The Civic Consequences of "Going Negative" : Attack Ads and Adolescents' Knowledge, Consumption, and Participation

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This study explores whether negative political advertising has any impact on adolescents. Two datasets are merged for this inquiry: (1) content-coded ad-buy data on the placement of campaign messages on a market-by-market and program-by-program basis and (2) national survey data of parent-child dyads collected immediately after the 2008 presidential election. The authors' analysis finds that the negativity of political advertising to which adolescents were exposed predicted human-interest candidate knowledge, but not policy-relevant candidate knowledge. In addition, the negativity of political advertising exposure suppressed political consumerism among adolescents, but had no effect on their levels of political participation. This study shows that political campaigns can affect adolescents' knowledge and participation in unconventional and potentially deleterious ways.

Keywords: conscious consumption; candidate knowledge; election campaigns; negative advertising; youth socialization

Generation Y, often characterized as disengaged from societal institutions but dedicated to their devices, challenged part of that account through their involvement in the 2008 presidential election. More young people reported attending a campaign event than did older voters, and nearly one in ten young voters donated money to a political candidate (Keeter, Horowitz, and Tyson 2008). Born roughly between 1980 and 1999, this cohort's participation in the 2008 election cycle has been traced to their involvement with social and mobile media (Bode et al. forthcoming). This article complicates that narrative by examining the impact of campaign messaging, namely, political advertising, on various forms of political knowledge and participation.

Notably, we expand our exploration beyond conventional measures of these concepts by examining the effects of political advertising on

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both policy-relevant and human-interest candidate knowledge. In addition, we examine its effects on both conventional campaign participation and the "sleeping giant" of political consumption, which Zukin and colleagues (2006, 81) asserted "many are inclined to [take part in]" if only systematic information sources guided this behavior. Others contend that it has become a powerful and convenient way for younger generations to express their political values through their pocketbooks rather than through the voting booth (Shah et al. 2007b).

Research has shown that campaign communication has the ability to socialize adolescents into political life (Sears and Valentino 1997). Political advertising, a direct and unfiltered form of candidate communications, can be a source of knowledge and catalyst for mobilization. Yet research on the influence of political advertising on youths is limited (Atkin 1976) and, in many respects, outdated. In

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contemporary elections, political advertising has become a core component of the campaign information environment. During the 2008 presidential election, more than one million political ads were aired at a cost of approximately $600 million (University of Wisconsin Advertising Project 2010). The escalation of attack advertising in recent elections and the resultant angst among its critics, however, complicates this relationship.

Ignoring political advertising in the study of adolescent political socialization is understandable; after all, most political ads are not meant to target those under the voting age. Nonetheless, adolescents who watch television encounter a sizable amount of political advertising. And although they cannot vote, they can learn about candidates, express their political preferences through consumption decisions, and participate in the campaign in other ways. The volume and tone of these campaign ads may prove to be a consequential agent of youth socialization, enhancing some outcomes while suppressing others. Yet a review of the literature suggests that political advertising has hardly ever been studied in the context of adolescent political socialization (cf. Atkin 1976; Sears and Valentino 1997), especially in the context of the post–billion dollar campaign cycle. Even more surprising, no research has examined the effects of attack ads on adolescents, despite the rise of negativity across recent elections.

We posit that early exposure to negative campaigns can have significant ramifications for adolescents' comprehension of and participation in politics. This study fills the gap in the literature by exploring whether negative political advertising had any impact on adolescents' knowledge and participation during the 2008 presidential election. We do so by examining political knowledge, consumption, and participation in data from a national panel survey, conducted during the 2008 general election, of adolescents ages 12 to 17 and their parents. During that campaign season, these adolescents were among the youngest members of Generation Y.

