Going Negative and Going Positive: 
Political Parties’ Communication Strategies in their Press Releases during the 2008 Austrian National Election Campaign

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Abstract

The study examines political party’s press releases to identify and explore the use of negative and positive messaging strategies from a political actor’s perspective. The information provided in press releases is self-initiated and thus a direct representation of the party’s tactical choices. The data for this study come from a 6-week content analysis of parties’ press releases (n=1607) of the 2008 Austrian National Elections. The analysis reveals that political parties used their press releases to emphasize their political opponents’ shortcomings. In particular, political parties sitting in opposition employ negative campaigning. Yet, they are hardly ever the target of negative messages. Overall, the analyzed negative messages rather focused on ‘soft skills’ such as personality traits than on ‘hard skills’ such as issue appeals. Furthermore, the impact of the campaign is rather neglectable as political parties did not alter the tone of their messages over the course of the campaign.

Keywords

Political parties, election strategies, press releases, negative and positive campaigning

Introduction

In Austrian election campaigns over the past decade, negative campaigning has increasingly become a critical topic of discussion among politicians, campaign managers, pollsters and in the media. However, even though the majority of them agree on the fact that negative campaigning is a frequently used communication strategy by Austrian political parties and they believe that going negative ‘works’, there is no empirical data to support such a notion. The goal of this study is to advance our understanding of negativity and positivity in Austrian election campaigns through empirical investigation of political parties’ press releases: Is negative and positive messaging a campaign strategy employed by Austrian political parties? If so, are certain types of negativity and positivity more common and who are political parties likely to target?
Research examining negative campaigning from a political party perspective has largely been focused on political advertisement, campaign events, electoral debates, and recently also websites (e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Druckman et al. 2010, Geer 2006, Holtz-Bacha 2001, Lau and Pomer 2001, Lau et al. 1999, Maier and Maier 2007, Schweitzer 2010, Walter and Vliegenthart 2010, Wicks and Souley 2003). Findings show that there are notable differences in the degree and types of negative messages between these objects of investigation (more below). This paper turns attention to a lesser examined communication channel – the political parties’ press releases – to identify and explore the use of negative and positive messaging tactics from a political actor’s perspective (Haynes et al. 2002; Haynes et al. 2006). Press releases afford political parties the opportunity to present their policies and statements on current issues, inform about party decisions, highlight their candidates, announce upcoming events, criticize the opposing party, and respond to attacks. This form of communication is self-initiated and thus a direct representation of the party’s tactical choices (Haynes et al. 2002: 636). Via their press releases political parties are trying to get their message out to the media and thereby to indirectly influence the electorate. In Austria press releases are one of the key communication channels of political parties. For example, since 1946 the social democratic SPÖ publishes daily the Sozialistische Korrespondenz (SK) (socialistic correspondence) (Austria-Forum 2011). During the 2008 general election campaign, the five parties in parliament send on average 37 press releases every day to the mass media (and others).

Emphasizing the shortcomings of the opponent is a commonly used communication strategy by political parties in election campaigns. Negative criticism or attacks involve questioning the policy views, the record and the qualifications for government of the opponent. It means bashing the personality and undermining the judgment of the opposing candidates and parties; talking about the opponent’s campaign in an unfavorable light (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Djupe and Peterson 2002: 847; Geer 2006; Mark 2009; Walter and Vliegenthart 2010: 443) and ‘generating fear about what the future might hold if the opposing party or parties were in power’ (Sanders and Norris 2005: 526). The purpose of negative campaign messages is to eliminate the targeted rival (Haynes and Rhine 1998: 695). Over the course of the campaign, political parties often employ the information provided in their
opponents’ press releases to criticize or attack their decisions or statement on current issues, and the
like.

Positive campaigning is just the opposite: It is talking about the positions, qualifications, accom-
plishments, and campaign tactics of the opposing party or parties in a positive way. In general, other
authors define a positive appeal as a message that is talking about the party’s or candidate’s own suc-
cess, qualifications, and so on (e.g. Lau and Pomper 2001; Djupe and Peterson 2002). However, polit-
ical party’s press releases are a communication channel in which parties constantly put themselves in a
good light, present their own proposals and highlight their achievements; because they are aiming for
favorable media coverage. We can expect parties to go positive on themselves several times in their
press releases. Therefore, in this study, I take a different approach by measuring to what extent politi-
cal parties are presenting their political opponents and their campaigns in a more favorable light. Be-

sides, under the proportional representation system a coalition government is very likely as usually no
party can achieve a majority in the parliament on its own. In fact, since 1983 Austria always had a
collegation government, thus, political parties know that they may depend on other parties’ support in a
collegation government. For example, as early as in the election campaign, parties make statements
about anticipated coalitions. Therefore, it seems likely that political parties employ positive messages
about their future coalition partners or others in their press releases.

