

Three Myths about Voter Turnout in the United States

by John Samples

Executive Summary

Critics of American politics and elections often focus on low voter turnout in the United States. They argue that voter turnout is steadily declining largely because of voter cynicism caused by big money campaigns and negative political advertising. Voter turnout is lower than it was in the 1960s, but almost the entire decline happened between 1968 and 1974. Sophisticated and detailed studies of both public trust in government and the consequences of political advertising show that neither factor has a negative effect on voter turnout.

Turnout is lower than in other developed nations, but the United States has a different culture and history than European nations that see large majorities of their citizens go to the polls. European standards are not appropriate for judging American turnout.

Critics of American politics have misunderstood voter turnout in the United States. The proposed remedies—limiting political liberty through restrictions on campaign finance and on political advertising—are neither analytically sound nor necessary for a healthy body politic.

John Samples is director of the Cato Institute's Center for Representative Government.

Many nations in Europe have higher voter turnout than the United States. But the differences between U.S. and European voting levels are not necessarily a problem.

Introduction

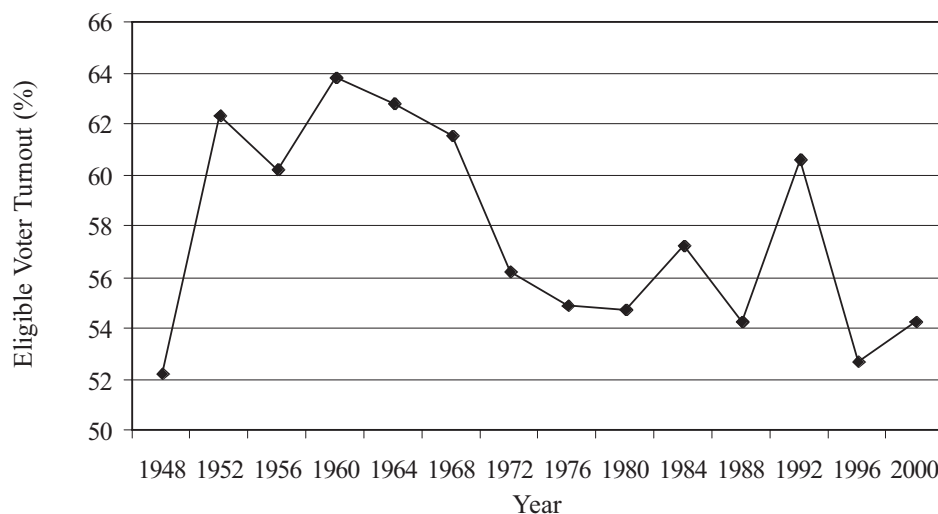
As the general election of 2004 approaches, critics of American politics will decry low voter turnout in the United States. They will note that turnout in the United States has steadily declined since the halcyon days of the 1960s. Some critics will trace that putative decline to the baleful influence of “big money” on voters. The large sums raised and spent by both parties and their campaigns will be said to alienate voters and discourage participation. After all, if campaign contributors run the show, why bother to vote? Other critics will argue that sharply critical advertising (so-called negative ads) discourages voting by fostering cynicism about the political process. Some self-styled reformers will argue that the harm done to democracy by big money and negative ads justifies government efforts to restrict campaign finance and to regulate the tone of campaign commercials. In sum, critics believe the decline in voter turnout is a sign of sickness in the body politic and that limits on political liberty are needed to save the patient. Fortunately, the critics’ diagnosis is wrong and their cure unnecessary.

Has Turnout Steadily Declined?

Many people assume Americans are voting less and less, an assumption often repeated but rarely examined. Some pundits have made a profession of studying and decrying the putative failure of Americans to live up to their political obligations. Curtis Gans, an analyst often quoted on this issue, has written of America’s “disintegrating democracy” where “the nation that prides itself on being the best example of government of, for, and by the people is rapidly becoming a nation whose participation is limited to the interested or zealous few.”¹

Complaints about U.S. turnout come in two versions. Sometimes critics say that the U.S. turnout is among the lowest in developed nations. That is accurate. Many nations in Europe have higher voter turnout than the United States. But the differences between U.S. and European voting levels are not necessarily a problem. Why should the United States be judged by European standards? We have a different history and political culture than most of Europe. Government is smaller in the United States, and politics matters less to the society and its citizens.

Figure 1
Turnout of Eligible Voters in Presidential Elections, 1948–2000



Source: Michael McDonald, George Mason University, at http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm.

But has turnout in the United States been steadily declining? Experts have traditionally measured voter turnout by dividing the number of voters by some measure of potential voters. They have gauged potential voters by the voting age population of a state, a number easily obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau. That procedure does paint a picture of a nation slowly abandoning the polls. However, that way of measuring turnout is misleading.

