

The conventional wisdom about American electoral politics is that the public is repulsed by the negative tone of contemporary campaigns. They are especially distressed by “attack ads” that include criticism of candidates’ personal lives and families and are viewed as unfair distortions of the facts. Such name-calling is seen as part of a “win at any cost” culture fostered by political elites and big-money fat cats. Besides being unpleasant, such conduct fails to address pressing public problems in a constructive way. This aversion, it is said, has serious consequences for the political system: low levels of citizen trust in government, turnout, and engagement in public affairs.

This conventional wisdom is confirmed in two recent surveys commissioned by the Project on Campaign Conduct at the Institute for Global Ethics. The data find a public rejecting negative attack-campaigning and demonstrating considerable agreement on what constitutes unfairness in campaigns. Further, at least one important segment of the political elite agrees with the public: campaign donors.

John Green is professor of political science and director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, University of Akron. Brad Rourke is vice president for public policy, Institute for Global Ethics, and director of its Project on Campaign Conduct.

In November 1999, eight hundred American adults were asked their views on the legitimacy of “negative attack-campaigning.” The following April, a similar survey was administered to 600 political campaign donors—a group widely believed to be part of the problem, since, after all, these political activists actually pay for such campaigning.

According to these surveys, better than four-fifths of the public and almost three-quarters of donors believe that “attack-oriented campaigning is unethical.” About the same proportion of the public thinks that such campaigning “is undermining and damaging our democracy” and that it “produces leaders who are less ethical and trustworthy.” Some two-thirds of donors agree.

Of course, these general statements are easy to affirm with more specific assessments of current politics. More than one-half of both the public and donors believe that all or most candidates “twist the truth” when talking to voters. Roughly as many also believe campaigns have gotten “worse in terms of ethics and values in the last twenty years.” Although the difference is small, it is interesting to note that donors see more deterioration in campaigns than the public. Finally, about two-fifths of both groups believe all or most candidates make “unfair personal attacks in campaigns.” While this is disconcerting, a larger proportion does believe candidates avoid unfair attacks on their opponents.

