

More voters at GOP polls

Many of the 20 states that have held Republican presidential contests this year had record voter turnouts. Here is a look at how some compare:

2000 turnout ¹	Previous record ¹		
New Hampshire	26%	Washington	18.8%
South Carolina	24.3%	Maryland	8.1%
Michigan	19.3%	Massachusetts	9.5%
Virginia	10%	Ohio	6.7%
	18.7%		10.4%
	17.1%		9.4%
	12.6%		16.3%
	5.1%		12.5%

¹—percentage of those eligible to vote

Source: Committee for the Study of the American Electorate

By Marcy E. Mullins, USA TODAY

Can't candidates get along? Luckily, no

By John G. Geer

The 2000 presidential race has yielded one clear lesson that the leading contenders seem to have absorbed, even if journalists and pundits have not: Negative campaigning does not keep voters away from the polls.

Consider the harsh attacks exchanged between Republicans John McCain and George W. Bush in the weeks before Super Tuesday. Despite such negativity, there have been record-shattering turnouts in most states' GOP primaries this year.

Big turnouts in a few primaries do not constitute enough evidence to toss out the long-held view that voters recoil from negative campaigning. But this evidence conforms to the recent findings of scholars, who have concluded that negative campaigning in general — and attack television advertising, in particular — does not keep people out of voting booths.

Opposite of conventional wisdom

In December's *American Political Science Review*, for example, an analysis of current research by Richard R. Lau and his colleagues "uncovered little evidence to warrant the fears of those who believe that electoral participation is imperiled by the increasingly widespread use of negative political advertisements."

Steve Finkel at the University of Virginia and I reached a similar conclusion in our own research of 10 presidential elections from 1960 to 1992. Negative advertising, we found, had a slight positive effect on voter turnout — evidence that turns conventional wisdom on its head.

Attacks can turn some voters off to politics, but what is generally ignored is the flip side of the coin: Negative campaigning also can make people more engaged in the political debate and, hence, more likely to turn out on Election Day. Republicans are Republicans not just because they like the GOP, but because they dislike Democrats. Negative campaigns can be more interesting, more competitive and more attention-grabbing than, say, a "contest" between two like-minded candidates whose programs barely differ. Indeed, Democratic primaries have had no record turnouts this year.

In addition, negative ads in presidential campaigns, I found, are more issue-oriented and more specific in presenting issues than are positive ads. Remember Ronald Reagan's 1984 "Morning in America" ads, which spoke grandly of the unlimited potential of Americans? These spots made people feel good, but said little about Reagan's policies or, say, the skyrocketing deficit. Walter Mondale, by contrast, sponsored a series of attack ads that talked about the rising deficit and the need for fiscal restraint. His ads did not make people feel good, but voters saw graphic displays of the unsettling growth in the national debt.

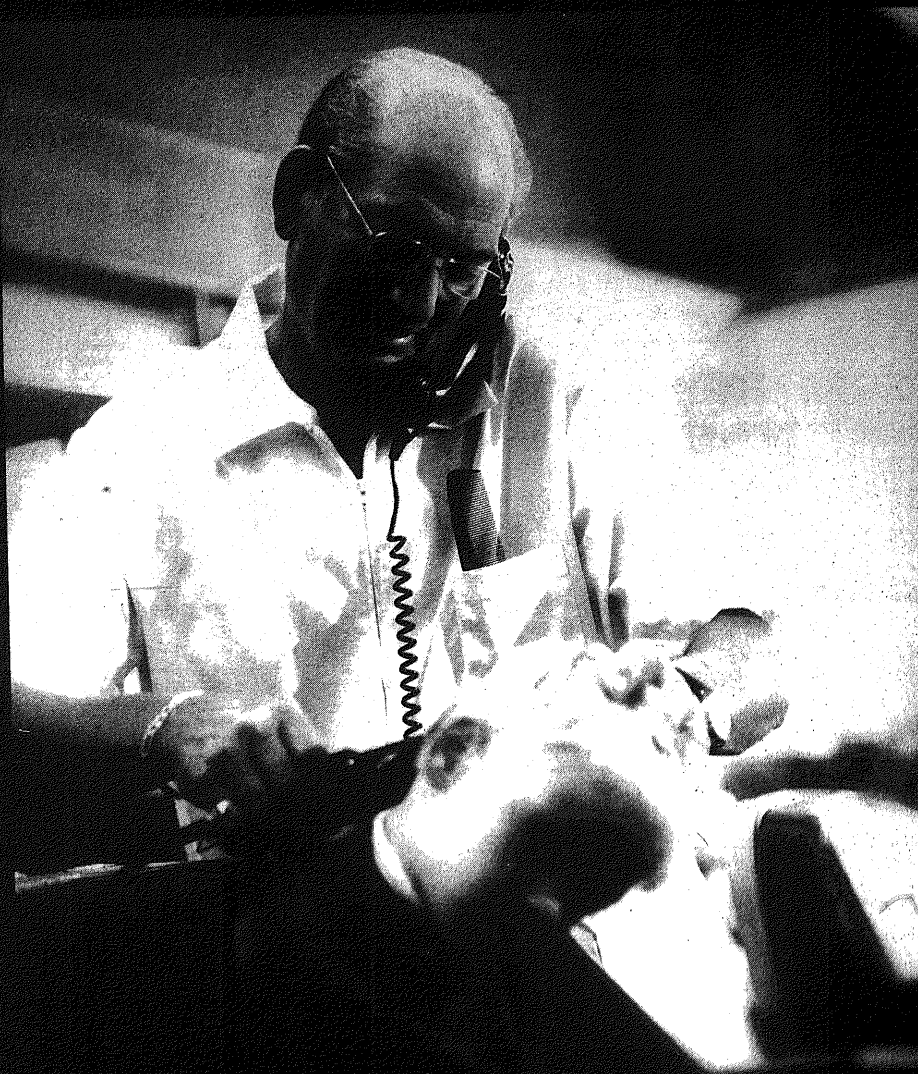
Negative information vs. bad information

I'm not arguing that our society would be better off with nastier campaigns. Rather, it is important that we realize that the negative things candidates say about each other play an important role in a democracy. Campaigns are pitched battles for the control of parties and of government, not feel-good exercises in which everyone should be nice to each other. Partisans won't raise their own weaknesses; that is the opposition's responsibility. Creating a more informed electorate is valuable in and of itself, but we also know from years of research that more informed citizens participate at higher rates.

In the months before the November election, the key is not whether Bush attacks Al Gore or whether Gore fires back. The critical issue is whether the claims are accurate. Accurate information, "negative" or "positive," plays a valuable role in yielding democratic outcomes. The danger in any election is not negativity, but misinformation.

This lesson is particularly important given the early signs that this upcoming presidential battle may be the nastiest in recent memory. The likely nominees are already on the attack, and it is only March. It is important, therefore, that pundits and journalists focus on the accuracy of the appeals made by candidates, not their negativity. And, to be accurate themselves, political commentators should stop complaining that negative campaigns lower voter turnout.

John G. Geer is a professor of political science at Vanderbilt



GET THE LONG AND SHORT OF SMARTLEASE AT 1-800-32-SMART
YOU COULD TRIM 30% FROM THE MONTHLY PAYMENT
YOU'D HAVE WITH A BANK LOAN* SNIP. SNIP.
JUST CALL

www.gmacfs.com