Timeless Strategy Meets New Medium: Going Negative on Congressional Campaign Web Sites, 2002-2006

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In a few short years, the World Wide Web has become a standard part of candidates' campaign tool kits. Virtually all candidates have their own sites, and voters, journalists, and activists visit the sites with increasing frequency. In this article, we study what candidates do on these sites—in terms of the information they present—by exploring one of the most enduring and widely debated campaign strategies: "going negative." Comparing data from over 700 congressional candidate Web sites, over three election cycles (2002, 2004, and 2006), with television advertising data, we show that candidates go negative with similar likelihoods across these media. We also find that while similar dynamics drive negativity on the Web and in television advertising, there are some notable differences. These differences likely stem, in part, from the truncated sample available with television data (i.e., many candidates do not produce ads). Our results have implications for understanding negative campaigning and for the ways in which scholars can study campaign dynamics.

Keywords campaigns, internet, negative campaigning, candidate Web sites, new media

There is little doubt that the Internet has transformed the way citizens interact with one another and with ruling elites. Yet, the speedy profusion of the Internet leaves the exact nature of its political impact uncertain. Scholars and pundits regularly disagree, for example, on how the Internet affects polarization, deliberation, and targeted marketing. Also unclear is whether the content of political communications on the Internet differs from what is found in more traditional media. This uncertainly stems, in large part, from the fact that "data on the production of political content online are difficult to come by" (Howard, 2006, p. 26). In this article, we explore political communication online by focusing on one of the most enduring and widely debated types of rhetoric: negativity. We are particularly interested in how and why candidates might be using the Web as a new venue for confronting their opponents—a venue that seems to offer some unprecedented opportunities for going negative.

We explore negative campaigning on the Web with data from a representative sample of over 700 congressional candidate Web sites over three election cycles (2002, 2004, and 2006). We link these data with television advertising data to assess the extent to which candidates may favor the Web over television as the venue for their attacks. This enables us to test the normalization hypothesis that behavior on the Web largely mimics that found in more traditional media.

We find, despite the opportunities provided by the Web and recent claims of relatively high levels of online negativity, that candidates go negative with similar likelihoods across these media. Moreover, the same basic variables determine whether a candidate goes negative on the Internet and/or in their television ads. These findings support the normalization prediction. There is a twist, however: our representative Internet data reveal some dynamics that are missed when relying on the truncated sample of candidates who produce television ads (i.e., well-funded, competitive candidates). This accentuates the advantages of using Web site data to study candidate behavior.

We begin in the next section by offering a basic theory of negativity, including a discussion of how the particular media (i.e., television or the Web) might affect the decision to go negative. We then describe our data, which come from a survey of campaign Web site operators, Web site content analyses, and television advertising data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project (see http://wiscadproject.wisc.edu). We follow with a comparative analysis of the trends and determinants of negativity. We conclude with a brief discussion of our findings and their implications, including comments on how the Web offers researchers a unique opportunity to study campaign communication strategies.

Negative Campaigning

Over the last decade, political communication researchers have devoted considerable attention to the causes and effects of negative campaigns (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Lau & Pomper, 2004; Kahn & Kenney, 2004; Geer, 2006; Mark, 2006; Buell & Sigelman, 2008; Lau & Rovner, 2009). We focus on the extent to which candidates go negative and the conditions under which they do so. We next build on a set of widely agreed upon premises to deduce hypotheses about when a candidate will go negative, in general. We then consider how the Internet, in particular, might affect candidates' tendencies toward negativity.

Our first premise comes from a half-century of voting research that demonstrates that, in most circumstances, voters pay scant attention to campaign rhetoric and base their decisions on a subset of accessible considerations (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Zaller, 1992; Kinder, 1998). Second, in congressional elections, incumbency serves as a highly accessible basis of vote choice. In fact, "incumbency is a dominant consideration" (Jacobson, 2004, p. 23) as voters commonly treat congressional races as a referendum on the incumbent (e.g., Mondak, 1995, p. 1045; Herrnson, 2008, pp. 198–201, 246).[1] Third, all else constant, voters favor incumbents (Gronke, 2000, pp. 140–141). This manifests itself in the well-known benefit from incumbency that provides incumbents with up to a 10 percentage point advantage (Ansolabehere & Snyder, 2004, p. 487; Abramowitz, Alexander, & Gunning, 2006). These three assumptions imply that candidates who are not advantaged (i.e., challengers) have an incentive to (a) induce voters to attend to their campaign rhetoric and (b) use the rhetoric to cause voters to base their decisions on criteria other than incumbency.[2] An additional premise, based on psychological research, is that negativity motivates voters to attend to rhetoric (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000; Druckman & McDermott, 2008).

It follows that, compared to incumbents, *challengers will be significantly more likely to use negative rhetoric,* with the hope of inducing voters to attend to their messages (also see Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995; Theilmann & Wilhite, 1998; Kahn & Kenney, 1999, 2004; Herrnson, 2008, p. 217). Consistent with this prediction is the idea that advantaged incumbents avoid active advocacy (for fear of appearing insecure about the campaign). Jacobson (2004) explains that "inept, obscure, or underfinanced opponents can be dealt with via routine maintenance of ties with groups in the electoral coalition, and they can otherwise be ignored. . . . Ignoring the opposition is a standard tactic of incumbents who feel relatively secure" (p. 97; also see Trent & Friedenberg, 2008, p. 100).

