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Why are negative political ads good for us?

By JOSHUA SPIVAK, Special to CNN

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After complaining about a barrage of negative ads that has put his campaign into a tailspin, Newt Gingrich, supported by some super PACs, is waging a bloody last stand in South Carolina against the clear GOP front-runner, Mitt Romney. Gingrich's drop-off and his look to negative ads as a way to revive his standing shows just how powerful the role negative advertising plays in our modern day campaigns.

Whether it's the infamous Willie Horton ad or the brutal ads that accompanied the Harry Reid/Sharon Angle senate race of 2010, voters have expressed a strong aversion to attack ads. Negative advertising has been criticized — rightly so — for coarsening our culture. And voters are turned off by them.

However, negative advertising has a value to our democratic process. In his book, "In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns," John Geer illustrates how negative ads manage to present significantly more factual information than positive ones. This is especially useful during a primary campaign when candidates have similar positions.

Some of the complaints about negative ads attempt to evoke a more genteel time, one most noteworthy for being fictitious. Campaigns have always been hard hitting. The Abraham Lincoln-Stephen Douglas race, for example, was vicious, with Lincoln's ancestry and ultimate political aims being repeatedly questioned.

What some of the critics fail to acknowledge is that positive campaigns are frequently issue-free and focused just on the sunny side of the candidate's family. The family narrative presented is likely a well-constructed veneer, one that is at odds with reality and designed specifically to avoid hard policy questions. And they rarely give out any useful information.

Arguably, if candidates can present strictly issue-oriented campaigns, then voters will be better off. But for the most part, few do. One official who ran a relatively clean campaign was John Hickenlooper, former mayor of Denver. In his successful bid for the governor seat in Colorado in 2010, Hickenlooper put out a TV commercial specifically touting his distaste for negative ads.

For an underdog or anyone running from a position of weakness, frequently, negative ads are necessary. The candidate has to show why there should be a change in leadership, and negative ads are unfortunately an easy way to go about it.

Gingrich knows all this since he is one of the most prominent practitioners of negative campaigning in recent memory; his rise to power is almost a textbook study of negative campaigning. Though he has at times tried to change his strategy, positive campaigning has never been Gingrich's strength.

Of course, negative ads have numerous problems. They pull information out of context, distort opponents' records and personal histories and can be unpleasant to watch. But negative campaigns can give voters a chance to look at hard issues and absorb the dirty truth that gets uncovered. For voters, negative ads offer more than an empty-calorie diet of faux domestic bliss.