

## Are Negative Campaigns So Bad?

published in *The Star-Ledger*, December 4, 2005

by Gerald M. Pomper

Critics of our political process almost always deplore negative campaigning, the candidates' tit-for-tat attacks. To them, this year's gubernatorial contest between Jon Corzine and Doug Forrester marked a new low.

But is it really so bad?

True, the New Jersey campaign featured nastiness, innuendo and half-truths. Forrester's advertising portrayed his Democratic opponent as the hub of a wheel of corruption that included ethically challenged politicians like former Gov. James E. McGreevey. In turn, Corzine's ads implied corrupt deals between Forrester's drug company and local officials.

Both candidates also resorted to personal attacks. Forrester broadcast the bitter words of Corzine's ex-wife; Corzine portrayed Forrester's early opposition to stem-cell research as disdain for the handicapped.

But, distasteful as they were, some of these charges were relevant; even a half-truth can have some value. There has been considerable corruption in the state, and voters should be told of the problem. Forrester had opposed stem-cell research, and voters should consider the issue. Still, the personal attacks went too far.

What's the alternative to such campaigns? The most obvious is "positive" campaigning, where candidates focus on their own personal qualities and qualifications. We actually have a lot of it. We're told that candidates love their spouses (if they have them), adore cute children, salute the flag and accept the constitutional mandate to balance the state budget. How reassuring.

A good campaign is not about such pap, but substance. It should resemble a true debate, where contestants tell us about both their qualifications for office and their positions on current issues. But voters need to know about the candidates' vices as well as their virtues, the defects of their programs as well as their merits. They can't expect the candidates themselves to admit that they are corrupt or their programs are foolish. Their opponents' criticism -- if kept within bounds of decency -- is essential.

Those who worry about negative campaigning ignore these advantages -- and they often misunderstand the real impact. One common misperception is that negative campaigns are effective, whatever their defects. Contrary to the claims of campaign consultants, however, that's just wrong. Take this year's elections for governor in New Jersey and Virginia.

In New Jersey, Forrester certainly ran the more negative campaign, although Corzine got in some heavy licks. Forrester began his attacks earlier and continued more persistently than Corzine, but he trailed consistently. His final effort -- the Joanne Corzine assault -- actually lost him votes. The result was a 10-point margin for Corzine, surely no triumph for negative campaigning.

In Virginia, Republican Jerry Kilgore ran a heavily negative campaign against Democrat Tim Kaine, nearly accusing him of sympathy for murderers because of his personal opposition to the death penalty. In one emotional ad late in the campaign, the father of a murder victim berated Kaine as unwilling to use the death penalty, even for Adolf Hitler. Kaine responded by distinguishing his personal religious view from his official duty to uphold Virginia's death penalty law. Again, the negative campaign and the last-minute attack didn't work. In a firmly Republican state, Kaine won a plurality of 100,000 votes.

Overall, as my colleague Richard R. Lau and I found in a 12-year study of U.S. Senate elections, negative campaigning is generally not very effective. It aids challengers only slightly, and it actually hurts incumbents. In open-seat contests, such as this year's gubernatorial contests, money is more important than negative attacks.

There are remedies for the worst forms of negative campaigning -- such as voluntary campaign codes of conduct, ad watches by newspapers and citizen groups, and requirements that candidates publicly approve all ads sponsored by their organizations and parties. But the best way to eliminate bad campaigning is to place ultimate

responsibility where it belongs in a free political system -- in the electorate.

This year, voters rejected excesses of negative campaigning. These results should give us renewed hope that American democracy still works.

Gerald M. Pomper is an emeritus professor of political science at Rutgers University and co-author, with Richard R. Lau, of "Negative Campaigning."