

OPINION

Wednesday, January 10, 1996

Page 4

Daily
Nebraskan
Editorial Board
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

J. Christopher Hain Editor, 472-1766
Doug Kouma Managing Editor
Doug Peters Opinion Page Editor
Sarah Scalet Associate News Editor
Matt Waite Associate News Editor
Michelle Garner Wire Editor
Jennifer Mapes Columnist

Insured drivers

New state law a step in right direction

The light turns green. You shift into first and start through the intersection. You glance to your right, but it's too late to stop — someone ran the light.

The shock of impact and the sound of twisting metal and shattering glass is the beginning of what could turn into a tangled web of legal wrangling and financial burdens.

It's a simple fact ... if you drive enough, for a long enough period of time, eventually you'll be involved in an accident. Even the most conscientious drivers cannot avoid that.

A new state law increasing penalties for uninsured drivers took effect on New Year's Day, paving the way for the elimination of an all-too-frequent problem. Previously, proof of insurance was required before a vehicle could be registered, but there was no requirement that the policy be maintained throughout the registration period. In addition, the penalty for violating the insurance requirement was deemed unenforceable by some Nebraska courts.

Many accidents are little more than a couple moments of fright, a second of impact and a few days or weeks of inconvenience. Information is exchanged, tickets may be issued, and damage is paid for by the insurance company of the driver at fault.

If, of course, that person has insurance.

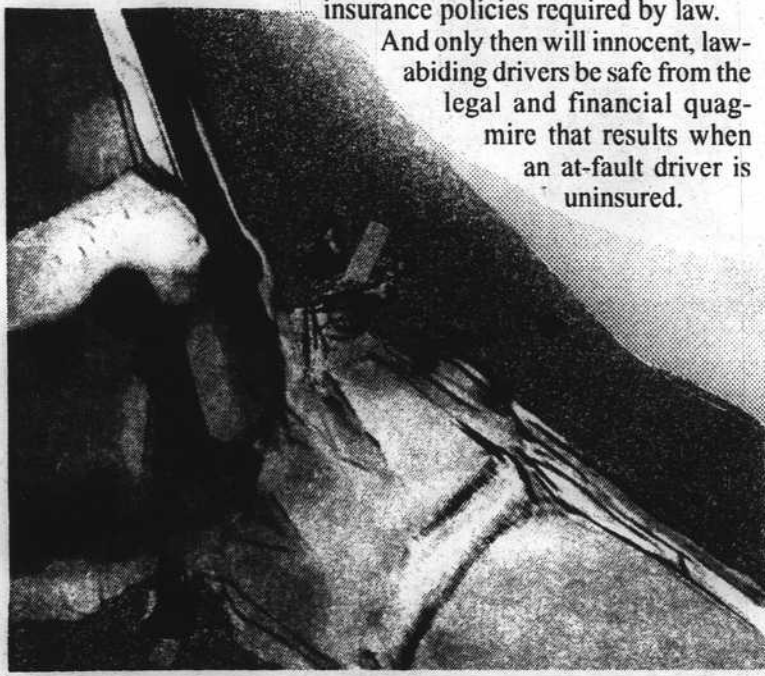
There are few things more frustrating than being hit by an uninsured driver. Often, these drivers have limited financial resources and are simply unable to pay for medical expenses or repairs to someone else's car. Since they have no insurance, victims have to resort to the courts for relief.

But that's usually not very effective, either — you know, no blood from a turnip, etc.

The passage of LB 37 by the Legislature and Gov. Nelson's signing of that bill into law is a service to all law-abiding Nebraskans. By increasing the penalties associated with driving without insurance, our state government is laying the groundwork for furthering the protection by government of people who play by the rules.

Only when it becomes more expensive to be uninsured than to be insured will all Nebraska drivers purchase and maintain the insurance policies required by law.

And only then will innocent, law-abiding drivers be safe from the legal and financial quagmire that results when an at-fault driver is uninsured.



Editorial policy

Staff editorials represent the official policy of the Fall 1995 Daily Nebraskan. Policy is set by the Daily Nebraskan Editorial Board. Editorials do not necessarily reflect the views of the university, its employees, the students or the NU Board of Regents. Editorial columns represent the opinion of the author. The regents publish the Daily Nebraskan. They establish the UNL Publications Board to supervise the daily production of the paper. According to policy set by the regents, responsibility for the editorial content of the newspaper lies solely in the hands of its students.