Political scientist Michael McDonald has shown that the number of Americans actually eligible to vote has become progressively smaller than the number of Americans of voting age. In 2004, for example, McDonald estimates that the United States will have 17.5 million people of voting age who are not eligible to vote. In estimating voter turnout, this difference changes everything. Calculations based on eligible voters (not the voting-age population) show that turnout in presidential and off-year elections has remained roughly flat for about 30 years (Figures 1 and 2).

McDonald confirms that voter turnout has gone down from its peak in the 1960s, though turnout has been higher than many experts have thought. However, the decline has not been slow and steady. Instead,

turnout has followed two paths, one relatively high in the 1950s and 1960s and a lower path after the mid-1970s. Turnout dropped into the second, lower path between 1968 and 1974. The trend since the mid-1970s has been flat or slightly downward.

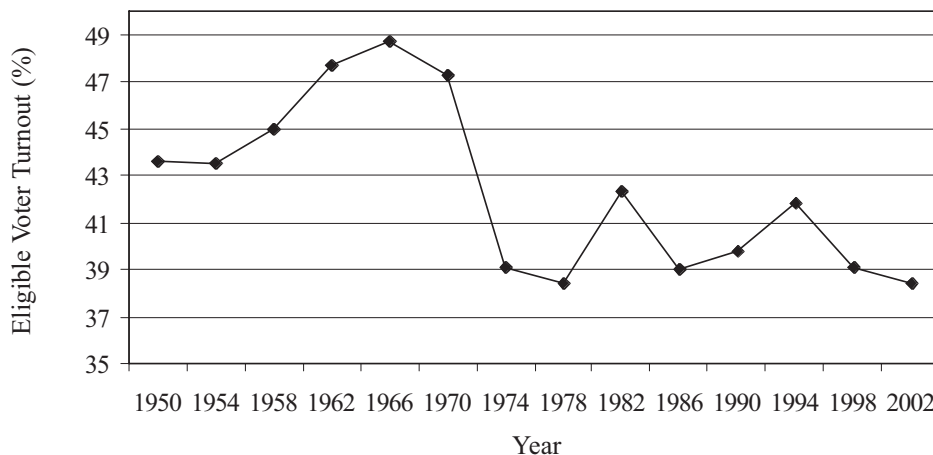
The two paths of turnout provide a clue to their cause. A cause of the decline must have either increased or decreased sharply from 1968 to 1974 and then have maintained that larger or smaller value for the next 30 years. Campaign spending does not fit either scenario: spending has risen steadily since the 1960s. As we shall see, negative advertising also has varied in ways that undermine the belief that such communications have driven down turnout.

Campaign Finance and Turnout

Why would increases in campaign spending cause declines in voter turnout? After all, candidates, parties, and groups spend money to bring voters to the polls. They spend money to stimulate turnout of potential supporters, not suppress it. One might expect that more money would lead to higher, not lower, turnout.

Candidates, parties, and groups spend money to bring voters to the polls, to stimulate turnout of potential supporters, not suppress it.

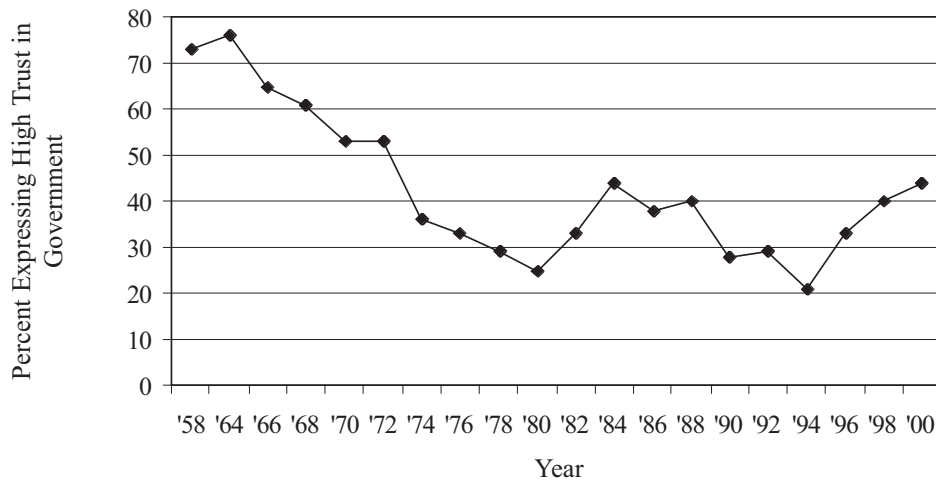
Figure 2
Turnout of Eligible Voters in Off-Year Elections, 1948–2000



Source: Michael McDonald, George Mason University, at http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm.