Political parties employ negative and/or positive campaigning, because the majority of politicians
and of people professionally involved in politics believe that negative campaigning enhances voter
turnout (e.g., Fridkin and Kenney 2004: 571). Even though, only a handful of studies to date have
investigated the effects of negative campaigning, or to be precise, primarily the effects of negative
political advertisements on voters’ attitudes in the context of national election campaigns across Euro-
pean countries. According to a study on two TV-ads produced by the Social Democratic Party and the
Christian Democrats for the 2005 German national elections that explicitly attack the opponent, Ger-
man citizens perceive negative political advertisements as harmful. The findings demonstrate that neg-
ative campaigning causes a negative backlash on citizen’s evaluation of the sponsoring party (Maier
and Maier 2007: 343). Also Sanders and Norris (2005) show that negative campaign advertising by
political parties is counter-productive in the sense that it stimulates sympathy for the target of the negative appeal rather than strengthening the position of the sponsor.

Overall, empirical findings reveal only minimal effects of negative campaigns on voter turnout. Lau et al. (1999: 859) conducted a meta-analysis of 52 U.S. (and Canadian) studies and concluded that negative political advertisements in politics appear to be no more effective than positive ads. More recent findings on negative campaign advertisements confirm that negative political ads have not much impact on U.S. citizen’s perceptions of politics and governments (Jackson et al. 2009); and also positive campaign messages can provide candidates with benefits (Damore 2002: 672). Still, despite these empirical findings, negative campaigning is increasingly employed in the context of national election campaigns. Hence, this study investigates how Austrian political parties employ negativity and positivity in their press releases.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the debate over negative (and positive) campaigning across different communication channels. I mainly discuss prior research that focuses on party-controlled communication channels, thereby following the main research question of the study. To analyze political parties negative and positive messages in their press releases the paper focuses on the degree of negativity and positivity between the political parties, on the content of the appeals (types of messages) and its target. When observing negative and positive campaign tactics the context of the campaign plays an important role. Hence, I also investigate the impact that proximity of Election Day exerts on party’s decisions to go negative or to go positive. Second, I outline the research design for testing negativity and positivity in the 2008 Austrian election campaign, drawing upon a content analysis of 1607 press releases of the then-governing political parties. Third, I present the empirical results of the content analysis. The article concludes by discussing the principal findings.

Theoretical framework: Negativity and positivity across different party-controlled communication channels

The recent literature on negative campaigning has shown that political parties in Western Democracies have increasingly employed negative campaign tactics to win the elections (see, for example, Geer
2006: 36; Semetko and Schoenbach 2003). Although, results across studies conducted in Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands reveal that in multiparty systems, the rate of negativity in election campaigns is still lower than in US campaigns (Elmelund-Præstekær 2011; Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Holtz-Bacha 2001; Maier and Maier 2007; Walter and Vliegenthart 2010). Moreover, in German election campaigns advertising and spots primarily have a positive tone. Nevertheless, political parties in national election campaigns in European countries go negative, because messages that are criticizing or attacking other political actors tend to attract more attention than news that is positive. For example, in the 2005 Danish elections, the media focused on messages indicating a conflict, even though going negative was only a minor aspect of the political campaigns (e.g., Hansen and Pedersen 2008: 421-2).

Existing literature that empirically measures negative and/or positive campaigning in political press releases is scarce (Haynes et al. 2006; Wicks and Souley 2003). Even though, studies report that candidates go negative in their press releases: Examining the press releases that were posted on the websites of Georg W. Bush and Al Gore during the 2000 presidential campaign Wicks and Souley (2003) find that three-quarters of the press releases contained an attack on the opponent. However, as press releases have hardly been chosen as the object of investigation, the following discussion will mainly rely on the results of studies that examined negativity and/or positivity across other party-controlled communication channels.

