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# Panel: Candidates responsible for negative attacks in campaigns

■ Panel discussion at Richard Stockton College explores ways to restore civility in politics.

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A little more than a year ago, Democrat Jim Whelan had just beaten former Republican Sen. James "Sonny" McCullough in a bitter campaign for state Senate. Both needed to get away. And two days after the election, both were surprised to discover they were sitting across from one another on a plane to Florida.

They talked about their campaign, in which they had alternately accused the other of being tax-lovers, a patronage hack, a machine boss puppet, a backstabber, a mob associate, and other bad things.

"If I had done the dirty tricks my advisers wanted me to do, I would have beaten you by 5,000 votes," McCullough recalled saying to Whelan.

McCullough, mayor of Egg Harbor Township, said his consultant proposed doing robo-calls in which voters would be

asked to get five friends to vote for then-Assemblyman Whelan. A second call would say the same thing. A third call would thank voters for telling friends to vote for Whelan.

"That's not so bad," Whelan reportedly said.

"Yeah, but the first call would have been made at 2 a.m.," McCullough said. "The second call would be at 3 a.m. And the third would be at 5 a.m."

McCullough relayed the story at Richard Stockton College on Thursday at a panel discussion on civility in politics — or the lack of it — to say campaign consultants often push candidates to attack more harshly than they want. Five panelists agreed the harsh tone of election campaigns is turning the public — and public servants — away from politics.

"Sonny and I were both guilty," said Whelan, a former mayor of Atlantic City who said he and McCullough have long been friends.

The answer, panelists said, is accountability. Candidates must take charge of their own campaigns, and independent groups and the news media should fact-check allegations to hold candidates

accountable.

Most of the group said factual criticisms of an opponent's record are fair game. But character assassinations and phony charges are not.

The hour-long forum was sponsored by Stockton's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy.

Richard Mroz, former counsel to Gov. Christie Whitman, said consultants proposed attacking Democrat Jim McGreevey when Whitman ran for re-election in 1997.

"They said, 'We can file this guy like a fish,'" said Mroz, who coordinated John McCain's New Jersey campaign.

They weren't even talking about his homosexuality, just his legislative record. But Whitman refused to campaign that way, Mroz said.

The panelists said they wished big money could legally be removed from politics because its effect is corrosive.

"The public gets such a negative view of politics," said Stockton professor Alan Arcuri. "I can't get people to take my classes because they think politics is slimy."

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Staff photo by Edward Lea

**Egg Harbor Township Mayor James 'Sonny' McCullough listens to state Sen. Jim Whelan, D-Atlantic, speak during a panel discussion on civility in politics Thursday at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.**