**Campaign
spending does not
correlate well
with public trust.**

Figure 3
Trust in Government, 1959–2000



Source: National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, *The NES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior*, 1995–2000, Table 5A.1, <http://www.umich.edu/~nes/nsguide/nsguide.htm>.

People concerned about voter turnout argue that increases in campaign spending discourage voting by fostering cynicism. For example, a federal court recently argued that “a failure to regulate the arena of campaign finance allows the influence of wealthy individuals and corporations to drown out the voices of individual citizens,” leading to a “political system unresponsive to the needs and desires of the public, and causing the public to become disillusioned with and mistrustful of the political system.”² The leader of Common Cause told the Rules Committee of the U.S. Senate that “large contributions buy access and influence in all aspects of legislative decision-making. And that is exactly why [citizens] are becoming increasingly cynical about their democracy,” which leads to declines in voter turnout.³ The critics assert (1) that our methods of financing campaigns lead to cynicism and (2) that such distrust discourages voting. We focus on the first conjecture.

Over the past 40 years, the National Election Studies Center has asked the following question every two years: “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time or only

some of the time?”

A response of “just about always” or “most of the time” shows high trust in the federal government.⁴ Since 1958 the proportion of Americans showing high trust in the federal government has declined overall (Figure 3).

Although the overall trend is downward, trust in government has declined and risen twice since 1958. The first decline began in 1964 and ended in 1980; the second began in 1984 and ended in 1994. Trust rose for a few years after 1980 and has risen continuously since 1994. Once again, campaign spending does not correlate well with public trust: spending has risen continually since the early 1970s while trust has gone up and down.

Soft money contributions, recently banned by law, were said to be the epitome of the influence of money on politics. The soft money exception to federal election law came about in 1979.⁵ Shortly thereafter, trust in government began to rise, which directly contradicts the conjecture that “big money” causes distrust in government. Trust started downhill again in 1986 and continued to decline until 1994. The partisan of campaign finance regulation might be tempted to con-

clude that the “abuses” of soft money became clear only in 1986 and along with the Iran-Contra scandal caused a decline in trust. Unfortunately for that theory, soft money began to grow in 1995 when President Clinton and his advisers raised such contributions to pay for an extensive advertising campaign designed to prepare the ground for his reelection.⁶ In other words, just at the moment the alleged soft money “abuses” started, trust in government began to rise. In general, if we look at soft money spending in presidential election years, we find a positive relationship between soft money and trust in the federal government. In other words, *growth* in soft money spending tends to be moderately associated with *growth* in trust.⁷

Other public opinion data support a similar conclusion. For example, the number of Americans who agree with the statement “People don’t have a say in what the government does” dropped like a stone during the period when soft money fundraising rose rapidly. By 2002 the number agreeing with the statement was near its all-time low.⁸ The same can be said of the number of people who believed that public officials don’t care what people think or who answered “not much” when asked “how much does the government listen to the people?”⁹ Public belief in the responsiveness of the government appears to have risen during a period of increased campaign spending and soft money fundraising.

Step back again from the trust data. When did trust in government go up? In 1980 and 1994. What happened in those two years? Outsiders promising limits on government and lower taxes won the presidency and the Congress. Overall, increases in trust are strongly associated with declines in the federal government’s share of the nation’s wealth.¹⁰ Moreover, both years saw victories by Republicans, the party that traditionally raises and spends more money on elections. If campaign spending causes distrust in government, why has trust in government gone up *only* when the political party associated with raising and spending a lot of money on campaigns has won watershed elections? Could it

be that money has little if any effect on trust in government?

More sophisticated analyses support that conclusion.¹¹ The correlation coefficient between congressional spending on elections and trust in government from 1982 to 2000 is about zero.¹² We need not rely on general correlations alone. Several studies that control for other factors affecting trust in government have shown that campaign spending has little influence on public trust or efficacy (the belief that citizens can make a difference in politics). John J. Coleman of the University of Wisconsin and Paul F. Manna of the College of William and Mary looked closely at the effects of spending on public trust in the 1994 and 1996 elections, taking all relevant factors into account.¹³ They concluded, “Spending by incumbents and challengers seems to have little substantive impact on trust and efficacy.”¹⁴

Some recent research on state campaign finance law points to the same conclusion. State campaign finance laws vary a great deal: some have contribution limits, some had spending limits prior to 1976, others offer public financing, and many require disclosure of contributions. Since the state laws vary, statistical analysis can determine the effects of various campaign finance regulations on public trust in government and voter turnout. David Primo and Jeffrey Milyo have studied the effects of state campaign finance laws on public trust in government. Their study includes a comprehensive collection of state laws as well as 50 years of surveys concerning public trust in government. They conclude: “The results suggest that there may be some modest improvement in efficacy from disclosure laws, and perhaps even [from] limits on contributions from organizations; however, the evidence showing a perverse effect of public financing is at least as strong. Finally, there is no evidence that either mandatory expenditure limits or limits on individual contributions have an appreciable impact on efficacy.” The perverse effect of public financing is the most surprising of these findings: public financing of elections “has a statistically sig-

Campaign spending has little influence on public trust or efficacy.

