Keena Lipsitz is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Queens College and joined the consortial faculty here at the Graduate Center in the fall of 2015. She is the author of *Competitive Elections and the American Voter* (2011).

By Beth Newcomer

Beth: Some reports have suggested that the 2016 election cycle will be filled with more negative ads than ever before. Based on your research on political communication and campaign advertising, what effects on voter information might you expect from an exceedingly negative tone in this election?

Keena: This race without a doubt will be the most negative we’ve ever seen. In every presidential election since 1988 we’ve seen an increase in negative ads. That’s just the trend. Negative ads – which in political science are ads that criticize an opponent – are actually correlated with higher voter knowledge. In fact, they are more informative than positive ads that tend to be mostly fluff. Ads run by super PACs are another story, however. Super PACs run more negative ads and their ads tend to be more misleading. This is especially true of groups who use dark money. They don’t have to disclose who their donors are and usually hide behind made-up names so it’s impossible to hold the sponsors of these ads accountable. These are the ads to watch for in 2016.

B: Tell us about the project you’re currently working on.

K: My research is moving more in the direction of political psychology. I’m looking at how political ads – positive, negative, or contrast ads – affect cognitive processing. One normative argument you’ll often find in the literature is that we want candidates to use contrast ads. These are ads where a candidate says, “I stand for this and my opponent stands for that.” We assume these are the best kind of ads but there hasn’t been much work showing that this is true – i.e. that voters learn from them or that they cause viewers to think more deeply about their vote choice. What I’ve found so far is that viewers engage in more cognitive processing when they watch contrast and negative ads than positive ads. I’m now trying to understand if the types of cognitive processing generated by negative and contrast ads are fundamentally different in any way.

B: How are you measuring “cognitive response” in this instance?

K: This is the fun part about this project. I’m working with a survey I helped design of over 17,000 Americans who were asked to watch Romney and Obama ads online in 2012. After viewing the ad, they were asked to describe them. Since I can’t code all 17,000 responses, I’m using computer analysis software to look for certain kinds of words associated with cognitive processing. I’m drawing on the work of a social psychologist at UT, Austin, James Pennebaker, who studies how written language reflects different kinds of psychological processes. That’s really the most exciting part of this project for me – drawing on the literature and methods of a different field to understand advertising effects. Nobody’s done this kind of thing.