Based on the findings presented above, I assume that negativity and positivity are part of political parties’ campaign messaging strategies. Whereby, the level of negative campaigning will be higher than that of positive campaigning. Especially, in multiparty systems, parties need to distinguish themselves from their competition to get the public’s attention. This involves competitive strategies, ‘and comparison often takes a negative form’ (Haynes and Rhine 1998: 692). To determine the strategy of negative and positive campaigning behind the press releases we need to examine how and when political parties use this form of messages. This implies that we have to consider the target and the content of the message as well as contextual factors of the campaign.

The first question to be considered concerns the source of the negative and positive message: In a multiparty electoral context, which political party is more likely to go negative or to go positive? In general, the political parties sitting in parliament can be distinguished on the basis of whether they are
incumbents or challengers. According to this distinction, the parties in opposition are challenging the governing party or, in case of a coalition government the ruling parties. Moreover, in case of a coalition government, it seems to be likely that the smaller coalition partner is challenging the chancellor’s party in order to win the elections. Researchers who choose to investigate negative campaigning on the basis of party-controlled communication channels such as advertisements, letters to the editor, party election broadcasts, and debates of party leaders have clearly found that challengers are more likely to go negative than those parties which are currently in government (Elmelund-Præstekær 2011: 9; Hansen and Pedersen 2008: 411; Schweitzer 2010: 210-1). These findings confirm previous results of analysis conducted in a US-context (e.g., Lau and Pomper 2001). Hence, the first hypothesis predicts:

**Hypothesis 1:** Political parties in opposition use negative campaigning in their press releases to a greater extent than do political parties in government. Whereas political parties in government use positive campaigning in their press releases to a greater extent than do political parties in opposition.

In addition, the target of the negative and positive messages ought to be considered as well. Studies investigating political campaign communication in party-based electoral systems (Schweitzer 2010: 214; Walter and Vliegenthart 2010: 453) found that political parties rather aim at other parties as collective entity than at individual politicians, e.g. the party’s top candidate. These findings do not really come as a surprise, because scholars have generally argued that the type of electoral system influences the general focus of election campaigns (e.g., Plasser and Plasser 2002: 81). In party-based electoral systems, like Austria, campaigns rather have a party-centric view than focusing on the individual politician. In comparison, in candidate-centered electoral systems such as the US, campaigns are highly individualized (Plasser and Plasser 2002: 78). Even though some scholars have argued that in Western European Democracies the importance of top candidates has continuously increased and, at present, there is a trend towards personalization of media and party communication (e.g., McAllister 2007: 584), first and foremost elections in Austria are party-oriented. Therefore, it is sensible to hypothesize that:
**Hypothesis 2:** More negative and positive campaigning will be targeted at political parties as collective entities than on individual politicians.

Campaign messages not only vary in their tone, but also in their content. Fridkin and Kenney (2008: 695) note that research on negative campaigning has hardly paid attention to the variance in the content of negative information; even though, ‘not all negative messages are alike’ (Fridkin and Kenney 2008: 696) and different types of campaign messages can have differential effects. Following previous research, I distinguish the following types of negative and positive messages (e.g., Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Haynes et al. 2006; Walter and Vliegenthart 2010; Wicks and Souley 2003): a) issue appeals, b) appeals on the opponent’s record, c) personal appeals and statements on a party’s or politician’s qualification for the job, and d) appeals on the campaign tactic and campaign strategy of the opponent.

**Issue-oriented appeals** focus on the policy views of the opposing party. Appeals on the opponent’s record refer to the opponent’s job performance and achievements or voting record. Both appeals are considered to concern ‘hard skills’ (e.g. data, facts and figures) as opposed to ‘soft skills’. ‘Soft skills’ are defined as those appeals that focus on individual characteristics and the campaign itself. This concerns personal appeals, which portray an opponent’s personal history and character traits (e.g. integrity and charisma) as well as statements on the qualifications for the job, which focus on the opponent’s competence, experience and leadership abilities. Last, I evaluate the extent to which messages in press releases focus on the campaign tactic and campaign strategy of the opponent as the present study is conducted in a campaign context.