**Other factors
affect public
confidence in
government far
more than
campaign
finance.**

nificant negative effect on efficacy.”¹⁵ Other research by Milyo and Primo concerns the relationship between campaign finance laws and voter turnout. If the critics were correct, we would expect that contribution or spending limits or public financing would have positive and significant effects on turnout in states that adopt such restrictions. After all, such laws would presumably blunt the influence of private campaign contributions and thereby increase trust in government and foster higher turnout. Recent research examining turnout for every gubernatorial election in the United States from 1950 to 2000 found that none of those restrictions had any effect on voter turnout. Disclosure appears to increase turnout by about 2 percent.¹⁶

Other factors affect public confidence in government far more than campaign finance. Nathaniel Persily and Kelli Lammie have recently examined the factors affecting public confidence in government. According to the appearances argument, Persily and Lammie should have found that some feature of the campaign finance system, taking all other factors into account, causes a decline in public confidence in government. They found instead that Americans’ “confidence in the system of representative government”—specifically, their beliefs that government officials are not “crooked” and that government is “run for the benefit of all”—are associated with their positions in society, their general tendency to trust others, their beliefs about what government should do, and their ideological or philosophical disagreement with the policies of incumbent officeholders. For Persily and Lammie, their regressions indicate that “trends in general attitudes of corruption seem unrelated to anything happening in the campaign finance system (i.e., a rise in contributions or the introduction of a particular reform).”¹⁷ Other factors, not campaign finance, seem to cause declines in public confidence in government.

The evidence shows that spending has no effect on public trust. Indeed, multivariate analysis suggests that other factors account for changes in public confidence in govern-

ment. The asserted line of causality from campaign finance to distrust of government does not exist. Given that, campaign finance cannot cause declines in voter turnout.

Negative Ads

For intellectuals, television runs a close second to campaign contributions as the pathogen plaguing American democracy. Analysts note that most campaign spending goes to television ads and that campaigns have “turned increasingly hostile and ugly.” Attack ads, the argument continues, have “become the norm rather than the exception.”¹⁸ Aesthetics aside, critics have tried to link such advertising to declining turnout. Others claim that private financing of campaigns fosters negative ads and that limits on spending would improve the tone of public discourse.¹⁹

What is a “negative ad”? The term is rarely defined explicitly. Critics use the term to mean any advertising that attacks or is critical of an opponent. “Negative campaigning focuses on the weaknesses and faults of the opposition: the mistakes they have made, the flaws in their character or performance, the bad policies they would pursue.” As two experts remark, “Negative campaigning is not lying and stealing and cheating, it is criticizing the opponent.” Positive campaigning, in contrast, emphasizes the merits of a candidate and the beneficial policies he would pursue.²⁰ Looked at this way, negative advertising provides valuable information to the electorate. Some people believe negative advertising harms democracy by driving down voter turnout. Are they correct?

The Effects of Negative Ads on Democracy

General Data. Given that voter turnout dropped in the early 1970s, we would expect campaigns to have turned negative at that time and remained so. Steven E. Finkel of the University of Virginia and John G. Geer of Vanderbilt University examined most tele-

vised presidential ads since 1960 and rated each as positive or negative. In fact, advertising during presidential campaigns became progressively more positive from 1964 to 1976, the latter year being the most positive in tone of any campaign from 1964 to 1992.²¹ The year turnout collapsed, 1972, fell during the time of a rising tone of presidential campaigning. While the tone of presidential campaigning declined after 1976, turnout has remained essentially flat. In fact, the 1992 election featured both the best voter turnout after 1970 and the worst tone of all the years measured. Put another way, the sharpest decline ever recorded in the tone of presidential campaigns is associated with the largest rise in voter turnout in the 30-year period studied. Negative campaigning does not correlate negatively with turnout by eligible voters. In fact, the data suggest the opposite conclusion, especially in the 1992 election: negative ads are positively associated with a rise in turnout.