Incidental Exposure and Campaign Knowledge

Adolescents are not the target audience for political advertising, so why do we expect them to be exposed to these strategically placed ads? The answer lies in the *incidental* nature of advertising exposure. Unlike television programs, whose schedules are released in advance so that the audience can exercise selective exposure, the kind of advertising placed within those programs is not sought out or easily avoided. A viewer who sits down to watch a program will arguably be exposed to all the ads embedded in it, regardless of whether he or she likes those ads. In other words, exposure to advertising is largely incidental, not purposeful.

Admittedly, the audience may choose not to attend to the ads embedded in or between programs, a phenomenon aggravated by the diffusion of such time-shifting devices as digital video recorders. In practice, however, the media

industry assumes that people who watch the programs in which the ads are embedded are also exposed to the ads. Advertising media buys, therefore, are based on the gross rating points delivered by television shows. As a result, we operationalize political advertising exposure in this study in a similar fashion. By matching the frequency of viewing certain types of programs with the number of political ads placed in each type, we are able to estimate political advertising exposure for each individual adolescent.

Using this method, we can examine relationships that have been observed among adults. For example, past research has documented how citizens obtain candidate information from political ads, in general, and from negative ads, in particular (Geer 2006; Ridout et al. 2004). In their meta-analysis, Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner (2007) found that negative campaigning increases campaign-related knowledge. Recent studies suggest that negative ads are particularly effective in imparting information about the positions of candidates, partly because they contain more factual information than positive ads (Arcebeaux and Nickerson 2005; Stevens 2009). It follows that attack ads will have an effect on adolescent learning.

Extant research on ad effects on adolescents' campaign-related knowledge is scarce. In fact, to our knowledge, only one study has looked at the effect of exposure to political advertising on political knowledge among elementary school children during the 1976 Michigan presidential primary election (Atkin 1976). This study found exposure to political ads to be positively correlated with knowledge about both candidates competing in the race.

Past research also acknowledges that political knowledge may not be a unidimensional concept (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). We posit that it is useful to distinguish between policy-relevant and human-interest knowledge. Patterson (2000) convincingly documented the rise of soft news and the decline of hard news in the mass media over the past few decades, and such changes have been proven consequential for voters and their learning (Baum 2003; Baum and Jamison 2006; Prior 2003). Hard news focuses on topics of social or political consequences, whereas soft news is more personality based and less time sensitive (Patterson 2000). Along similar lines, we posit a distinction between *policy-relevant* candidate knowledge, which concerns information pertinent to understanding issue positions on domestic and international affairs, and *human-interest* candidate knowledge, on the other hand, which refers to awareness of publicized, but less politically substantive, events, such as the personal lives and histories of the candidates. Political ads, especially negative ads, contain both policy and personal information. The literature, then, suggests the following hypotheses among adolescents:

Hypothesis 1a: The negativity of political advertising exposure will be positively related to policy-relevant candidate knowledge among adolescents.

Hypothesis 1b: The negativity of political advertising exposure will be positively related to human-interest candidate knowledge among adolescents.

Ad Effects on Adolescent Participation

If knowledge provides the building blocks for political involvement, participation serves as the hallmark of democratic citizenship (Dahl 1998; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Voting in elections is often considered the most essential form of participation, but the range of participatory options certainly extends beyond the voting booth and can include a much broader array of behaviors, particularly for adolescents. Indeed, recent theorizing asserts that "lifestyle politics," such as political consumption, are beginning to displace traditional civic and political commitments as modes of participation, particularly among younger people (Bennett 2008; Dalton 2009).

Contrasting the literature bemoaning the decline of citizenship and participation in the United States (Mindich 2005; Putnam 2000), some recent studies maintain that participation in public life has not declined, but has shifted to new realms, such as the marketplace (Shah et al. 2007b; Zukin et al. 2006). Expanding on these insights, Dalton (2009) argued that demographics and generational changes are heralding this shift in citizenship norms. From this perspective, American society is witnessing a shift from traditional duty-based citizenship to engaged, expressive citizenship. Duty-based citizenship stresses voting, paying taxes, party allegiance, and commitments to the formal obligations and rights of citizenship. Conversely, engaged/expressive citizenship encourages forms of political action such as volunteerism and political consumption (see also Bennett's [this volume] actualizing vs. dutiful citizen distinction).

