

A decorative graphic is positioned on the left side of the page, featuring a solid green rectangular area at the top left. A thin horizontal line extends from the right edge of this green area, ending in a small yellow square. A vertical line descends from this yellow square, crossing a horizontal line that spans the width of the page. Another vertical line descends from the right end of this horizontal line, ending in a small yellow square. A large, thin, light-colored arc curves from the top right towards the bottom right, passing behind the main text.

Negative Campaigning: Asset or Liability?

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Report prepared by Gerard Rainville

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The AARP Undecided voter survey obtained telephone interviews with a sample of 1000 respondents drawn at random who were at least 18 years old, likely to vote in the November presidential election, and not firmly committed to any presidential candidate. The interviews were conducted in English by Woelfel Research, Inc. between August 29 and September 14. The margin of sampling error for the random sample of 1000 is $\pm 3.1\%$.

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Introduction

With an election less than a month away, the campaigns of the two major party Presidential candidates are at a juncture. Though voters consistently report their top three election concerns as the economy, foreign affairs and health care, the campaigns may either focus on these issues or divert voters' attentions from them. The tendency for campaigns to "go negative" in the month leading up to election day has been hard to resist, but an AARP survey of undecided and leaning voters indicates that candidates who focus on issues and do not stir up partisan anger are rewarded with greater support from the swing voters they need to attract to win the election.

Part of the explanation for the choice to go negative is that, sadly, such attack ads work. A poll of 500 likely voters by Survey USA released on 10/7/2008 found that 66% of likely voters felt that attack ads hurt the victim of attacks. However, such ads may cut both ways as the same survey found that 58% felt such ads hurt the candidate *putting out* the ad. What should be noted is that this survey was done on *likely* voters, some of which may strongly support a candidate and excuse their attack ads as an acceptable means to their preferred end. When data on *undecided and leaning voters* is examined however, there is much more of a desire to have issues addressed and less appetite for diversions.

The Benefits of Bipartisanship

A recent nationwide AARP survey on undecided and "leaning" voters raised implications for the negative effects of diverting voters from core political issues. The survey consistently finds that this swing sample of voters indicates higher levels of support for candidates who are seen as above partisan rancor and who are deemed more likely to work to break gridlock to address financial security and health care issues. Support for relatively issues-focused candidates may even come from outside of the candidate's respective parties.

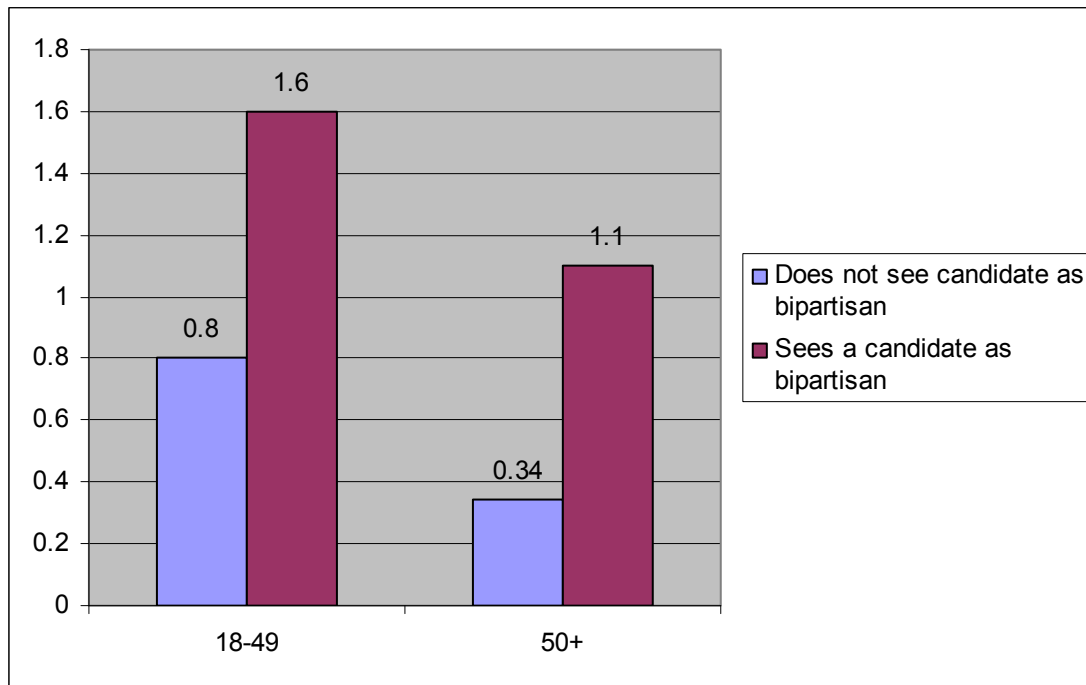
Candidates that are viewed as being able to cut through partisanship enjoy a higher degree of support than those that are not identified as bipartisan.

Chart 1 shows the relative levels of support from undecided and leaning voters for candidates seen as being able to cut through partisanship and those that are not. "Bipartisan" candidates are identified by an item reading "Which presidential candidate do you feel will break through special interest and partisan gridlock to make real progress on healthcare and the economy?". As such, the measure is also an indicator of focusing on core political issues as well as avoiding partisan rancor. The strength of support scale ranges from "0" = "truly undecided" to "4" = "strongly leaning toward the candidate". The overall averages are buoyed by a large number of truly undecided voters, but the pattern of support is clear:

Candidates that are seen as more bipartisan and issues-focused than their opponent are rewarded with greater strength of support measures than those that are not.

Bipartisan candidates receive double the support from those aged 18-49 and more than triple the support from those 50+, relative to candidates that are not viewed as being as issues-focused and bipartisan.

Chart 1: Relative strength of support for bipartisan candidates (0-4 scale)



Viewing candidates as bipartisan is not wholly dependent on party affiliation. Table 1 indicates that sizable percentages of voters in both age groups are willing to vote against their party affiliations to support candidates that are seen as relatively bipartisan and focused on issues of financial security and health care. The “Independents” in the survey consist of those with no party affiliation or an affiliation to a third party. Those that supported either of the major party candidates were regarded as defections from their party (though, in practice, some have no party from which to defect). Other groups that appear to defect from party affiliation to support bipartisan candidates are Republicans in general and Democrats over age 50.

Table 1: Percent of voters supporting bipartisan candidates that are in another political party.

	Republicans	“Independents”	Democrats
18-49	34%	53%	21%
50+	28%	35%	24%

Conclusions

Negative ads work, but it is important to note who they work best on. The general electorate – consisting mostly of voters who have made up their minds already – have the most positive reactions to negative advertising. However, undecided voters – the ones who will sway the election – are far less supportive of such tactics.

Undecided and leaning voters remain such because most have yet to hear from a candidate about what they can do for the nation, be it on economic, health care issues or other policy concerns. Diverting voters' attentions from the issues may be an asset to a campaign, but excessive partisanship and negative ads focusing on ad hominem attacks, and tactics that avoid substantive issues, are not best suited to winning over the undecided and leaning voters.

AARP data further indicate that a candidate's focus on a willingness to steer clear of partisanship is rewarded with even greater swing voter support. Some of this support comes from voters of rival parties. Some voters truly see the degree to which a candidate will focus on an issue and work across the aisle for solutions as more important than their own party affiliation in deciding who to support.

It is becoming more and more obvious as Election Day draws near that the candidate who rises above negative, partisan attacks and shows a willingness to reach across the aisle can break through to the undecided and leaning voter.