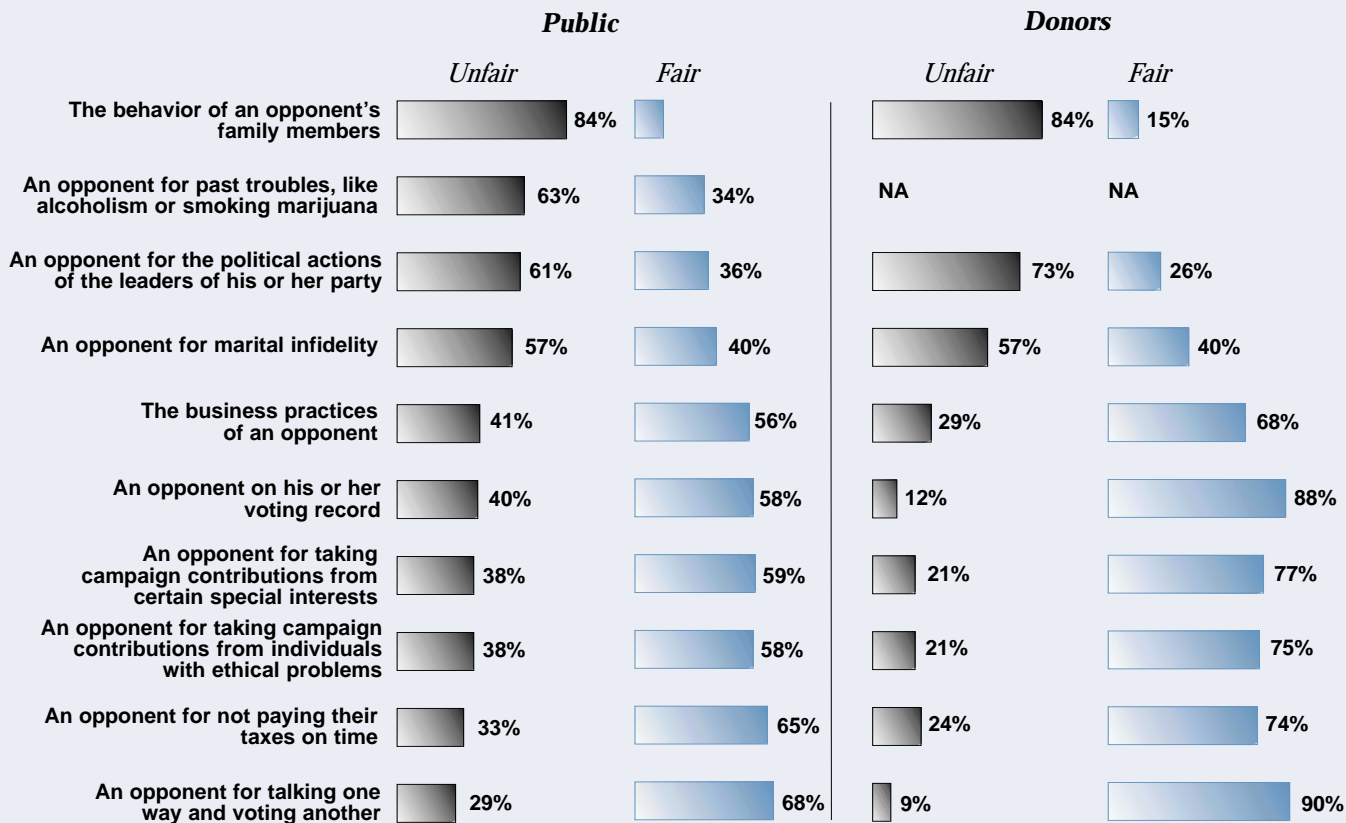
This last point begs an important question: what constitutes an “unfair” attack? Once again, there is a remarkably high level of agreement between the public and donors (see Figure 1). Criticizing an opponent’s family members is at the top of the list of unfair tactics, with more than four-fifths of both groups finding it out of line. The public next ranks as questionable attacking opponents’ past troubles, such as alcoholism or smoking marijuana, with almost two-thirds regarding it as unfair. Nearly two-thirds of the public regard attacks based on the personal lives of a candidate’s party leaders as unfair. Here the donors are more critical, with nearly three-quarters noting unfairness. Further, more than one-half of both groups say that marital infidelity is not fair game in campaigns.

The remaining items are reported as unfair by less than one-half of the public and less than one-third of donors. Indeed, something of a gap opens between the two groups. Roughly two-fifths of the public consider criticizing an opponent’s business practices, voting record, or sources of campaign contributions to be unfair. Donors are not nearly as critical of these kinds of attacks. This pattern continues with the last two items—criticism for not paying taxes on time and for “talking one way and voting another”—which one-third of the public sees as unfair. The largest differences between the public and donors occur with attacks on a candidate’s voting record and failure to vote as promised.

Figure 1

Crying Foul

Question: ...For each one, I'd like you to tell me whether you think it is a fair criticism for candidates to make of each other, or whether you think it is an unfair attack that should not have any place in a campaign... criticizing...



Source: Surveys by Lake Snell Perry & Associates and John Deardourff/The Media Company for the Institute for Global Ethics; general public survey conducted November 1999; campaign donor survey conducted April 2000.

For many people, any kind of criticism in campaigns is potentially negative and problematic. These patterns may indicate a higher level of sophistication on the part of campaign donors, who are more accustomed to the rough-and-tumble of political conflict and who recognize the need for candidates to draw distinctions between themselves and their opponents. In fact, this divergence of opinion about what most observers would agree are “fair” criticisms—that is, issue-based and relevant to the public record—adds weight to the donors’ views about what constitutes *unfair* candidate discourse. Campaign donors are not indiscriminately fed up with politics (as might be said of the public at large), but rather with specific types of criticisms.

Overall, these findings reveal that the public and donors are averse to negative campaigning, especially if it is viewed as

unfair. And they have similar views of what constitutes unfairness. Put another way, both the public and donors know good campaign conduct when they see it, and much of what they see in campaigns doesn’t meet that standard.

How can this strong, informal consensus be refined, formalized, and reflected in practice? One idea that has shown promise is the adoption of voluntary codes of conduct for campaigns, in which candidates running against each other agree to forswear unfair attacks.