Evidence supports the view that younger citizens, more than any other group, appear to be enthusiastically embracing individualized and direct forms of participation (Gotlieb and Wells, this volume; Marsh, O'Toole, and Jones 2007; Norris 2002; Thorson, this volume). Accordingly, rather than placing democracy at risk, this behavior shift represents an opportunity to enrich democratic participation. Political consumption, then, is especially relevant for younger adolescents who cannot vote and are less likely than adults to attend political rallies or work for candidates. Political consumption is defined as "actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices" (Micheletti 2003, 2). Young people are involved in activities related to political consumption, such as boycotting (Zukin et al. 2006), and these activities are more pronounced among those who incorporate political and public affairs into their daily lives.

Research on political advertising's effect on participation has focused mostly on traditional forms of campaign and civic participation, showing mixed findings (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Simon 1999; Freedman, Franz, and Goldstein 2004; Krasno and Green 2008). Efforts relying on more precise estimates of advertising exposure that combine ad placement and content tracking with survey data that include differentiated measures of television viewing have found stronger support for advertising effects on participatory outcomes, including

indirect effects on civic volunteerism (Shah et al. 2007a; Cho et al. 2009). A recent meta-analysis (Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007) also reports a small positive effect of negative political advertising on political participation. Of course, this runs counter to aggregate and experimental evidence that negative ads suppress turnout and participation (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Simon 1999).

Regardless of the direction of the ad effects, election campaigns may also affect political consumption. Campaigns politicize products, whether boycotting Heinz ketchup or courting NASCAR dads. Consumption is now seen by some as a form of voting (Shaw, Newholm, and Dickinson 2006), and should be more pronounced during an election year. As Dalton (2008) suggested, engaged citizenship, exemplified by political consumption, is shaped by levels of trust in government and political tolerance. Negative campaigns can play off of these political values, which may influence political consumption. Given that so little work connects political ads and consumption, especially among adolescents, we offer the following hypothesis and research question:

Hypothesis 2: The negativity of political advertising exposure will be positively related to political participation among adolescents.

Research Question 1: Is there a relationship between the negativity of political advertising exposure and political consumption among adolescents?

Data

Future Voter Survey

The Future Voter Survey is a national panel survey of adolescents ages 12 to 17 and their parents, conducted during the 2008 general election. Synovate, a commercial survey research firm, collected the baseline wave between May 20 and June 25, 2008, using a four-page mailed questionnaire. The second wave was gathered from these same respondents between November 5 and December 10, 2008, again using a four-page mailed questionnaire.

Using a stratified sampling technique, a total of 4,000 surveys were mailed to households with children 12 to 17 years old. One parent and one child per selected household were asked to complete the survey. Of the mailed surveys, 1,325 responses were returned, which represents a response rate of 33.1 percent. Because of incomplete responses and inconsistent information, a small number of these responses were omitted. As a result, 1,255 questionnaires were mailed out on November 4, 2008. Of the recontact surveys distributed, 738 were returned, for a panel retention rate of 55.7 percent and a response rate against the mailout of 60.4 percent. Some demographic information was collected from wave 1, but all the control and dependent variables in the study were measured at wave 2. For details on the sample procedures, see Lee, Shah, and McLeod (forthcoming).