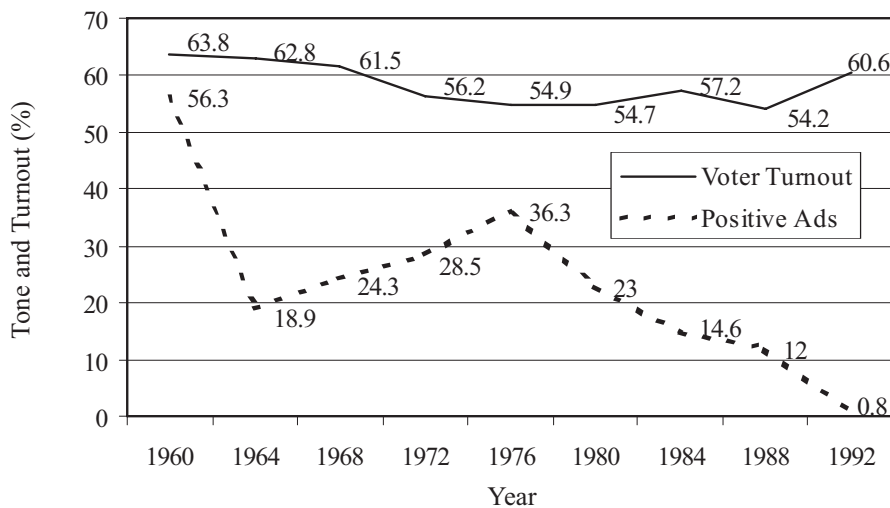
Experimental Evidence. About a decade ago, a team of scholars (hereafter the Ansolabehere group) conducted experiments that seemed to indicate that attack ads drive down turnout.

Their experiment exposed a treatment and a control group to negative ads. The results indicated that negative ads drove down turnout by 5 percent. They followed the experiments by looking at the effects of negative campaigns on turnout in the actual 1990 Senate contests. The scholars again found that negative campaigns reduced turnout by 4 percent.²² They concluded that negative campaigning drives down turnout by making “voters disenchanted with the business of politics as usual” and by lowering “confidence in the responsiveness of electoral institutions and public officials.”²³ They argued that negative ads would especially reduce participation by political independents whose disgust with the tone of campaigns would drive them away from the voting booth in disproportionate numbers. Following up on that conjecture, the same authors conducted experiments in the 1992 presidential elections that indicated that negative advertising led to an 11 percent decline in intention to vote among political independents.²⁴

Those studies have at least three problems. First, the experiments did not use actual campaign advertisements. Second, the larger statistical study of the Senate campaigns mea-

Negative ads are positively associated with a rise in turnout.

Figure 4
Voter Turnout and Campaign Tone, 1960–92



Source: Steven E. Finkel and John G. Geer, “A Spot Check: Casting Doubt on the Demobilizing Effect of Attack Advertising,” *American Journal of Political Science* 42 (April 1998): 582, Figure 1.

Several studies have found that critical ads at least do no harm to democracy and may well increase turnout.

sured “negativity” by press reports on the tone of a campaign. If the press reported campaigns as more negative than they were, the researchers’ conclusions would be off target. Finally, and most important, their findings have not been replicated in subsequent studies. Indeed, other scholars have found that negative ads improve democracy in theory and practice.

Specific Studies. A moment’s reflection suggests several reasons why negative ads would boost turnout. Negative ads contain relevant information for a voter, and scholars have long known that more knowledgeable voters are more likely to participate. Negative information helps voters discriminate between candidates and thereby gives them a reason to go to the polls. Finally, negative messages may stir up voters, creating more enthusiasm and involvement in an election and, perhaps, a desire to learn more about the candidates.²⁵ As two scholars point out, “Criticism of an opponent—particularly strong criticism—sends a message that something of substance is at stake in the election, that its outcome matters, and that this is a choice voters should care about.”²⁶

Tough critical electoral advertising does fall short of the norms of the seminar room, but those norms are unrealistic for a nation in which most people do not care much about participating in politics.²⁷ Voting involves costs and benefits to citizens. In the United States many people appear to believe that the costs outweigh the benefits. More citizens might vote if the costs of voting were lower. One major cost is gaining information about the candidates and issues at stake in an election. Negative ads provide relevant, critical information in a brief, easily grasped format. Far from being pathological, the brevity and tone of electoral ads lower the costs of voting.

The conjecture that negative ads stimulate turnout at the polls has become the “emerging conventional wisdom” among scholars studying the question.²⁸ Scholars have not been able to show that negative ads reduce turnout.²⁹ At the same time, several studies have found that critical ads at least do

no harm to democracy and may well increase turnout.³⁰

Finkel and Geer studied closely most of the presidential campaign ads that had run in the United States since 1960. They decided whether each ad was positive or negative and constructed an index that measured the overall proportion of ads that was positive. Finkel and Geer then looked at the relationship between the tone of the presidential campaign ads and turnout (including the participation of political independents), controlling for many other factors that are known to affect turnout. Their findings are striking:

- Advertising tone has essentially no effect on turnout of the electorate, once other factors are taken into account.
- Campaigns with more negative advertisements have a slightly higher rate of turnout among independents than more positive campaigns, again taking other factors into account.³¹

Finkel and Geer conclude “that exposure to negative campaign advertisements has no demobilizing effect among the general public or among Independents.”³²

Other researchers have tried to estimate the effects of being exposed to political ads. Paul Freedman and Kenneth Goldstein examined the advertising in the 1997 Virginia gubernatorial election. They not only evaluated the tone of the commercials but also closely tracked when and where campaign ads appeared. Their effort marks the most precise measure we have of voters’ exposure to political advertising. Once again taking account of other factors that might affect turnout, they found that negative advertising strongly increased turnout. Strikingly, ads that conveyed a positive or more mixed message seemed to lower turnout. Freedman and Goldstein conclude that “it is primarily the negative spots that have a mobilizing effect on voters.”³³

Critics of negative ads might object that those two studies are not representative of what we “know” about negative ads. Fortunately, two

Negative advertising does not harm American democracy or its political culture.

political scientists have considered all studies of negative ads up to 1999 to provide some general conclusions. They performed a “meta analysis” of 117 findings about negative ads drawn from 52 separate studies. Their work addressed three questions: “Do citizens dislike negative ads? Are negative ads more effective than positive ads? Does negative advertising reduce electoral participation?” Their statistical analysis of the research literature found

- no reliable statistical basis for concluding that negative ads are liked less than positive ones,
- no evidence that negative political advertisements are any more effective than positive political ads, and
- little evidence that widespread use of negative ads imperils electoral participation.

The authors conclude that “participatory democracy may be on the wane in the United States, but the evidence reviewed here suggests that negative political advertising has relatively little to do with it.”³⁴

More recently, two political scientists, Kenneth Goldstein and Paul Freedman, have studied negative ads by using a commercial database that identifies where and how often a campaign commercial appears. Their research assistant then coded each ad in the 1996 presidential race as positive, purely negative, or contrast (ads that have positive information

about their sponsor and negative claims about his opponent). They also obtained data about when and where the ads ran and the television viewing habits of individuals in various parts of the country.

They found that positive ads have no effect on turnout but “negative ads have a significant and substantial mobilizing effect.” The increases in turnout brought by negative ads more than offset the decreases caused by the overall volume of ads. More concretely, Goldstein and Freedman looked at the progressive effects of negative ads on the likelihood that an “average voter” would go to the polls.³⁵ Table 1 summarizes their results.

Overall, exposing the average voter to heavy doses of negative ads would, all things considered, increase his likelihood of voting by over 10 percent. Lighter doses, an “average” exposure for example, increase the probability of voting by 3 percent.³⁶

The most recent contribution to the scholarly literature on the effects of negative campaign advertising confirms earlier findings. Joshua Clinton and John Lapinski constructed a large controlled and randomized experiment to discern the immediate and long-term effects of ads on voting. The researchers found that “it is never the case that exposure to negative advertising decreases either the reported probability of voting or the actual voting.” They also report “no evidence” that political independents are most susceptible to negative ads. Contrary to earlier

Table 1
Negative Ads and Turnout

Exposure to Negative Ads	Probability of Voting	Effect of Negative Ads on Turnout (percent)
None	0.761	
Average	0.789	2.8
One standard deviation above average	0.833	4.4
Two standard deviations above average	0.869	3.6

Source: Ken Goldstein and Paul Freedman, “Campaign Advertising and Voter Turnout: New Evidence for a Stimulation Effect,” *Journal of Politics* 64, no. 3 (August 2002): 721–40.

Any government regulation of negative ads would involve controlling the content of speech, which the First Amendment forbids.

er studies, Clinton and Lapinski found only limited evidence that negative advertising stimulates voting.³⁷

Summary. Social scientists have become increasingly skillful and sophisticated at measuring the effects of advertising on citizens. Their conclusions about negative ads are clear. Negative advertising does not harm American democracy or its political culture. If negative ads did not exist, fewer people might well turn out to vote. If higher turnout is better for democracy than lower turnout, negative ads may make a valuable contribution to American democracy.

Constitutional Considerations

If negative ads did lower turnout, what could government do? Some people argue that Americans should consider the tradeoff between free expression and voter turnout, suggesting that government regulation of ads may be warranted.³⁸ Americans may want to consider the tradeoff, but any government regulation of negative ads would involve controlling the content of speech, which the First Amendment forbids.

