
News mention	0.18	0.39	0	1
Incumbent	0.28	0.45	0	1
Republican	0.46	0.50	0	1

N=144

This is because negative campaigning serves as a “watch dog” for the public and helps inform voters. For this reason, some argue to re-label negative campaigning as attack campaigning (Jamieson 1992). Attack campaigning offers a more strategic notion to negative campaigning, attack your opponents by revealing information about them. Thus, negative campaigning has a fundamental, *directional*, interpretation. Jamieson

takes the argument one step further by classifying ads as attack, contrast, and promotional. Attack ads are designed to move your opponent's position, contrast ads are designed to position both the instigating and targets position, and promotional ads are designed to position the instigating candidate's position. Here I classify ads only as "promotional" and "non-promotional."

Definition 1: *A positive ad features a candidate or issue in a promotional manner.*

Definition 2: *A negative ad features a candidate or issue in a non-promotional manner.*⁸

These definitions, though simple, capture fundamental difference between the two forms of campaigning.

After classifying each ad as negative or positive, I selected a time period to search Lexis-Nexis and Newsbank for the issues and candidates featured in the ad. I used a seven-day interval because it covered every day of the week (including weekends, where coverage should increase) and the average duration of an ad is slightly more than seven days. Then an ad airing on Tuesday October 5th would be searched from Tuesday October 5th until Monday October 11th, giving seven days total. This measures the salience of the issue and candidate over the week the ad first aired. Likewise, in order to capture the impact of this particular ad I must control for the salience of the candidate and issues before the ad aired. For this reason I re-searched the candidate and issues 7 days prior to the ads airing. Thus using our example above, an ad airing on October 5th would be searched from September 28th until October 4th. Thus in Table 1, the number of articles written before the ad aired is *Coverage before* ad and after is denoted by *Coverage after* ad. By taking the difference between the two measures of coverage I can observe the change in salience of issues and candidates (corresponding to the *Change in coverage* variable in Table 1).⁹ Given the context of my research, I would expect that negative ads would yield a greater positive change in coverage than corresponding non-negative ads.¹⁰

Returning to Table 1, *weeks until election* (henceforth referred to as WTE) is the mean distance in weeks from the general election. In this case, the average ad first aired the last week in September. Expenditure per week is the mean expenditure in the first week the ad aired and total expenditure is the mean expenditure for the entire life of an ad. *Spots per week* is the mean number of spots in the first week the ad aired. Expenditure per spot was obtained by dividing expenditure per week by spots per week. News mention is a dummy variable for whether the ad mentioned a news source in the advertisement. Incumbent is a dummy variable that is true when the ad is sponsored by

⁸ A negative ad can also be used to make one candidate, presumably the one paying for the ad, appear more favorable than another candidate. This type of advertisement was also classified as negative, but is also identified in the sample as a contrast ad.

⁹ Differencing also reduces the possibility of serial correlation.

¹⁰ Because I observe both positive and negative ads this reduces the identification problem associated with increasing levels of coverage and advertising as the election nears. That is, an issue and candidate might receive more coverage because the election is nearing or because of an event not related to the ad. However, even if coverage is increasing the difference between positive and negative ads is still observable and less effected, if at all by increasing coverage.

an incumbent candidate or the incumbent party. Republican is another dummy variable that is true when the sponsor is republican candidate or the Republican Party.

3.2 Empirical model

To test my hypothesis I implement two different regression equations. In both models, the dependent variable is the change in coverage. In this way I hope to capture the effect of advertising. If advertising is effective the change in coverage should be positive regardless of whether the ad is negative or positive. The important variables are the interactions of negative with month (*Negative*Month*). These variables will tell us the relative difference in coverage for a negative ad verses non-negative ads for that particular month, holding all other variables constant.

First negative ad was constructed by coding the first negative ad to run in that particular district race. The hypothesis is that after one negative ad is run, it is more likely that the following ads will be negative. Here *First negative ad* also captures the effect on coverage of being the first candidate to “go negative.”

Response1 and *Response2* are variables that capture the effect of an opponents negative campaigning. *Response1* is determined by recording the number of negative ads that were run in the past week against the sponsor of the current negative ad. *Response2*, measures the number of times an ad was run against the sponsor of this negative ad in the last two weeks.