Campaign advertising data

By means of a satellite tracking system that recognized and logged commercials when they aired, the TNS Media Intelligence/Campaign Media Analysis Group was able to track every political ad that aired in all the media markets in the 2008 federal and local races. The Wisconsin Advertising Project (see Goldstein 2008 for details) obtained, coded, and made available this dataset. Our analysis in this article focuses only on presidential ads. The Campaign Media Analysis Group recorded 1,133,263 presidential ad airings between January 1, 2007, and Election Day 2008. We include all the presidential ad airings from that point on to estimate exposure to advertising because scholars have argued that paying attention to this extended campaign period is important to gauge advertising's impact (Goldstein and Freedman 2002; Iyengar and Petrocik 2000). Details regarding how these data on airings and placement were converted into estimates of ad exposure are described below.

Measures

Independent variables

Demographics. Seven demographic variables were controlled: gender (female = 1; 49.52 percent), race (white = 1; 80.92 percent), age (M = 14.90 years, SD = 1.68), total household income (Md = $50,000 to $59,999), parental education level (M = 2.89, SD = 1.00), party identification (Democrat = 1; 40.09 percent), and partisan strength (M = .84, SD = .63). For parental education level, the scores of each child's mother and father were averaged. For Democrat dummy coding, "Strong Democrat" and "Democrat" were coded as 1, while "Independent," "Republican," and "Strong Republican" were coded as 0. For partisan strength, "Strong Democrat" and "Strong Republican" were coded as 2, "Democrat" and "Republican" as 1, and "Independent" as 0.

Political interest. Adolescents were asked their level of agreement (on a five-point, Likert scale) with the statement "I am interested in politics" (M = 3.00, SD = 1.12).

Parental encouragement. Parents were asked, on the same five-point scale, their agreement with the items "I often encourage my child to follow the news" and "I often encourage my child to volunteer." These items (r = .49, p < .001) were averaged into an index (M = 3.78, SD = .89).

Civics education. Adolescents were asked, on an eight-point scale ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very frequently" (8), how often during the past three months they "followed the news as part of a class assignment," "learned about how government works in class," "discussed/debated political or social issues in

class," "participated in political role playing in class (mock trials, elections)," and were "encouraged to make up your own mind about issues in class." These items were averaged into an index (α = .90; M = 3.55, SD = 2.00).

Media use variables. Three mass media news sources were considered: *TV*, *print*, and *online*. TV news use was measured by asking adolescents how many days in a typical week they watched national and local news on TV. The two items (r = .72, p < .001) were averaged to create an index (M = 2.13, SD = 2.13). Print news use was measured by asking adolescents how many days in a typical week they read a national newspaper and a local newspaper. The two items (r = .25, p < .001) were averaged to create an index (M = 1.30, SD = 1.46). This modest correlation and low mean likely reflect the diminished standing of print media among young people. Online news use was measured by asking adolescents how many days in a typical week they used national newspaper Web sites, local newspaper Web sites, and TV news Web sites. These items were averaged to create an index (α = .72; M = .57, SD = 1.05).

Political social network use. Adolescents were also asked, on an eight-point scale ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very frequently" (8), how often during the past three months they "displayed your political preferences on your profile," "became a 'fan' or 'friend' of a politician," "joined a 'cause' or political 'group'," "used a news or politics application/widget," "exchanged political views on a discussion board or group wall," and had "been invited to a political event by a friend." These items were averaged to create an index (α = .86; M = 1.28, SD = .53).

Political advertising exposure variables. Political ad exposure was constructed by matching the ads placed on six types of shows in each media market with the individual consumption of those shows. Specifically, we first calculated the total number of presidential political ads placed on each of the six types of TV programs (i.e., morning shows, national news, local news, game shows, talk shows, and others) in the designated market area (DMA) where each respondent lived (see Ridout et al. 2004). This ad volume was then multiplied by the respondent's self-reported consumption level of each type of program. This procedure can be expressed through the following equation for estimating ad exposure:

$$\text{Exposure to Political Ad} = \sum_{i=1}^{6} (\text{Ad Volume in Market}_i \times \text{Individual Viewing Level}_i),$$

where Ad Volume in Market signifies the total number of ads placed in each of the six types of programs in the market where the respondent resided, and Individual Viewing Level denotes the extent to which the respondent consumed each of the six types of programs.

