Competition and dynamics in the tone of political advertising campaigns: theory and evidence

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Abstract:

Why do political advertising campaigns tend to start positive and turn negative? When a candidate switches tone, what is the probability that her rival will do the same? This study presents theory and evidence on the dynamics of tone in political advertising and shed light on, among other things, the questions above.

We start by presenting a model in which two political candidates decide on the content of their ads (positive or negative) each period and the news media decides whether or not to cover the campaign. The model has several implications, two of which are particularly novel: (1) although negativity is expected to increase during the campaign, in some cases, it is actually expected to decrease close to Election Day, and (2) whereas a candidate is likely to intensify the negativity of her ads when her rival becomes more negative, such interaction is less likely when her rival becomes more positive. In other words, candidates tend to move together when changing the tone of the campaign in the negative direction, but not when it becomes more positive. Thus, negativity is a “stickier” state than positivity.

We test this theory using data on the elections for the U.S. House of Representative in 2000, 2002 and 2004. For each of these election years we have daily panel data at the candidate level. The data support the model’s implications. For example, if the rival adopts a negative tone after both candidates used a positive one, the probability that the focal candidate switches to negative is at least 80 percent higher compared with the case that the rival did not change tone. On the other hand, a switch in tone by the rival after both used a negative one is not correlated with a change in tone by the focal candidate.