A final assumption (and caveat to our third premise above) is that the incumbency advantage declines as the race becomes increasingly competitive. In competitive races, voters are more likely to attend to campaign rhetoric and incorporate alternative types of information (beyond incumbency; e.g., Kahn & Kenney, 1999, pp. 182–183). Incumbents in competitive races thus have little choice but to enter the fray and attempt to persuade voters. As a result, incumbents will often invoke negativity to induce voters to attend to their preferred rhetoric (rather than the challengers'). In response, challengers may be even more apt to go negative to counter incumbent rhetoric. Two predictions follow: *As competition increases, the occurrence of negativity will increase*, and *as competition increases, the aforementioned challenger–incumbency disparity in going negative will shrink and/or disappear* (also see Kahn & Kenney, 2004, p. 36).[3]

Beyond our theory's focus on candidate status, competition, and their interaction, other factors have been posited to increase negative campaigning, including resources (i.e., funds) (e.g., Pfau & Kenski, 1990; Lau & Pomper, 2001, 2004), candidate and/or district partisanship (Lau & Pomper, 2001, 2004; Peterson & Djupe, 2005), candidate gender (Kahn & Kenney, 2004, p. 36; Lau & Pomper, 2004, pp. 32–33), office (i.e., House or Senate) (Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, & Ridout, 2008), and whether the opponent goes negative (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995, p. 120; Haynes & Rhine, 1998; Lau & Pomper, 2001, 2004; Kahn & Kenney, 1999). Since several of these factors correlate with candidate status and competition, analyses of the determinants of negativity need to incorporate (i.e., control for) these variables.

Negativity on the Internet

How might the Internet affect candidates' tendencies toward negativity? Does the medium influence their decision about going negative? These questions reflect an ongoing debate about whether behavior on new media matches or differs from that found in more traditional media. The innovation hypothesis posits differences, suggesting that online campaigning is "more disengaged from typical offline patterns of electioneering" (Schweitzer, 2008, p. 450). In contrast, the normalization hypothesis suggests that "political practice on the Internet . . . closely resemble[s] politics offline and that traditional factors affecting the distribution of political resources . . . shape the way that political actors use the Web" (Foot & Schneider, 2006, p. 169; also see Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Graber, 2001, p. 110).

Most extant work on negative campaigning, including our above theory, provides little insight into innovation versus normalization. Indeed, it ignores media differences and implicitly assumes that candidates aim their strategies at voters in general (e.g., the median voter). This may be a problematic assumption for candidate Web sites. Engaged supporters visit candidates' Web sites with much greater frequency than other voters, and as a result, may serve as the sites' primary targets (e.g., Bimber & Davis, 2003, pp. 101–124;

Cornfield, 2004; Foot & Schneider, 2006).[4] This, in turn, might induce candidates to be more apt to go negative online since attacks are less likely to alienate supporters (compared to voters in general). Moreover, online negativity may stimulate supporters to participate (e.g., Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998), volunteer (e.g., Hansen, 1985), and donate funds (e.g., Miller, Krosnick, Holbrook, & Lowe, 2007). Trent and Friedenberg (2008) argue that "websites are not constructed primarily for undecided voters or voters who are strictly seeking information. . . . [Sites are designed to] influence a different set of decisions: whether to volunteer, whether to donate, whether to vote or stay at home" (p. 403; also see Bimber & Davis, 2003, p. 67).[5]

In line with this logic, numerous analysts predict that the likelihood of negativity will be higher online than in other media (i.e., television). Some have even proclaimed that "attack politics has hit the Web in a major way" (Thornburg & White, 2000, p. 1; also see, e.g., Klotz, 2003; Wicks & Souley, 2003; Chadwick, 2006, pp. 155–156, Kaid, 2006, pp. 71–72; Warnick, 2007, p. 87; Trent & Friedenberg, 2008, p. 404). The different cost/benefit calculations of going negative online also might mean that the determinants of online negativity differ from those found in other media. The advantageous cost/benefit structure of online negativity might compel all sorts of candidates to go negative, regardless of their status and the competitiveness of the race. For these reasons, then, we may see differences between the Web and other media such as television. We now turn to empirically examining if this is, in fact, the case.

Our Approach

We explore negativity online with data from three different sources. We use information from a survey of congressional campaign Web site operators to get a sense of how campaigns view their Web site audiences. We then investigate patterns of online negativity with a novel content analysis of over 700 House and Senate Web sites from 2002, 2004, and 2006.[6] To compare negativity across media, we link our Web site data to television advertising data from the Wisconsin Advertising Project.[7]

Survey of Web Site Designers

As explained, underlying the expectation of relatively more online negativity is the premise that Web sites target engaged supporters so as to recruit volunteers, garner donations, and mobilize participation. We tested the veracity of this assumption by conducting a survey of individuals involved in the design of congressional campaign Web sites during the 2008 campaign ($N = 137$). We identified potential respondents by assessing the universe of U.S. Senate and House campaign Web sites in 2008. We contacted the 716 campaigns that provided workable e-mail addresses or online inquiry forms, up to three times during the course of the campaign (from October 17 to November 5). We asked that an individual involved in the creation and/or updating of the campaign's Web site complete a confidential 5-minute online survey.[8] We received a total of 137 responses (a 19.13% response rate, which falls within the typical range; see Couper, 2008, p. 340). The sample reflects the population fairly well in terms of office (14% Senate), party (53% Democrat), and status (31% incumbents, 53% challengers, 15% open seats).

