

Colloquium on Political Communication Research Presentation

When: Wednesday, March 1, 2006

Place: Schuessler Institute for Social Research, 1st floor seminar room (3rd St. & Hawthorne)

Time: 12:00-1:15pm

Presenter: Deborah Brooks, Department of Government, Dartmouth College

Assessing the Effects of Campaign Attacks on the Public

Abstract

In 1994, Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar confirmed the conventional wisdom about the relationship between negative campaigning and political participation: specifically, they found that campaign attacks reduce turnout. Subsequent studies, however, have largely failed to confirm those findings. Because the methodology utilized by the studies differs so dramatically, however, it has been hard to resolve the dispute. Moreover, the conventional wisdom is still widely espoused by the media, with Ansolabehere and Iyengar's findings frequently cited to backup that claim. To help bring clarity to this literature, I revisit Ansolabehere and Iyengar's study of turnout in the 1992 Senate elections with a replication and improvement of their analysis and find that those results are considerably less definitive than they originally appeared (see JOP forthcoming August 2006). In conjunction with the newer findings on the subject, these results suggest that we can now lie to rest the concern that overall negativity depresses turnout. There is still more to be explored in related areas, however. Specifically, it is important to understand whether certain types of attacks – in particular, personal attacks and/or particularly uncivil attacks – might have a depressive effect on participation. To explore this hypothesis, John Geer and I conducted an experiment with a large national sample where we tested the effects of campaign messages that differed on three important dimensions. The general findings from this study will be discussed, along with some suggestive evidence that incivility has a disparate effect on the turnout of men and women.