Negative Campaigns and Their Influence on Voter Attitudes

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CBS News/NY Times National Poll

The opinion poll asks respondents on their attitudes towards the 2012 presidential election.

The independent variable in this study is the public’s perception of negativity with respect to the 2012 elections. This variable is gathered through the question that asks respondents to compare how negative (or positive) they feel about the election.

Cross Tabulation Results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enthusiasm about the Campaign by Perceptions of Negativity</th>
<th>Very Enthusiastic</th>
<th>Somewhat Enthusiastic</th>
<th>Not Enthusiastic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More Positive</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Same</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Negative</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n=782)</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cross Tabulation Results: Enthusiasm about the Campaign by Perceptions of Negativity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enthusiasm about the Campaign by Perceptions of Negativity</th>
<th>Very Enthusiastic</th>
<th>Somewhat Enthusiastic</th>
<th>Not Enthusiastic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More Positive</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Same</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Negative</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n=502)</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

H: Negative Campaigns and Enthusiasm

- After running the two variables through a cross tab the results demonstrated that the hypothesis was not supported.
- 53.7% of respondents who answered that they were very enthusiastic about the campaign had perceived the elections as negative.
- Only 6.2% of respondents who said they were very enthusiastic perceived the campaign as positive.
- This evidence suggest that negativity does not depress voter enthusiasm but in fact stimulates it.
- However, symmetric measures demonstrated that these finding were not statistically significant (Approx. Sig. = .277)

H: Negative Campaigns and Enthusiasm with Control Variable

- When diving the respondents between those who paid high attention and those who paid low attention the results differed.
- Among those in high attention category: 55% of respondents who were very enthusiastic had perceived the campaign as negative.
- Among those in the low attention category: 45.2% of respondents who were very enthusiastic had perceived the campaign as negative.
- This evidence suggests that perception of negativity among this category actually diminished the amount of those who felt very enthusiastic.

Conclusions

- While different methods of analyzing demonstrate conflicting results, it seems that in this case such campaigning may in fact stimulate voters.
- However, it is important to recognize the effects that negative campaigning may have on the electorate considering the extremely low voter participation in the U.S.
- Continuing the discussion on this topic is important if we want to realize a healthy functioning electoral process.

References

- American Political Science Review. 57, 861-869.
- American Political Science Review. 31, 511-524.
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