To ensure that we received responses from appropriate individuals, we asked respondents, on a 7-point scale, to indicate the extent to which they are informed about how the content of the site is determined, with higher scores indicating more knowledge. The average response was 6.51 ($SD = 1.16$; $N = 136$). The survey also asked respondents to rate the

priority of several groups of voters (e.g., undecided voters, supporters), in terms of each being a target audience of the Web site, on a 7-point scale, with higher scores indicating increased priority. Respondents used a similar scale to rate their perception of how often an average member of each group (e.g., undecided voters, supporters) visited the site, with higher scores indicating more frequent visits. Finally, we asked respondents to rate, again with a 7-point scale, the importance of various goals for the site, such as "persuading undecided voters" and "fundraising."

Web Site Data

We began our Web site data collection for each year—2002, 2004, and 2006—using the *National Journal, Congressional Quarterly*, and various national and state party homepages to identify all Democratic and Republican House and Senate candidates.[9] We included the universe of Senatorial candidates and then selected a systematic random sample of approximately 20% of House races, stratified by state and district to ensure regional diversity in the sample. We searched for the candidates' Web sites in our sample by following links from the *National Journal*'s Web site (www.nationaljournal.com) and using search engines such as Google. We were careful to identify only candidates' personal *campaign* Web sites, excluding official congressional Web sites and Web sites sponsored by other groups or individuals. We were able to identify almost all Senate candidate Web sites and nearly 95% of House sites in our sample. This suggests that while not all candidates had Web sites, clearly the overwhelming majority did, substantially outnumbering candidates who produced television advertisements (see Foot & Schneider, 2006, pp. 7–11). Our sample consists of a total of 736 Web sites, with 26% coming from Senate candidates and 74% coming from House contenders.[10]

In each year, we assembled a team of content analyzers. All coders participated in a detailed training session that included practice coding before being randomly assigned a set of candidate Web sites. All coding was conducted in the 10 days preceding election day; however, we also tracked a small sample of Web sites from after Labor Day until election day, and found little evidence of changes that would have significantly altered our coding (i.e., changes almost always concerned items such as the candidate's schedule). For the years in our sample, we thus believe our coding approach successfully captured campaign strategy.

Coders examined all major parts of the candidate's self-contained Web site for evidence of negativity. That is, they searched the homepage, the fundraising area, the issues area, the biography area, and any other major area linked to the homepage (e.g., news room and media pages) to find material about the candidate's opponent that was negative or critical—either in tone or explicitly. Our approach follows Geer's (2006) depiction that "negativity is any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign" (p. 23; also see Buell & Sigelman, 2008).

We opted for a dichotomous measure of negativity, rather than a count across the entire Web site, for two reasons. First, on a particular page, we found it highly unreliable to count the number of negative statements (when does a negative statement end and another one begin?). Second, using a subsample of 41 sites, we counted the number of distinct pages (e.g., front page, personal page, issue page) that included negativity. We found very little variance such that most candidates who went negative on their sites did so twice (most typically, on the front page and issues page; also see, e.g., Klotz, 1998, 2003).[11] Not surprisingly, then, we find virtually identical results, in our subsample, when using this count or employing our simpler and more reliable dichotomous indicator.[12] We do

acknowledge that counts of entire sites may become increasingly important in future years as the sites become more complex; yet, we believe our approach for 2002–2006 is meaningful and valid.[13]

Television Advertising Data

For each candidate in our Web site sample, we obtained data—from the Wisconsin Advertising Project—on whether the candidate produced one or more television advertisements and the tone of the ad(s). Of particular interest is whether a given advertisement was coded as "attacking" the opponent (see Franz et al., 2008, pp. 56–57, who similarly operationalize negative ads as attack ads). To ensure comparability with our negativity measure, we created a variable indicating whether each candidate created at least one negative ad. The results reported below are similar if we instead used the proportion of a candidate's ads that are negative and, thus, we opt for the comparable dichotomous measure, which facilitates comparisons. The television advertising data were available only for 2002 and 2004.[14]

Results

We present our results in three sections. We start with information from the campaign Web site operator survey. We then present our comparative analysis of the frequency of negativity. Finally, we report results about the determinants of negativity.