Currently, a variety of code-based projects are underway throughout the United States, ranging in scope from the local to the national. The Pew Charitable Trusts has funded the Institute for Global Ethics’ Project on Campaign Conduct to continue its pilot effort (active in Ohio and Washington state)

for a second election cycle; the Carnegie Corporation of New York has funded efforts to push this activity down to the state and local level in Ohio. The Margaret Chase Smith Public Policy Center at the University of Maine formed a partnership with the Margaret Chase Smith Library to broker codes on a statewide basis in 1998 and 2000. Local chapters of the League of Women Voters, and other civic groups, have organized similar code projects in other areas.

The experience of groups seeking to implement codes has varied, but the hurdles have been remarkably similar. In 1998, for example, the Project on Campaign Conduct had an overall participation rate among congressional and statewide candidates of 55% in Ohio and 33% in Washington state. In many cases, campaigns were reluctant to participate because they did not want to concede potential ammunition. (Less common were concerns that the opposing campaign was planning to break the code.) And while candidates themselves frequently were enthusiastic about the idea, campaign advisors, political consultants, and staff were just as frequently opposed. These effects were intensified in so-called “targeted” races, where the national campaign committee planned major media-time investments on behalf of one candidate.

But even if some political insiders show ambivalence, do the public and donors still support voluntary codes of campaign conduct? Survey respondents say “yes.” Two-thirds of the public agree that campaign codes are a good idea, choosing an 8, 9 or 10 on a ten-point scale. Donors are less enthusiastic, with under one-half giving these responses. However, the ten-point scale averages for the two groups are similar (7.7 for the public and 7.0 for donors).

The respondents find particularly appealing codes brokered by an outside entity, with neither a partisan axe to grind nor a vested interest in the election’s outcome. Among donors, 66% would trust a code of conduct designed by candidates with the help of an independent organization, compared to just 38% who would trust a code designed entirely by the candidates themselves. Among the public, the difference is less pronounced but still significant—76% would trust a code designed by an outside organization, compared with 50% who would trust a candidate-created code.

Indeed, similar proportions of respondents claim that it would be important to know if a candidate had signed a code, taking into account all the other things they would want to know about a candidate. Support for campaign codes of conduct cuts across demographic and political lines.

Are candidates likely to follow a code that they sign? The survey participants think so. Two-thirds of the public believe

that candidates who sign codes would follow them. And the donors report even higher numbers—more than four-fifths. Interesting is the finding that more than one-half of the public claims they would be more likely to *vote* for a candidate who signs a code, all else being equal. Similarly, almost one-half of the donors say they would be more likely to *donate* to a candidate who signs a code, all else being equal.

“Such name-calling is seen as part of a ‘win at any cost’ culture fostered by political elites and big-money fat cats.”

Another part of the conventional wisdom is that negative campaigning “works” in elections. Thus candidates have strong incentives to engage in attack politics, despite its negative consequences on the broader political system. While this bit of wisdom is far from confirmed, it is not inconsistent with the findings presented here. After all, people quite frequently are unable to follow “the better angels of their nature,” whether it be dieting or voting against otherwise appealing candidates who engage in mudslinging. This kind of behavior is particularly common in competitive situations characterized by poor information and high levels of risk, such as election campaigns. The well-known “prisoner’s dilemma” is an example of how adversaries engage in mutually destructive behavior when they could cooperate for mutual gain. Indeed, this inability to live up to one’s own standards is so common that specialized rules have developed in many walks of life to help people “be as good as they can be,” along with specialized roles to enforce them. A good example is the world of sports, where there are rulebooks and officials to ensure the fairness of the contests.

These surveys show a broad-based concern about the general coarsening of political competition, and a desire for everyone to “play by a set of rules.” The fans—the electorate in this metaphor—are eager for rulebooks and officials to get the players back on track. The only question is how to induce the players to cooperate. One way is to establish voluntary codes of candidate conduct, facilitated by trusted groups above the political fray.

The public appears ready to respond to such a mechanism. And so are campaign donors, people who are well placed to encourage candidates to participate. As with other reforms of the political process, political donors could be part of the solution and not just part of the problem. 