It is possible that more aggressive advertising will lead to a greater change in news coverage. To control for this effect I add *Expenditure per spot*. This variable is the average expenditure per spot in thousands of dollars. This idea is that not all spots are worth the same amount. Some spots reach different populations and different numbers of people. Hence the premium for prime-time advertising spots - they reach the most viewers. Then higher cost spots should yield a greater change in coverage.

Some of the ads were run in Spanish. However, a subset of ads was translated to English and contained all relevant information. These ads were included even though I only search English newsprint. Other variables in the regression equation are as described by Table 1.

In the second model, I add more interaction terms. *Negative*Incumbent_i* represents the different return to an incumbent campaigning negatively vs. a challenger campaigning negatively. One might expect that incumbents would have more authority with the press given the stature of their office. *Negative*National_i* is the return given to negative ads aired nationally relative to national positive campaigning. *Negative*ExpenditurePerSpot_i* is the return to spending one thousand dollars per spot on a negative ad relative to a positive ad.

In general, the decision to run a negative ad is not determined independently of the campaign. It depends on many factors that come out of the campaign itself. Some factors that are thought to increase the likelihood that a candidate campaigns negatively are: if the candidate is a challenger, if the candidate is republican, if the candidate’s opponent(s) have run negative ads against the candidate, if the election is near, and if the candidate is losing the race.¹¹

11 For more on the factors determining negative campaigning see Lau and Pomper 2004.

One method to control for this is to use instrumental variables. That is, set *Negative* equal to several exogenous variables not correlated with coverage. However, it is difficult to make this argument for the available variables. Instead I include information that can account endogeneity directly into the regression. *Response1* and *Response2* both measure the effect of an opponents negative campaigning. Also, *Incumbent* is negatively correlated with negative campaigning. That is, incumbents are less likely to campaign negatively. This could be because the return to negative campaigning by an incumbent is less than that of a challenger.

3.3 Empirical results

The estimates are provided in Table 2. Regression 1 is primarily concerned with the sign of the month and negative interaction terms. That is, when is it best to campaign negatively or positively? In April and June there were no negative ads run, thus those interaction terms were dropped. However, there seemed to be an upward trend moving from *Negative*July* to *Negative*November*. *Negative*November* was estimated precisely at the one percent level and can be interpreted as, holding all else constant, a negative ad run in November receives close to a twenty eight article bump in coverage relative to a positive ad. The results suggest that there is an increasing return to campaigning negatively as the election nears. Estimated at the five percent level, non-negative advertising in June results in a twenty two article reduction in coverage change.

Also estimated precisely were *National*, *Expenditure per spot*, and *June*. *National* captures the difference in advertising at the national level relative to advertising at the state or local level. The positive coefficient means that campaigning nationally creates a greater change in coverage relative to non-national ads. *National's* coefficient of twelve is large in magnitude – implying that national ads command a twelve-article bump in coverage relative to non-national ads.

One question many political scientists and economists alike have is: Can candidates buy the election? Regression 1 shows, if candidates increase their expenditure per spot, they increase the bump in coverage of issues and candidates featured in the ad. This is empirical evidence that candidates can *buy news coverage!* In fact, for each additional thousand dollars spent on a spot, the increase in coverage jumps by over three and a half articles.

Regression 2 includes additional interaction effects to control for the possible differences between negative campaigning by an incumbent, campaigning negatively at the national level, and expenditure on a negative ad. Negative campaigning by an incumbent has a positive yet insignificant sign. Meaning that negative campaigning by an incumbent resulted in a greater change in the level of coverage than corresponding positive campaigning by an incumbent.

Airing a negative ad nationally had a very large benefit. Estimated precisely, *National negative* increased the change in coverage by twenty five articles. What is the reasoning behind this phenomena? First, it is likely that there is some correlation between *National negative* and *race*. That is presidential ads were mostly aired nationally. Also it is possible that a national ad can take advantage of the conglomeration

in media corporations. I.e. if there is correlation amongst coverage between different news organizations, then airing nationally would likely attract the most coverage.