Even if we bracketed the constitutional questions, some research suggests that boosting turnout through ad regulation would require distinguishing “useful negative information” (which boosts turnout) from “shrill mudslinging” (which discourages voting).³⁹ Should government be given the power to distinguish good and bad negative ads? Wouldn’t “mudslinging ads” simply be defined as ads that effectively criticize the individuals or groups who have the power to regulate campaign advertising? That likely outcome highlights the wisdom of the phrase “Congress shall make no law” in the First Amendment. If negative ads were a public problem—and the evidence says they are not—the best policy response would be criticism and shame, coupled with vigorous media reporting and evaluation of campaign advertising.

Limits on negative ads would also make American elections less competitive. Any limits on attack ads inevitably favor incumbents.

Those who already hold office begin their reelection campaigns with enormous advantages in name recognition and resources (staff work, campaign money, and so on). Incumbents also benefit from the value voters put on experience.⁴⁰ Incumbents do not lose unless challengers find some way to become known in a district and to call into question the incumbent’s record. Challengers may use positive ads to make their names more recognized by voters, but calling the incumbent into question requires criticism that is sharp and memorable: “Challengers certainly hope to convince people of their own virtues . . . but they are not likely to get far without directly undermining support for the incumbent.” Not surprisingly, researchers found that 18 percent of voters could name something they disliked about an incumbent who won reelection; in contrast, in districts where incumbents lost, 46 percent of voters could name a reason to dislike the officeholder.⁴¹

A more recent study of Senate elections makes a similar point. Richard Lau and Gerald Pomper looked at U.S. Senate races from 1988 to 1998 to see who used negative appeals to voters. Taking all things in account, they found that challengers in general, candidates in open seat races, Republican candidates, candidates with less money than their opponents, and candidates facing negative campaigns were more likely than everyone else to use negative appeals.⁴² Lau and Pomper’s conclusions suggest that negative ads are a tool for candidates facing an uphill battle, candidates likely to lose unless something changes. Challengers and candidates with less money (often the same persons) obviously need some weapon to fight their battles. Negative ads are that weapon.

Conclusion

Many things are taken for granted in American politics—and none more than the belief that voter turnout has steadily decreased over the past 30 years largely as a result of a noxious combination of big

money and negative ads. Voter turnout is lower than it was in the 1960s, but almost all the decline came between 1968 and 1974. General data as well as careful studies of the causes of voter turnout indicate that neither campaign finance nor negative advertising has alienated voters and kept them away from the polls. No justification exists for limiting the rights of citizens to donate to campaigns or fund political advertising as a way to promote voter turnout.

Notes

1. Curtis Gans, "Table for One, Please: America's Disintegrating Democracy," *Washington Monthly*, July–August 2000.
2. *Jacobus v. State of Alaska*, 338 F.3d. 1107 (2003).
3. See Scott Harshbarger, Testimony to the Rules Committee, U.S. Senate, April 5, 2000, <http://www.commoncause.org/publications/april00/0405test.htm>.
4. The NES has asked other questions related to trust in government. For example, since 1964 it has asked, "Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?" Responses to this question have a 98 percent correlation with responses to the general trust question noted in the text. The two questions clearly tap into the same set of attitudes and may be treated for present purposes as identical.
5. Anthony Corrado, "Party Soft Money," in *Campaign Finance Reform: A Sourcebook*, ed. Anthony Corrado et al. (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), pp. 171–72.
6. Michael Kelly, "Soft Money, No Crime?" *Washington Post*, November 27, 1997, p. A29.
7. The correlation coefficient is +.37. I focus on presidential election years to produce comparable data. Soft money spending in off-year elections was much lower than in presidential years so it is necessary to control for the presidential race.
8. National Election Studies, Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, *The NES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior, 1995–2000*, Table 5B.2, <http://www.umich.edu/~nes/neguide/neguide.htm>.
9. Ibid., Tables 5B.3 and 5C.1.
10. Since 1964 the correlation between trust in government and federal spending as a percentage of GDP is .61. This is an intriguing though not definitive result. Other factors may have affected the trust measure over that time.
11. A similar argument about soft money can be found in Nathaniel Persily and Kelli Lammie, "Perceptions of Corruption and Campaign Finance: When Public Opinion Constitutes Constitutional Law," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 153 (forthcoming December 2004). See also Figure 2 therein, which indicates the relevant trends in soft money and public opinion.
12. The actual number is .013. David Primo reports a similar finding; see David Primo, "Public Opinion and Campaign Finance: A Skeptical Look at Senator McCain's Claims," Cato Institute Briefing Paper no. 60, January 31, 2001.
13. Coleman and Manna's methods, data, and variables are discussed in John J. Coleman and Paul F. Manna, "Congressional Campaign Spending and the Quality of Democracy," *Journal of Politics* 62, no. 3 (2000): 763–65.
14. See *ibid.*, p. 766. That conclusion reflects the minuscule coefficients for candidate spending reported in Table 1 in *ibid.*, p. 767.
15. David M. Primo and Jeffrey Milyo, "Campaign Finance and Political Efficacy: Evidence from the States," Paper presented at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, August 2003.
16. See David Primo and Jeffrey Milyo, "State Campaign Finance Laws and the Turnout Decision," Harris School Working Paper Series 04.10, March 2004. The authors' analysis controls for several factors that typically affect turnout. They did find that poll taxes, when legal, depressed turnout by about 13 percent. The findings of this study are preliminary. The authors plan to deal with concerns about endogeneity (states with low turnout may pass campaign finance laws to bring voters to the polls) in a future study.
17. Persily and Lammie.
18. Stephen Ansolabehere et al., "Does Attack Advertising Demobilize the Electorate?" *American Political Science Review* 88 (December 1994): 829.
19. Ronald Dworkin, "The Curse of American Politics," *New York Review of Books*, October 17, 1996, pp. 19–24.
20. William G. Mayer, "In Defense of Negative