We performed a natural log transformation of the raw volume to account for the decreasing marginal returns of ad exposure (Ridout et al. 2004; Stevens 2009) and the inflation of measurement error incurred by the self-reports of TV use measures (Stevens 2008). The logged volume has a mean of 4.83 (SD = 4.28, Min = 0, Max = 11.75).

The Wisconsin Advertising Project also coded whether each ad was an attack (negative), promotional (positive), or contrast message. We calculated the proportion of negative advertising by dividing the number of times attack ads were aired by the total number of ads seen by each adolescent. On average, 22.26 percent of the ads that adolescent saw were attack ads (SD = .21, Min = 0, Max = 1). This ratio was used to estimate the negativity of the campaign that each youth encountered.

Dependent variables

Political knowledge. Each adolescent was asked six questions about the two major party candidates who ran for president in 2008. These indicators were developed to tap into both policy-relevant and human-interest candidate knowledge. A forced two-factor solution yielded the expected components, with factor loading ranging from .81 to .50 with little cross-loading between the two factors. Policy-relevant knowledge was assessed with the following items: (1) "Which candidate opposes a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq?" (2) "Which candidate supports raising taxes on the wealthiest Americans?" and (3) "Which candidate has not served in the U.S. military?" Correct answers were coded as 1, whereas incorrect ones were coded as 0. These three items were summed to create the policy-relevant knowledge index (mean interitem = .18; $p < .001$; M = 2.10, SD = .88). Human-interest candidate knowledge was assessed with the following items: (1) "Which candidate has an adopted daughter from Bangladesh?" (2) "Which candidate has been divorced?" and (3) "Which candidate began his political career as a community organizer?" The responses were coded in the same way and were summed to create the human-interest candidate knowledge index (mean interitem = .30; M = 1.63, SD = 1.06).

Participation. Two dimensions of participation were assessed in this study: traditional political participation and political consumption. For *political participation*, respondents were asked how frequently, from "not at all" (1) to "very frequently" (8), during the past three months they "contributed money to a political campaign," "attended a political meeting, rally, or speech," and "worked for a political party or candidate." These three items were averaged to create the political participation index ($\alpha = .92$; M = 1.29, SD = 1.00). *Political consumption* was measured by asking adolescents how frequently they "boycotted products or companies that offend my values" and "bought products from companies because they align with my values." These two items ($r = .72$, $p < .001$) were averaged to create the political consumption index (M = 1.72, SD = 1.53). Descriptive statistics for all variables are reported in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics

	M	SD	Min	Max	*N*
Gender (female)	.50	.50	.00	1.00	1,246
Race (white)	.81	.39	.00	1.00	1,221
Income	45.83	6.04	31.00	57.00	1,291
Parental education	2.89	1.00	1.00	5.00	1,275
Child age	3.92	1.68	1.00	7.00	698
Democrat	.40	.49	.00	1.00	676
Partisan strength	.84	.63	.00	2.00	676
Political interest	3.00	1.12	1.00	5.00	708
Parental encouragement	3.78	.89	1.00	5.00	710
Civics education	3.55	2.00	1.00	8.00	704
TV news use	2.13	2.13	.00	7.00	708
Print news use	1.30	1.46	.00	7.00	703
Online news use	.57	1.05	.00	7.00	702
Political social network use	1.28	.53	1.00	4.00	704
Political ad exposure (logged volume)	4.83	4.28	.00	11.75	1,120
Negative ad exposure (proportion)	.22	.21	.00	1.00	667
Policy-relevant knowledge	2.10	.88	.00	3.00	661
Human-interest knowledge	1.63	1.06	.00	3.00	646
Political participation	1.29	1.00	1.00	8.00	704
Political consumption	1.72	1.53	1.00	8.00	702

Results

To investigate the effects of negative political advertising on adolescent political knowledge and participation during the 2008 presidential election, we conducted a series of ordinary least squares regression analyses, controlling for demographics and a host of political socialization variables. We also accounted for the influence of parental encouragement, civics education, news media consumption, political social network use, and the volume of political ad exposure. Our core variable of interest is negativity of political ad exposure.