Campaign Web Site Audience and Objectives

Results from our survey of campaign Web site operators show that campaigns typically design their sites for a general audience, although they recognize that supporters are the most likely to visit. The results, which we present in Figure 1, show that those involved in the creation of the sites view "voters in general" and "undecided voters" as the primary
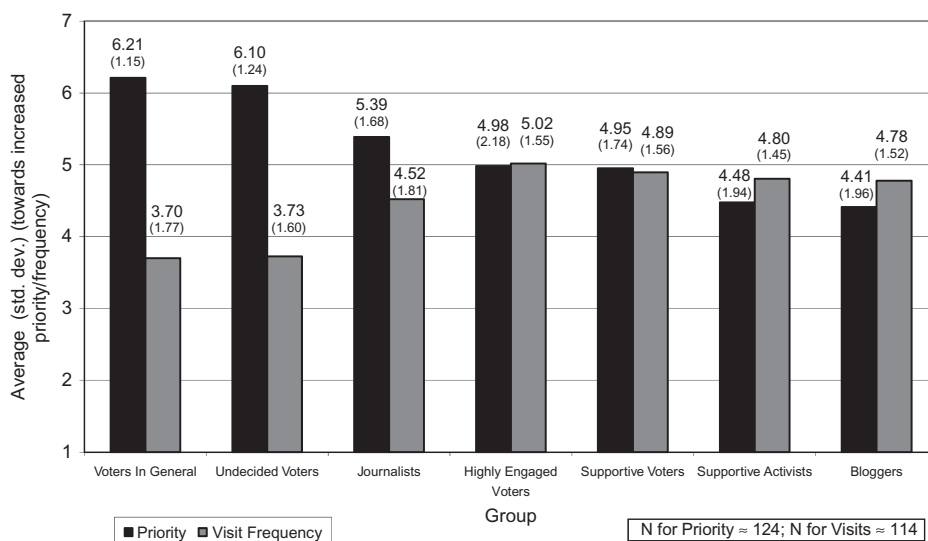

Figure 1. Web site visitor priority and visit frequency.

target audiences. These two groups register significantly greater priority scores (on our 7-point scale) than all other groups (e.g., comparing "undecided voters" to "journalists" gives $t_{123} = 3.86$, $p < .01$, for a two-tailed test). This matches Stromer-Galley, Howard, Schneider, and Foot's (2003) survey of Web site producers, implemented in 2002–2003, which also finds "undecided voters" to be the top-rated audience.

Interestingly, the respondents recognize that "voters in general" and "undecided voters" visit less frequently than all other groups. Instead, they believe "highly engaged voters" access the site most often, even though these voters are not the primary target of the site (e.g., comparing the frequency question for "highly engaged voters" to "undecided voters" gives $t_{112} = 8.97$, $p < .01$, for a two-tailed test). This accentuates the importance of *not* confounding the frequency with which particular voters visit Web sites with the intentions of those designing the sites (e.g., certain groups may be more important even if they visit less often; cf. Trent & Friedenberg, 2008, pp. 402–404).[15]

As mentioned, we asked respondents to rate the importance of various goals for the site using a 7-point scale with higher scores indicating increased importance. The results, displayed in Figure 2, show that the sites are created, first and foremost, to inform and persuade voters, with fundraising, volunteer recruitment, and mobilization (i.e., getting out the vote) being significantly less important (e.g., comparing "persuading undecided voters" to "fundraising" gives $t_{115} = 2.98$, $p < .01$, for a two-tailed test).[16] This again mimics the results from Stromer-Galley et al.'s (2003) survey, which reported even larger differences between providing information and volunteering and fundraising (also see Klotz, 2003, p. 76; Foot & Schneider, 2006, p. 170). In sum, campaigns do not appear to primarily use their Web sites as a tool for targeting supporters to volunteer or donate. These results call into question the expectation of increased online negativity, since, as mentioned, an underlying premise of the prediction concerns the primacy of targeting supporters to benefit from the Web's opportunities for fundraising, volunteer recruitment, and mobilization.[17] Instead, it appears that candidates see their Web sites as a medium for communicating with voters in general, much like other media. This evidence, then, is more consistent with the aforementioned normalization hypothesis (rather than the innovation hypothesis). We now turn to our direct examination of campaign negativity.
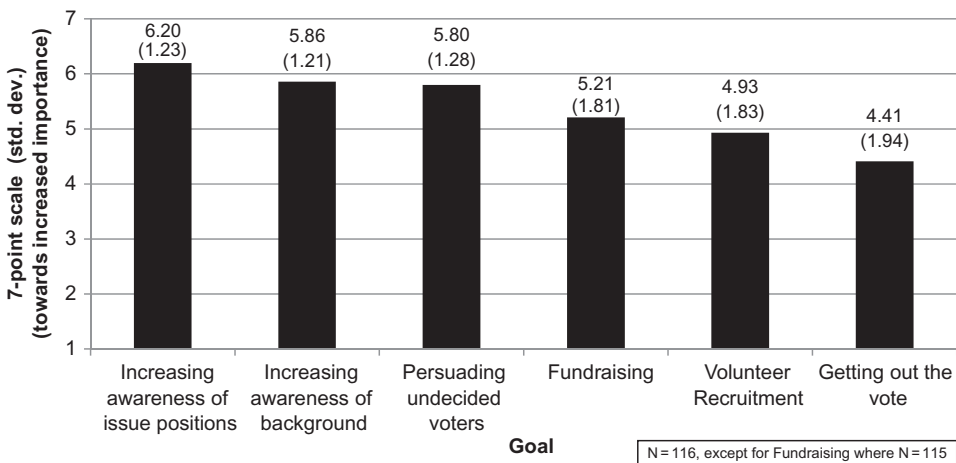

Figure 2. Web site goals.

