



A nation in the negative

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Recently, a number of graphic and overtly racist ads have been running on national television, especially during the baseball playoffs and other sporting events. One cuts from an opening shot featuring President Biden, Sen. Bernie Sanders, and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas to a biblically sized column of immigrants from Latin America marching toward the U.S. border — a phalanx described as rife with drug dealers, sex offenders and other criminals — where they will soon be “draining paychecks, wrecking schools, ruining hospitals, and threatening your family.”

Another — under the heading “Who is Joe Biden Letting In?” — focuses on the alleged rape of a 3-year-old by an illegal immigrant in Chicago followed by the accusation, paced with long pauses between words for emphasis, that every Democratic senator voted against barring immigrants with criminal records. “Every ... one.” In addition to the fact that Senate Democrats actually voted to increase funding for Border Patrol hiring and resources to deport illegal immigrants who have been convicted of crimes, the ad fails to mention that the assault occurred not during Biden’s presidency, but rather during the Trump administration.

The misleading data and chronology are not accidents. The group behind the ads, which modestly calls itself Citizens for Sanity, is depicted by a [Philadelphia Inquirer columnist](#) as “the very worst, xenophobic remnants of Team Trump, offering America not just a new low for the 2022 midterms but a sneak preview of the nightmare that the 45th president’s 2024 comeback crusade is likely to be.” Among those supplying the financing are the farther-than-far-right billionaire Uihlein family, which also backed, among others, another accused child molester, Alabama’s Roy Moore, in his run for the Senate.

New low or not, these ads are running with sufficient frequency that, like other toilet-themed campaigns such as “Please don’t squeeze the Charmin,” repetition alone might sway enough of the undiscerning to actually make a difference – in this case among voters in swing districts. They are also a distraction. [As noted in The Bulwark](#), “The aim of Citizens for Sanity seems to be to stoke fear and loathing in voters who might be tempted to vote for Democrats in the upcoming elections because they’re turned off by some of the extremist GOP candidates in their states.”

As with most attack ads, the facts are quite different from the damning picture they purport to convey. In this case, the central flaw is that immigrants, both legal and illegal, are far less likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans.

One study comparing crime rates between 2012 and 2018 in Texas, a center of anti-immigrant sentiment, found: “Undocumented immigrants have substantially lower crime rates than native-born citizens and legal immigrants across a range of felony offenses. Relative to undocumented immigrants, US-born citizens are over 2 times more likely to be arrested for violent crimes, 2.5 times more likely to be arrested for drug crimes, and over 4 times more likely to be arrested for property crimes.” Similar studies have garnered similar results, including one by the conservative Cato Institute that also found native-born Americans with double the crime rate of undocumented aliens.

While it is not altogether a surprise that Citizens for Sanity are not Citizens for Truth, that even such an extreme group would engage in this expensive, ham-fisted effort to demonize Hispanic immigrants is testament to the power of negativity in American politics. Although some scholars have contended that negative advertising does not have much of an impact, one merely need remember Tricky Dick, Crooked Hillary, death panels and Swiftboating to realize that they do. One study theorized that reactions to negative input have a physiological basis. “Our brains are hard-wired to seek out and remember negative information. That fact isn’t lost on politicians and political parties.”

Whether the basis is physiological, psychological or just voter laziness, virtually every politician running for even local office will focus far more on his or her opponent’s perceived negatives than his or her own positives. Candidates who vow not to fall into the negativity trap — “When they go low, we go high” — are forced to switch to attacks because going high simply does not work.

While negative campaigning is not the optimal vehicle for voters to decide who will represent them in government, the problem goes a good deal deeper — we have reached a point in our politics that negativity is not restricted to trying to gain power but has also come to dominate the need to stay in power. Democrats now spend a disproportionate amount of time calling Republicans anti-democratic cryptofascists and Republicans assail Democrats for ruining the economy and letting the nation be overrun by criminals both foreign and domestic.

And it works. The radical, perhaps irredeemable, division in American society is largely the result of politics, media and even comedians focusing almost exclusively on what is wrong with the other side. When confronted with accusations that their favored side is guilty of this or that sin, “what aboutism” has become the standard retort. And so, with neither side willing to eschew incendiary rhetoric or concede even a sliver of ideological or semantic turf, America’s political process has become a study in partisan bickering, threatening the very survival of the system of government that Americans seem to take for granted.

In addition to creating Lincoln’s “house divided against itself,” negative thinking and rhetoric prevents the nation from tackling problems shared by both sides. Problem solving is a positive, not a negative, act. And so, while both sides bicker, the economy teeters, the environment

deteriorates, and schools increasingly fail to prepare American children for a world in which challenges will only increase, especially for the un- or undereducated.

One common trait on both sides of the divide is the willingness to blame the messengers who foist all this anger, hatred and fear on what has become a disgusted and despairing citizenry. But that blame is misplaced. It is the fault of all of us for not rejecting negativity and demanding more from what can now be laughably termed “servants of the people.”