Campaigning," *Political Science Quarterly* 111, no. 3 (1996): 440–41. See also Richard Lau and Gerald Pomper, "Negative Campaigning by US Senate Candidates," *Party Politics* 7 (January 2001): 81.

21. Steven E. Finkel and John G. Geer, "A Spot Check: Casting Doubt on the Demobilizing Effect of Attack Advertising," *American Journal of Political Science* 42 (April 1998): 582, Figure 1. Lau and Pomper found no systematic trend in the use of negative ads in their study of Senate races from 1988 to 1998; see Lau and Pomper, p. 77.

22. Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 833.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 835.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

25. Finkel and Geer, p. 577.

26. Paul Freedman and Ken Goldstein, "Measuring Media Exposure and the Effects of Negative Campaign Ads," *American Journal of Political Science* 43 (October 1999): 1190.

27. John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: American's Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

28. Ken Goldstein and Paul Freedman, "Campaign Advertising and Voter Turnout: New Evidence for a Stimulation Effect," *Journal of Politics* 64 (August 2002): 722.

29. Some work has found a generally positive though nuanced effect of negative advertising. One study of U.S. Senate campaigns concluded that people distinguish between relevant negative information presented in an appropriate manner and irrelevant, shrill, and pejorative ads. Ads seen as legitimate criticism draw people into the voting booth. In contrast, "harsh and irrelevant" negative messages seem to discourage voting. The study also found that "mudslinging"—providing harsh and irrelevant information—discouraged turnout more among political independents, people with little interest in politics, and political novices. See Kim Fridkin Kahn and Patrick J. Kenney, "Do Negative Campaigns Mobilize or Suppress Turnout? Clarifying the Relationship between Negativity and Participation," *American Political Science Review* 93 (December 1999): 877–89.

30. Other studies support the "mobilization the-

sis." Martin Wattenberg and Craig Brians concluded that "in 1992, recollection of negative campaign ads was actually associated with significantly higher turnout, and in 1996, there was no significant relationship." Martin P. Wattenberg and Craig Leonard Brians, "Negative Campaign Advertising: Demobilizer or Mobilizer?" *American Political Science Review* 93 (December 1999): 892. Critics have noted that this conclusion depends on voter recall of ads, which is subject to distortion and error. Stephen D. Ansolabehere, Shanto Iyengar, and Adam Simon, "Replicating Experiments Using Aggregate and Survey Data: The Case of Negative Advertising and Turnout," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (December 1999): 901–9.

31. Finkel and Geer, pp. 584–86.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 587. Finkel and Geer's study has some limitations. They have a lot of data on the tone of campaign ads. They do not know, however, how often and where the ads were shown. In their index, however, each ad has equal weight and equal exposure.

33. A change of one standard deviation in exposure to negative ads resulted in an increase of three points in the probability of turnout. Freedman and Goldstein, pp. 1198–2000.

34. Richard Lau et al., "The Effects of Negative Political Advertisements: A Meta-Analytic Assessment," *American Political Science Review* 93 (December 1999): 856–58. "Meta-analysis refers to the analysis of analyses . . . the statistical analysis of a large collection of analysis results from individual studies for the purpose of integrating the findings." Gene V. Glass, "Primary, Secondary, and Meta-analysis of Research," *Educational Researcher* 5 (1976): 3.

35. Goldstein and Freedman, pp. 721–40.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 735.

37. Joshua D. Clinton and John S. Lapinski, "'Targeted' Advertising and Voter Turnout: An Experimental Study of the 2000 Presidential Election," *Journal of Politics* 66 (February 2004): 92.

38. Ansolabehere and Iyengar, p. 836.

39. Kahn and Kenney, p. 887.

40. Mayer, p. 451, n. 29.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 451, quoting research by Gary Jacobson on the 1980 and 1982 elections.

42. Lau and Pomper, p. 79.