Negativity on the Web and in Television Ads

We begin by comparing our Web site and television advertising samples. Since virtually all candidates launch Web sites, our Web sample closely mimics the full population of campaigns.[18] This is not the case for television advertisements, which tend to be produced only by well-funded candidates in close races. We find that 47.75% (212 of 444) of the candidates in our 2002 and 2004 Web site sample did not produce a single television advertisement (at least as available from the Wisconsin project).[19] Moreover, the television advertising sample is highly skewed toward more competitive Senate races. For example, whereas 68% of the candidates in our Web site sample participated in the least competitive races—as classified by Cook's nonpartisan ratings (see Notes 18 and 23)—only 47% of candidates with television advertisements did so. Similarly, as noted, 26% of our Web site sample comes from Senate candidates, whereas nearly 40% of the television advertising sample comes from the Senate. As we will later discuss, the *under*representation of less competitive and House races in the television sample truncates variation on chamber and competitiveness measures. (We base all subsequent television advertisement analyses on the sample of candidates who produced at least one ad.)

Despite these differences in samples, when we turn to direct comparisons of the negativity across media, we see very similar likelihoods of going negative. Forty-eight percent (351 of 732)[20] of candidates went negative on the Web, compared to 55% in their television advertisements (128 of 232). Candidates thus are *not* more likely to go negative on the Web and, in fact, are slightly more likely to go negative on television (a difference of proportions test gives $z = 1.86$, $p < .10$, for a two-tailed test). While the greater negativity in advertisements may stem from overrepresentation of competitive races in the television sample, there is still no clear evidence that candidates are aggressively using the opportunities provided by the Web to attack their opponents.

We also observe similar over-time trends toward negativity in both media, with the likelihood of negativity increasing on the Web—in 2002, 2004, and 2006—from 38% to 45% to 57%, and in television advertising—in 2002 and 2004—from 51% to 59%. Finally, in both media, Senate candidates are more likely to go negative; the respective Senate and House percentages for the Web are 60% (114 of 191) and 44% (237 of 541) ($z = 3.78$, $p < .01$, for a two-tailed test), and the television percentages are 61% (56 of 92) and 51% (72 of 140) ($z = 1.42$, $p < .20$, for a two-tailed test). That the chamber comparisons only significantly differ for the Web may, again, stem from the competitiveness and Senate skew in the television sample. Overall, these trends suggest similarities across media, as the normalization hypothesis predicts.[21]

Determinants of Going Negative

The evidence thus far suggests, consistent with the normalization hypotheses, that candidates are not more likely—and are in fact slightly less likely—to go negative on the Web than in television advertising. We next explore whether the determinants of negativity also cohere across media, as we would expect given that campaigns seem to view their Web sites as a venue for communicating with voters in general. We also test our hypotheses that competition engenders negativity, challengers are significantly more likely to go negative, and the challenger-incumbency distinction diminishes as competitiveness increases. To do this, for each of these media, we regress negativity on candidate status and competition, and then we add interactions between the two. As mentioned, we also need to include control variables posited in other work (e.g., Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Lau & Pomper, 2004).[22]

We use dichotomous variables to identify challengers, open-seat candidates, Senate candidates (as opposed to House candidates), the candidate's political party (i.e., if the candidate is a Democrat), and gender (i.e., if the candidate is a woman). We also include dummy variables for year (i.e., 2004 or 2006), since we found evidence of a trend toward negativity. To measure competitiveness, we use the aforementioned ratings by nonpartisan political analyst Charlie Cook, where higher scores on the 4-point scale indicate increased competitiveness.[23] We also include measures of campaign resources, the per capita amount of money each candidate raised (in millions of dollars) as reported by the Federal Election Commission, and "district partisanship," which is the percentage of votes in the district (or state) cast for George W. Bush in 2000 (for our 2002 and 2004 data) or 2004 (for our 2006 data) (Lau & Pomper, 2004).[24] Finally, we created a dummy variable to identify candidates whose opponent went negative in the given medium since candidates might respond to one another (or uniformly respond to district demands) (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Lau & Pomper, 2004).[25] We standardized all variables on a 0 to 1 scale.[26]

We present the results in Table 1. The first two columns offer strong support for our competition and challenger hypotheses for both the Web and television advertising data. In both cases, the variables are highly significant and substantively meaningful (also see Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Franz et al., 2008, p. 57). In the least competitive races on the Web, the (average) likelihood of going negative is .37 (*SE* = .03); this increases at each level of competitiveness, respectively, to .52 (.03), .67 (.04), and .79 (.04).[27] The analogous television ad probabilities are .52 (.06), .58 (.04), .64 (.05), and .70 (.08).[28] The challenger effect is evident on the Web such that the average challenger has a .82 probability (.03) of going negative, compared to .20 (.03) for the average incumbent. On television, these probabilities are .73 (.06) and .40 (.06).