The relationship between negative political advertising and policy-relevant candidate knowledge is reported in the first column in Table 2. Income, age, parental education, parental encouragement, and civics education all had positive relations with policy-relevant knowledge, but none of the other variables, including the news media or social media measures, was statistically significant. Neither of our focal variables, volume and negativity of political advertising exposure, predicted this form of knowledge. The overall model explained

TABLE 2
Effects of Negativity of Ad Exposure on Policy-Relevant and Human-Interest Knowledge

	Policy-Relevant Knowledge	Human-Interest Knowledge
Gender (female)	–.081 (.071)	.042 (.086)
Race (white)	.024 (.095)	–.190 (.115)†
Income	.020 (.007)***	.032 (.008)***
Parental education	.119 (.042)***	.086 (.050)†
Child age	.077 (.021)***	.025 (.026)
Democrat	–.033 (.084)	.031 (.103)
Partisan strength	.071 (.066)	.081 (.081)
Political interest	–.011 (.037)	.007 (.045)
Parental encouragement	.101 (.043)*	.088 (.053)†
Civics education	.038 (.020)†	.051 (.024)*
TV news use	–.004 (.021)	.026 (.026)
Print news use	–.042 (.028)	–.022 (.034)
Online news use	–.052 (.040)	–.072 (.048)
Political social network use	.070 (.072)	.191 (.086)***
Political ad exposure (logged volume)	.025 (.022)	.006 (.026)
Negative ad exposure (proportion)	.241 (.186)	.427 (.225)†
Constant	–.214 (.366)	–1.084 (.442)
R^2	.125	.113
N	570	556

NOTE: Entries are unstandardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
†$p < .10$; *$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$.

12.5 percent of the variance in knowledge. Accordingly, we find little support for Hypothesis 1a.

The relationship between negative political advertising and human-interest candidate knowledge is reported in the second column in Table 2. This model explained close to the same amount of variance in the dependent variable, about 11.3 percent. For human-interest candidate knowledge, race, income, parental education, parental encouragement, and civics education all accounted for variance in the outcome measure. Notably, we also found that political social media use positively explains this form of knowledge. More important, we found tentative evidence for the positive effect of negative political advertising on human-interest candidate knowledge among adolescents (B = .43, SE = .23, p = .06). This provides some support for Hypothesis 1b.

Next, we turn to the effect of the negativity of advertising exposure on political participation and political consumption among adolescents. The results are

TABLE 3
Effects of Negative Political Advertising on Political Participation and Political Consumerism among Adolescents

	Political Participation	Political Consumerism
Gender (female)	–.019 (.068)	.134 (.115)
Race (white)	–.096 (.091)	–.058 (.155)
Income	.015 (.007)*	.023 (.011)*
Parental education	–.042 (.040)	–.030 (.068)
Child age	–.043 (.021)*	.006 (.035)
Democrat	.100 (.082)	–.182 (.139)
Partisan strength	.012 (.064)	.109 (.109)
Political interest	–.028 (.036)	–.062 (.060)
Parental encouragement	.045 (.042)	.042 (.071)
Civics education	.010 (.019)	.095 (.033)**
TV news use	–.029 (.021)	.003 (.035)
Print news use	.022 (.027)	–.042 (.047)
Online news use	.323 (.039)***	.326 (.066)***
Political social network use	.523 (.070)***	.493 (.119)***
Political ad exposure (logged volume)	.024 (.020)	.067 (.034)*
Negative ad exposure (proportion)	–.268 (.179)	–.649 (.304)*
Constant	–.138 (.343)	–.816 (.585)
Adjusted R^2	.292	.151
N	601	599

NOTE: Entries are unstandardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

reported in Table 3. Income, online news use, and political social media use all had positive relations with campaign participation, while child's age had a negative relationship. However, neither of the focal variables, volume and negativity of political advertising exposure, predicted political participation, providing little support for Hypothesis 2.

