

How the Emotional Tenor of Ad Campaigns Affects Political Behavior

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ABSTRACT

A vigorous debate about the impact of negative (vs. positive) ads on voting behavior has produced mixed results, and some studies have begun to differentiate forms of negativity by source and target. We argue for distinguishing further between message valence and attempts to elicit specific emotions. Recent research suggests that emotions strongly influence political behavior. We extend this line of work to study the impact of advertising campaigns on political participation. To do so, we construct a unique dataset that matches national survey respondents to the emotional tenor of presidential ad campaigns in their media market. We find that “mudslinging” often deters political engagement and issue-based attacks often increase it. In addition, emotional appeals have effects above and beyond those captured by the tone of the message. Both positive and negative emotional appeals tend to increase participation in accordance with predictions, though in some cases they dampen motivation. These results underscore the importance of specificity in considering the tone of campaign communication as well as the importance of taking the role of emotions seriously. We discuss potential reasons for variability in the effectiveness of emotional appeals and some obstacles to estimating the influence of emotion in ad campaigns.