The effects of the other variables are quite similar across media: negativity increases with open-seat candidates, year, female candidates, and funds raised.[29] There are, however, three notable differences. First, candidate partisanship, for reasons that are not entirely clear to us, differs, with Democrats being more likely to go negative on the Web but less likely to do so on television. Second, opponent negativity triggers a response only for television advertising, possibly reflecting the greater reach of television and the need to respond. Third, Senate candidates exhibit a greater likelihood than House candidates of going negative on the Web (with respective predicted probabilities of .59 [.05] and .44 [.03]), but this is not the case in television ads (with respective predicted probabilities of .61 [.06] and .57 [.05]). The lack of the Senate television effect likely stems from the aforementioned sample bias (and not necessarily pure media differences). In short, chamber differences in campaign styles likely differ across the full population of campaigns, but this fails to surface with the truncated television sample.[30]

The last two columns of Table 1 add interactions between competition and the candidate status variables. The Web results support our hypothesis that the challenger–incumbent differential in negativity declines as the race becomes more competitive (as indicated by the significant interaction). However, this is not evident in the television data, as the interaction is insignificant (cf. Kahn & Kenney, 1999, p. 94). The truncated television sample—with few noncompetitive candidates producing ads—may again lie behind this non-effect (although see Note 32). The Web sample results suggest the existence of two distinct political universes: a noncompetitive one in which challengers' and incumbents' behaviors are different and a competitive one where their behaviors resemble one another. Interestingly, the significant interaction between competition and open-seat status

Table 1
Determinants of negative campaigning

Independent variable	Models without interactions		Models with interactions	
	Web	TV	Web	TV
Challenger	2.90***	1.41***	3.41***	1.77***
	(0.26)	(0.42)	(0.31)	(0.54)
Open seat	0.94***	1.23***	1.84***	0.98*
	(0.30)	(0.46)	(0.41)	(0.68)
Competition	1.86***	0.79*	3.15***	1.03*
	(0.32)	(0.50)	(0.47)	(0.74)
Democrat	0.46***	−0.47*	0.53***	−0.45*
	(0.19)	(0.33)	(0.20)	(0.33)
Funds	4.74***	6.62**	4.60***	7.52**
	(1.91)	(3.90)	(1.99)	(4.02)
Female	0.41**	0.61*	0.34*	0.53
	(0.25)	(0.48)	(0.26)	(0.48)
Senate	0.60***	0.16	0.67***	0.16
	(0.22)	(0.36)	(0.23)	(0.36)
District partisanship (Rep.)	−0.14	−0.66	−0.09	−0.74
	(0.65)	(1.63)	(0.68)	(1.64)
Opponent negative	−0.02	1.33***	0.03	1.33***
	(0.24)	(0.34)	(0.24)	(0.34)
2004	0.61***	0.49*	0.56**	0.46*
	(0.26)	(0.35)	(0.26)	(0.35)
2006	1.10***		1.04***	
	(0.26)		(0.26)	
Competition × Open seat			−2.35***	0.33
			(0.69)	(1.15)
Competition × Challenger			−2.56***	−1.10
			(0.68)	(1.09)
Constant	−3.17***	−1.61	−3.58***	−1.68*
	(0.52)	(1.28)	(0.55)	(1.30)
Log-likelihood	−346.25	−114.72	−337.14	−113.92
Number of observations	714	205	714	205

Note. The dependent variable was negative campaigning (0 = no negativity, 1 = negativity). Entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

$*p \leq .10$; $**p \leq .05$; $***p \leq .01$ (one-tailed).

suggests that open-seat candidates might behave similarly to challengers (for further discussion, see Druckman, Kifer, & Parkin, 2009).

The Web–television differences are intriguing on two counts.[31] First, they suggest some small media differences, particularly with regard to opponent response.[32] Second, they reveal the limits of using a television sample skewed toward the Senate and competitive races. That said, the overall message of our results is that candidates go negative online with similar likelihoods and under analogous conditions as they do in their television advertisements (e.g., as predicted by the normalization hypothesis).[33]

Conclusion

While journalists, pundits, and scholars have spent a substantial amount of time discussing and debating the role of the Web in political campaigns, few systematic analyses of how the Web is used exist. We addressed this gap by offering an extensive analysis of negativity on a representative sample of congressional candidate Web sites over three election cycles. Thus, we offer the most updated and comprehensive analysis of online negativity and, as far as we know, the first comparison with television ads.

Our results show that while candidates frequently go negative online, they do so with similar likelihoods to going negative in their television ads. We find further support for the normalization hypothesis both in terms of trends and determinants, albeit with a few differences—most notably the differences in opponent response on television and Democrats being more negative on the Web. Overall, our results show that candidates see their Web sites as targeting the general voting population and thus need to be motivated by their political situation (e.g., challenger, competitive race) before going negative. That behavior on the Web largely mimics that found on television is intriguing given the tremendous amount of speculation about how the Web will change politics. Of course, other types of changes are possible, although we would submit that, to date, there is scant evidence of dramatic changes (see, e.g., Druckman et al., 2007, 2009). The implication is that analysts should take caution in asserting that the Internet has transformed politics, at least until systematic evidence exists.

Our analysis also highlights the potential benefit of the Web for studying campaign behavior. Unlike television ads that typically only capture competitive and well-funded campaigns, Web sites exist for virtually all Senate *and* House candidates. Consequently, researchers can study campaign strategy using a representative sample of competitive and noncompetitive races, and do so using an unmediated and holistic (e.g., candidates can post copious information on their sites) picture of the campaign. Thus, one of the Web's most important contributions may come from how it changes the way scholars study campaign behavior.