The findings for political consumption parallel those observed for political participation, with income, online news use, and political social media use all yielding positive relations with the outcome variable, along with civics education. However, unlike the campaign participation measures, both the volume and negativity of campaign exposure predicted political consumption, with volume positively related and negativity generating the inverse relationship. Thus, while the volume of ad exposure may encourage greater levels of political consumption, when adolescents encounter overly negative campaigns, this expressive tendency appears to be dampened.

Discussion

How political advertising socializes adolescents into political life has consequential implications for the future of democracy and typifies the intersection of consumer and civic culture. Schools, families, and news all transmit campaign information and socialize adolescents, but political advertising offers a unique opportunity to examine campaign influences that may be unintended but nonetheless consequential. In contrast to research arguing that contemporary political campaigns can mobilize adolescents, the results from this study raise some cautionary caveats.

Although negative advertising has been credited as a source of learning and mobilization among adults, the effects on youths appear to be more complex and less positive. As the experience of a campaign becomes more negative, our data suggest that adolescents do not gain substantive, policy-relevant knowledge about candidates, but rather human-interest information that may not be particularly pertinent to political socialization or decision-making. This concern is amplified by the finding that negativity appears to reduce political consumption without bolstering campaign participation, producing a "net loss" for civic culture among members of Generation Y. The suppressive effects of campaign negativity on political consumerism may be a function of "turning off" youths from politics, writ large, whatever its form.

Our findings regarding campaign knowledge and participatory action merit further attention. First, we should note that our data indicate that adolescents do not learn from all types of political ads. It is negative ads in particular that inform adolescent viewers, albeit about human-interest matters involving the candidate's backgrounds and life histories. This seems to provide evidence in support of Geer's (2006) assertion that negative ads can inform. However, instead of gaining knowledge about the policy positions of candidates, adolescents learn more about the personal aspects of candidates through negative advertising. We interpret this learning from campaigns as potentially deleterious, given the lack of substantive knowledge gains.

Not only is negative political advertising related to differential gains in adolescent political knowledge, but it is also related to an apparent reduction in their levels of political consumption. Unlike the mobilizing effects observed among adults, exposure to campaign negativity does not appear to affect adolescent political participation, yet it suppresses their expressive tendencies toward political consumption. This echoes the demobilization thesis in the negative advertising literature and the fact that we observe this effect among adolescents is certainly a cause for concern. Political consumption, as a form of lifestyle politics, provides a feasible outlet for adolescents to take part in the political process. By hindering political consumption activities among adolescents, negative campaigns may be curtailing a new venue for action.

In both sets of outcomes, we observe significant relationships between negativity of advertising exposure and unconventional domains, which calls for

a reconceptualization of youth engagement in politics. Political knowledge batteries developed for adults, which are largely civics and policy-knowledge questions, may not fully capture what adolescents learn. For these young people, the personal side of campaign information may be easier to comprehend and more approachable than are public policy debates. Likewise, they may deem political participation, especially campaign engagement, as outside their realm of action. Political consumption, on the other hand, provides an easier way to express their values. Adolescents are responsive to campaign information, though the apparent effects of these communications are manifested in a different type of political knowledge and participation than traditionally conceptualized. Albeit preliminary and seemingly short term, the effects of attack advertising on adolescents have significant ramifications for the future of democracy. Beneath the optimism about youth participation during the 2008 presidential election lies an undercurrent that warrants the attention of political communication researchers, and has implications for alternative modes of engagement with public life, such as political consumption and expressive engagement.

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