

CHAPTER SEVEN

Negativity, Democracy, and the Political System

The arguments and evidence presented in this book offer a unique perspective on negativity. Rather than concluding that negativity undermines the quality of debate in presidential campaigns, which is the conventional wisdom, I have demonstrated the opposite—attack advertising can *enrich* the information environment available to citizens. If we want voters to have access to more discussion about important issues presented with specificity and evidence to support candidates' appeals, then negative information has clear advantages over positive information. Scholars have long argued that campaigns would be better able to perform their democratic functions if voters had access to such information (see Kelley 1960; Thompson 1970). Political observers have largely assumed that positive advertisements, which tended to make the public feel good, were more likely to achieve these ideals. This book turns such conclusions on their head.

There are, as I have argued, real and substantial democratic payoffs to negativity. This is a strong conclusion that surely will not go unchallenged. To put it in terms familiar to this book, these claims will face their own kind of negativity. Because I believe this general line of argument is important, this concluding chapter seeks to extend it further. Over the last six chapters I have dissected and assessed negative appeals in presidential advertising. My task now is to step back and discuss negativity in more general terms. My effort to speak to broader issues will be pursued on four fronts.

First, I will consider the rise of negativity in light of other important trends in American politics, such as declining voter turnout, lower faith in elections, and shrinking trust in government. Second, I will offer an