Notes

1. Jacobson (2004) adds, "Nearly everything pertaining to candidates and campaigns for Congress is profoundly influenced by whether the candidate is an incumbent" (p. 23).

2. The motivation to engage voters in more deliberative decision making may also apply to other traditionally disadvantaged candidates such as those who are female, underfunded, and/or represent the minority party in their district. We focus on candidate status (e.g., incumbent, challenger) because it remains the primary determinant of advantage/disadvantage in congressional campaigns (see, e.g., Jacobson, 2004, p. 23; Herrnson, 2008, p. 246).

3. The behavior of open-seat candidates likely depends on other factors (see Jacobson, 2004, pp. 98–99), including the candidate's ability to tie him- or herself to the incumbent, district partisanship, and the candidate's standing in the race.

4. But see Goldstein (2004) on targeting with television advertising.

5. Web sites, in contrast to television ads, also provide virtually limitless space to attack without having to sacrifice other parts of a candidate's message.

6. While ours is not the first content analysis of negativity on congressional Web sites, it is, to the best of our knowledge, the only data set that includes campaigns post-2002, which is often cited as the year in which "e-campaigning . . . entered a new phase. While the Web was once the province of the cybersavvy politico, it is now a critical part of any candidate's strategy" (Chinni, 2002, p. 1; also see Foot & Schneider, 2006, p. 10). Earlier content analyses of negativity on congressional campaign Web sites include Davis's (1999) study of 1996 Web sites and Kamarck's (1999) study of

1998 sites, both of which report modest levels of negativity. Klotz (1998, 2003) analyzes Senate candidate Web sites from 1996 through 2002; he finds a substantial rise in negativity over this time period. (None of these studies include comparisons with television advertising or examinations of the determinants of negativity.) Of related interest are Wicks and Souley's (2003) study of negative news releases on presidential candidate Web sites in 2000, Schweitzer's (2008) study of German party Web sites (also see Schweitzer, 2009, who focuses on negativity), Foot and Schneider's (2006) general analyses of candidate Web sites, and Ward, Owen, Davis, and Taras's (2008) cross-national analyses of election Web sites.

7. Others have explored negativity in television advertising, including Kahn and Kenney (1999, 2004) and Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, and Ridout (2008). We are not aware of any prior work, however, that engages in comparative analyses. Also, Lau and Pomper (2004) investigate negativity in Senate campaigns with campaign statements contained in newspapers (also see Sigelman & Buell, 2003). The main downside of this approach concerns the use of a mediated source (e.g., Lapinski, 2004, p. 10).

8. We thank Jennifer Stromer-Galley for advice (see Stromer-Galley, Howard, Schneider, & Foot, 2003; Foot & Schneider, 2006, p. 225).

9. Our sample includes independent Bernard Sanders of Vermont, who was a 2002 House incumbent and 2006 open-seat Senate candidate. We also included incumbent Democrat turned Independent Democrat Joe Lieberman in 2006.

10. The list of all sites coded is available from the authors.

11. In our subsample, the average number of negative statements, across the Web site, is 2.07 with a standard deviation of .46.

12. We also investigated the effect of overall Web site size by accounting for the number of pages on each candidate's Web site. The Web site size variable did not significantly relate to the likelihood of going negative, and it was not significant in any of the analyses reported below.

13. To assess the reliability of the coding, we randomly sampled approximately 30% of the sites and had one of two reliability coders recode them. We found a very high reliability level of above .90 (adjusting for chance agreement) for our negativity measure (see Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998, p. 131; Neuendorf, 2002, p. 143).

14. In 2006, the project only coded a small subset of campaigns in the Midwest, and these data are not publicly available (personal communication, Wisconsin Advertising Project, January 27, 2009).

15. The importance of "journalists" is interesting since they often visit the site to obtain information that they then use in writing stories that reach broad audiences (e.g., Bimber & Davis, 2003, pp. 68–72; Semiatin, 2005, pp. 166–167).

16. We asked respondents to rate a few other goals as well, but none of these registered high scores. These included things like publishing campaign events and distributing campaign material. Details are available from the authors.

17. The year of our survey (2008) does not match the years of our Web site data (2002, 2004, 2006). However, we take comfort in the consistency of our survey results with Stromer-Galley, Howard, Schneider, and Foot's (2003) 2002–2003 survey.

18. Since we take a near census of Senate campaigns (e.g., excluding only the few candidates who did not have sites), this part of our sample almost perfectly matches the population in terms of incumbency and competitiveness. Our House sample contains 46% incumbents, 43% challengers, and 12% open-seat candidates, which mimics the respective population totals of 49%, 40.5%, and 10.5%. In terms of competitiveness—according to Cook's nonpartisan ratings (www.cookpolitical.com)—our House sample ended up slightly overrepresenting toss-up campaigns, with 9% being toss-up, 18% being leaning or likely, and 73% being solidly in favor of one candidate, compared to respective population figures of 5%, 14%, and 81%. The small overrepresentation of competitive races stems, in part, from our regional stratification that inadvertently resulted in multiple races from some states with relatively few congressional districts that happen to regularly be competitive (e.g., New Mexico). It also stems slightly from us retaining some districts in our sample in each election cycle so as to allow researchers to follow candidates over time.