Letter policy

The Daily Nebraskan welcomes brief letters to the editor from all readers and interested others. Letters will be selected for publication on the basis of clarity, originality, timeliness and space available. The Daily Nebraskan retains the right to edit or reject all material submitted. Readers also are welcome to submit material as guest opinions. The editor decides whether material should run as a guest opinion. Letters and guest opinions sent to the newspaper become the property of the Daily Nebraskan and cannot be returned. Anonymous submissions will not be published. Letters should include the author's name, year in school, major and group affiliation, if any. Requests to withhold names will not be granted. Submit material to: Daily Nebraskan, 34 Nebraska Union, 1400 R St. Lincoln, Neb. 68588-0448.



'Going negative'

Political parties need to take a bigger role

WASHINGTON — The polarization of American politics is not an accident. The uncivil atmosphere of Washington, so evident in the protracted battle of the budget, is not a happenstance. Both of them are direct byproducts of the dominant means of political communication, the 30-second campaign ads, whose increasingly negative tone and content heighten partisanship and drive centrist and independent voters away from the ballot box.

That is the central argument and ingeniously demonstrated conclusion of a new book called "Going Negative," by two political scientists, Stephen Ansolabehere of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Shanto Iyengar of the University of California at Los Angeles.

The subtitle of the book, "How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate," states the case that is persuasively made by the MIT and UCLA professors.

Many of us in journalism have decried the effects of negative political ads because of the repulsion many voters and some politicians have expressed for them—and because of our own distaste for the meanness of these attacks. The authors have found a way to describe and measure what those ads really do.

They ran experiments with cross sections of California voters, using ads from the 1990 and 1992 gubernatorial and senatorial campaigns. The subjects were shown local newscasts, some containing no political ads, some with one, and some with two. Before-and-after questionnaires allowed the professors to measure the effects of positive or negative ads, singly or in various combinations, on voter attitudes and intentions, in a controlled laboratory environment.

Their findings shatter some of my preconceptions and illuminate a problem more serious than I had ever reckoned. They report that the ads give people a lot of information. Seeing even a single ad gives the prospective voters more data,



David Broder

Many of us in journalism have decried the effects of negative political ads because of the repulsion many voters and some politicians have expressed for them.

especially on an issue, than they had before. The increase is especially great for those who start with little knowledge of the candidates.

With partisan voters, the ads are not as manipulative as one might think. Few Democrats are persuaded to vote Republican or vice versa by seeing an opposition ad. For the partisans, ads tend to reinforce allegiance. Positive ads modestly increase the partisans' motivation to vote; negative ads lessen their turnout only slightly.

Unfortunately, the main finding of this survey is a powerful confirmation of the intuition that negative ads are a turnoff to the growing number of independents in the electorate — those with weak party ties or no ties at all.

"Among partisans (Republicans and Democrats alike), the drop in turnout produced by negative advertising was 3 percentage points," the authors write. "Among non-partisans, the decline was an astounding 11 points. ... Our findings show that negative advertising demoralizes the electorate. It

eats away at the individual's sense of civic duty, especially in those people whose connection to the political process is marginal. In the long run, negative campaigns contribute to the general antipathy toward politicians and parties and the high rates of disapproval and distrust of political institutions."

That, of course, is exactly what many of us critics have been saying. But one device that we hoped would help — ad watches, newspaper or television features examining and critiquing campaign ads — appear only to reinforce the negative consequences. They "clearly backfired." In test groups where ad watches were included in the news, the candidate whose ad was criticized gained even more support among partisans, while independents were further disenchanted with the whole political process.

Ansolabehere and Iyengar argue that it is futile to urge candidates to "stay positive." Their experiments confirm the political consultants' advice that the damage is heaviest for a candidate who stays positive while his opponent is attacking.

How then to change the dynamic that is driving away the moderate middle of the electorate and increasing the influence of the partisan extremes? The authors endorse an approach I have long championed: Increase the roles of our two parties in elections, especially their grass-roots activities. Media campaigns aim to persuade, and negative ads do that efficiently. But party organizations try to mobilize voters, because "a party-centered campaign must sell the entire ticket, not just a particular name."

Stop the "wrongheaded" reform effort to curb or eliminate the "soft-money" contributions that pay for party registration and get-out-the-vote efforts, they urge. Give public subsidies to the parties, not to individual presidential candidates.

The evidence is strong. The conclusions strike me as being dead right.

© 1996, Washington Post Writers Group

P. S.
Write back...

Send your brief letters to:
Daily Nebraskan, 34 Nebraska Union, 1400 R St., Lincoln,
Neb. 68588, or Fax to (402) 472-1761, or e-mail
<letters@unlinfo.unl.edu>