Table 2: Regression Results

Change in Coverage	1			2		
	B	SE	T	B	SE	T
National	12.51	4.93	2.54	-3.01	7.53	-0.40
Incumbent	-0.30	4.37	-0.07	-4.84	6.44	-0.75
Negative*Incumbent	-	-	-	5.70	8.43	0.68
Negative*National	-	-	-	25.18	9.40	2.68
Negative*Expenditure per spot (000s)	-	-	-	2.95	3.02	0.98
First negative ad	-3.77	6.37	-0.59	0.08	6.52	0.01
Response 1	-7.19	5.42	-1.33	-7.12	5.39	-1.32
Response 2	2.31	3.98	0.58	2.90	4.00	0.72
Expenditure per spot (000's)	3.69	1.53	2.42	1.78	2.20	0.81
News mention	1.52	4.65	0.33	7.22	4.68	1.54
Spanish	10.79	6.82	1.58	14.86	6.89	2.16
Negative*May	20.30	22.70	0.89	-12.14	25.09	-0.48
Negative*July	-15.84	17.41	-0.91	-41.07	19.42	-2.12
Negative*August	0.51	19.78	0.03	-4.26	19.60	-0.22
Negative*September	0.56	8.72	0.06	-10.38	9.72	-1.07
Negative*October	3.49	5.47	0.64	-8.09	7.82	-1.03
Negative*November	27.85	10.22	2.73	13.90	11.73	1.19
April	-20.43	11.71	-1.75	-10.64	12.03	-0.88
May	-19.02	12.17	-1.56	-0.65	13.65	-0.05
June	-22.23	10.79	-2.06	-4.52	12.34	-0.37
July	-10.38	13.39	-0.78	5.25	14.37	0.37
September	-4.59	8.10	-0.57	-3.35	8.08	-0.41
October	-3.77	6.41	-0.59	-0.26	6.99	-0.04
November	-5.67	8.07	-0.70	-0.77	8.57	-0.09
N	144			144		
R-Squared	24.96%			29.60%		
Adj. R-Squared	12.14%			15.51%		

Spanish ads had a positive and highly significant effect on coverage. Interestingly news conglomerates own both Spanish and English newspapers. For this reason it is expected that there is some correlation between the content of their papers. Second and more importantly, in the 2000 election, the Republican Party (especially Bush) made a large investment in Spanish advertising. This policy was newsworthy in itself – i.e. Bush made an issue about attracting Spanish-speaking voters. For this reason, English newspapers are likely to report this strategy and more specifically, report the issues with which Bush used to attract Hispanic voters. Of eleven Spanish ads in the sample, Bush ran six ads with an estimated total expenditure of just over seven million dollars. The total amount of expenditure for Spanish ads in the 2000 election was eleven million

dollars. Thus Bush and the Republican Party accounted for more than sixty percent of the advertising expenditure in Spanish.

4. Conclusion

While negative campaigning has garnered enormous attention, its effects are still misunderstood. The literature has focused on negative campaigning as a tactic and studied its effects on polling results, but research on the phenomena that make negative campaigning effective can be fruitful. It is hoped that this research will shed light on why negative campaigning is effective. Here I find evidence that negative advertising in November increases the level of news coverage candidates and issues receive, relative to that of positive advertising. Given that there is a relationship between negative campaigning and news coverage what are the implications for campaign strategy?

First, I only model the change in coverage a candidate receives. There is no measure of actual effect, i.e. polling results. As I alluded earlier, one benefit to being the focus of the news is it permits the candidate to set the agenda. This increases the weight viewers put on issues and candidates mentioned in the news (Lippman 1922, McCombs and Shaw 1972, and Iyengar et. al. 1982). However, it would be useful to know if negative campaigning gave a candidate *good news coverage* or *bad news coverage*. Here I can make no conclusions good coverage vs. bad coverage. Consider, however, the candidate trailing in the polls. Candidates unlikely to win the election are not as affected by bad press coverage – they have less to lose. Then it is natural that a candidate trailing in the polls would take the risk of bad news coverage for the possibility of getting bad news coverage of an opponent. Thus candidates trailing in the polls should campaign negatively thereby giving them more press coverage and the ability to set the agenda.

Second, my regression showed a highly significant and positive return to expenditure per ad on news coverage. That is, it is possible to “buy an office.” If we considered two candidates, one budget constrained and the other un-constrained, the un-constrained candidate as a decisive advantage. For the constrained candidate, it makes economic sense to campaign negatively – because it is cheaper.

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