19. It is important to note that the Wisconsin project does not monitor the full universe of media markets (i.e., it is restricted to the 100 largest markets, which include 86% of viewing households; Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, & Ridout, 2008, p. 47). Thus, it is plausible that some candidates in our Web site sample produced ads that simply were not picked up by the Wisconsin project (as they fall out of the project's sample of markets) and thus were excluded from our calculations.

20. Coders failed to classify four Web sites.

21. If we rerun our Web data on the subsample of campaigns that produce an ad, the results are similar. Specifically, with that sample, 46% of candidates went negative overall, 41% did so in 2002, 49% did so in 2004, 51% in the Senate did so, and 42% in the House did so.

22. Unless otherwise noted, our data come from *The Almanac of American Politics*, complemented by the *National Journal*'s Web site.

23. Specifically, the 4-point scale is coded such that 0 equals solid Democratic or Republican, 1 represents likely Democratic or Republican, 2 equals leaning Democratic or Republican, and 3 equals a toss-up. The Cook scores are a common measure of competitiveness (e.g., Sulkin, 2001; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002) and have the virtue of being largely exogenous to the race itself (e.g., Gronke, 2000, pp. 100–101).

24. Prior work, particularly when focused on presidential campaigns, often includes a variable indicating whether the candidate is a front-runner (e.g., Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995; Buell & Sigelman, 2008). However, we do not include it because, in congressional elections, it so highly correlates with incumbency status (leading to extreme multicollinearity). Indeed, computing front-runner status based on vote totals yields a correlation with incumbency of .78 ($p < .01$). A regression of front-runner status on the other independent variables results in an R^2 of nearly .8.

25. Inclusion of the opponent's negativity variable creates an endogeneity issue. Lau and Pomper (2004, pp. 146–147), in their newspaper analyses of Senate candidates, address this by using two-stage least squares. Their key instruments are negative campaigning by the opposite party candidate in the *prior* election and the polling firm and media consultant working for each candidate. Unfortunately, data on polling firm and media consultants are not readily available for the years of our data. We also do not have access to prior election data (e.g., from 2000 or for several years in the case of our House sample, since not all districts were in the sample every year). Moreover, while the use of an instrument is statistically preferable—if strong instruments can be found (which we were not able to do)—it does not allow one to determine whether significance of the opponent variable reflects actual responsiveness to the opponent or both candidates responding to district/state demands (Kahn & Kenney, 1999, also do not use two-stage least squares, and Franz, Freedman, Goldstein, & Ridout, 2008, exclude the opponent negativity variable entirely). Despite these issues, we include the opponent negativity variable in our models given its prominence in past work (see, e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Lau & Pomper, 2001, 2004; Kahn & Kenney, 1999).

26. We use one-tailed tests since our main predictions, as well as those from prior work (e.g., our control variables), have clear directional content (Blalock, 1979, p. 163).

27. We compute these and other probabilities using Clarify (Tomz, Wittenberg, & King, 1999). We set all other variables to their mean values.

28. The one notable difference when we run the television analyses with a proportional dependent variable (i.e., proportion of negative ads) instead of a dichotomous one is that, with the proportional data, we do not find a significant competition main effect. We suspect this stems from the lack of variance on competition in the television sample.

29. We examined the Web data separately for each year and found two significant year interactions, with 2004 interacting with party identification (i.e., Democrat is not significant in 2004) and district partisanship (Republican districts are significantly less negative in 2004). The results suggest that minority party status (i.e., Democratic) might only matter in midterm election years since, during presidential election years, the partisan status of Congress is often a secondary consideration in a voter's mind relative to the presidential vote. Instead, minority party status is replaced by the extent to which the district opposes the more recognizable incumbent president.

30. If we rerun our Web data on the subsample of campaigns that produced an ad, the Senate effect falls to insignificance (but the positive Democrat effect remains).

31. Further analysis reveals that 32% (73 of 229) of the candidates did not go negative on either of the media, 13% (30 of 229) went negative on their Web sites but not in their television ads, 22% (51 of 229) went negative only on television (and not on their Web sites), and 33% (75 of 229) went negative on both. Thus, a majority of the candidates make the same decisions across media. We explored what might lead a candidate to go negative in one medium and not the other; the results mimic what we report in general (e.g., Democrats were more likely to go negative only online, and candidates who only went negative on television responded strongly to their opponents).

32. Given the aforementioned endogeneity issues with the opponent negativity measure, we reran our analyses excluding the variable. The Web results remain unchanged. The television ad results change slightly, with Democrat and female becoming insignificant (in both models) and the competition-challenger interaction becoming marginally significant. Also, if we rerun our analyses excluding candidates who are in the sample multiple times (e.g., in multiple years), our main results are unchanged.

33. We also investigated trends and determinants in policy-focused and personal-focused negativity on the Web. The results, which are available from the authors, mimic what we find with overall negativity with regard to our key variables of challenger status, open seats, and competitiveness.

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