



Trump, Clinton campaign will be nasty—and that's good news

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

As the presidential election looks to be featuring two of the most polarizing candidates in modern American politics, we can expect a hard sell of potential stories and ads to try and make Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton more appealing. But the real deciding factor will once again be an avalanche of negative advertising, designed to tear down the policies and besmirch the personal behavior of the other side. Already, commentators are expecting an historical use of negative campaigning. And voters should be thankful for this.

Appropriately, negative ads and campaigns get a very bad rap. They turn off voters, demonize opponents for perfectly acceptable policy disputes and coarsen the political culture — all of these are legitimate complaints. But negative campaigns are still a breath of fresh air compared to the toxic potential of positive ads.

Positive campaigns may be loved in theory, but in reality they are not idealized “Lincoln vs Douglas” debates, with each side courteously presenting their argument. They are instead frequently issue-free, focused on the perceived personal benefits of the candidate’s previous career and sunny pictures of family.

By now, with a stream of embarrassing sex scandals hitting the papers—and with a grandfatherly former Speaker of the House now serving time due to his action related to sexual assaults—we should hope that voters won’t buy into the tightly controlled stories about happy political families. But those stories, and the other inspirational pieces about rising from nothing to seek high office, are all part of the same problem of positive campaigns: They are really designed to tell as little as possible about a candidate’s actual policy.

Even when they do manage to deal with issues, positive policy proposals are presented in a facile manner, frequently with untruths and a complete unwillingness to face up to the likelihood of success versus failure. Donald Trump’s critics have loudly proclaimed that most of his ever-changing policy proclamations are impossible to carry out.

Trump and his supporters have said the same about some of his competitors’ plans, and will undoubtedly try to use the same arguments against Clinton. The only way for voters to actually judge these arguments is negative campaigns. Positive ads will not expose the elisions. Only negative ones have any hope of blasting holes and exposing the policy weaknesses of a candidate’s pie-in-the-sky plans.

But that is not the biggest benefit of negative ads. They are simply more truthful and fact-based than negative ones. Vanderbilt University Professor John Geer, the author of “In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns,” has noted that negative ads may be unpleasant but they end up presenting vastly more factual information—60 percent more on average—than the shiny happy positive variety.

What negative ads do is present a strong policy contrast for voters, giving them a chance to draw a real distinction between the two candidates. Negative ads distort information—context is always left out and they take the absolute worst possible interpretation of any action by an opponent. But they are usually very issue-based and much more precise and detailed than the positive and glowing ads in favor of a candidate.

We only have to look back through history to see this is true. Check out those old Lincoln-Douglas debates that are still held up as the ideal campaign. They are a true mud-slinging affair, filled with personal attacks and deep questions on the wisdom of the other's policy. They are more focused on tearing down the other side's argument than on presenting a strong positive claim.

Clinton vs Trump is sure to witness an historical level of mud, as negative advertising and campaigning will certainly be the top order of the day in the upcoming race. It may be unpleasant, but it is really the only way for voters to make a fair contrast between two candidates.

Commentary by Joshua Spivak, a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College in New York. He blogs at the Recall Elections Blog. Follow him on Twitter@recallelections.