According to Geer (2006: 84, 145) the rise of negativity in US presidential campaigns over the last forty years (1960 to 2004) can mainly be ascribed to an increase of issue attacks. Fridkin and Kenney (2004: 588-9, 593) note that negative advertisement focusing on issues have greater impact on citizen’s views of candidates than attacks on the opponents’ personal characteristics. However, examining candidate’s press releases in the 1996 U.S. Republican presidential nomination campaign, Haynes et al. (2006: 122) find that the probability of transmitting a negative message via the press to the public increases with an attack on personal traits or on the candidate’s campaign. In addition, Walter and Vliegenthart (2010: 452) note that the campaign coverage in the major Dutch newspapers rather focuses on personality traits than on issues. Nevertheless, the authors observed that the more control
political parties have over the communication channel, the more the negative message focuses on issues. Similar trends have been documented by Schweitzer (2010: 214) in a study on German party websites: German political parties rather focus on the political competence (e.g., the qualification in certain policy fields and the record) of the opposing party than on personality traits. Integrating the above, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

**Hypothesis 3:** Negative and positive messages rather focus on ‘hard skills’ than on ‘soft skills’.

When observing political parties campaign strategies also the context of the campaign plays a significant role. A very important contextual factor that influences campaign strategies of political parties is proximity to Election Day (Damore 2002: 672). Findings based on party-controlled communication channels other than press releases as well as on newspaper articles show that the closer the Election Day the more likely candidates and parties are going negative (Damore 2002; Elmelund-Præstekær 2011: 9; Peterson and Djupe 2005: 50-1). This is probably due to the fact that most voters tend to tune in the campaign rather late and political parties want to catch their attention. In addition, Damore (2002: 673) presumes that political parties are ‘waiting to go negative until after they have established themselves in the minds of voters’, because then they ‘may be perceived as more reliable, which may increase the veracity of their attacks’. Therefore, at the beginning of the campaign a key goal of the parties is to position themselves by informing the voters about their achievements since the last elections, their political competences and their leadership abilities and about what issues are most important to the party. Conversely, such an argument may assume that the level of positive campaigning will decrease as the Election Day nears. Hence, the last hypothesis predicts:

**Hypothesis 4:** Towards the end of the campaign the degree of negativity will increase in the press releases of Austrian political parties; while the degree of positivity will decrease.
Defining negative and positive campaigning

For the purposes of this article, as outlined above, I distinguish between negative campaigning and positive campaigning. Negative campaigning includes all forms of attacks and criticism directed at the electoral opponent in order to weaken the opposing party or parties and thereby strengthening the position of the sponsoring party. The opposite strategy of negative campaigning is positive campaigning. Positive campaigning is generally defined as presenting ‘one’s own qualifications for office’ (Djupe and Peterson 2002: 847). However, press releases primarily contain positive attributes of the sponsoring party. The sponsor is constantly engaging in acclamation and self-praise (Walter and Vliegenthart 2010: 443) to garner positive media coverage, especially during the campaign period. Therefore, in this paper, the term positive campaigning refers to presenting the opponent in a favorable light.

Data

The data for this study comes from a content analysis of political parties’ press releases of the last six weeks of the 2008 Austrian National Elections (August 16, through September, 27, 2008). This data includes 1607 press releases of the then-governing political parties: the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), the Austrian’s People Party (ÖVP), the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), The Greens – The Green Alternative (The Greens), and the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ). The content of each press release was analyzed and then coded on a variety of indicators including whether or not a press release contained negative and/or positive appeals.

Coding Procedure and Measures

The unit of analysis is the single press release. Only explicit and visible manifestations (i.e., manifestations the journalist can see and thus also the coder) were taken into account when measuring negative and positive campaigning. For each press release the most dominant negative appeal and the most dominant positive appeal, i.e. any reference criticizing/attacking or praising the opponent, was coded (see also Walter and Vliegenthart 2010: 448f.). The coding design does not account for multiple negative or multiple positive appeals. Thus, we coded a maximum of two appeals in a press release. How-

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1 The number of press releases (n = 1607) produced by each political party for the 2008 election campaign (43 days) is as follows: SPÖ = 509 (31.5%), ÖVP = 430 (27%), FPÖ = 258 (16%), The Greens = 160 (10%), BZÖ =250 (15.5%).
ever, in a single press release it is possible that there is more than one dominant negative or positive appeal. In this case, the first manifestation was coded. The research design to measure negative and positive campaigning has the following key elements:

- The *number* of negative and positive appeals.
- The *source* and *target* of negative and positive appeals (Who is criticizing/attacking or praising whom?): The *source* of negative and positive campaigning is generally the sponsor of the press release, i.e. the political party, (top) candidate or an individual politician of the party. It may also be another political party, (top) candidate or individual politician, who is cited in the press release. This also applies to governmental actors or the mass media. The same (political) actors (parties, candidates and other individual politicians, the government and the mass media) can also be the *target* of the appeal.
- The *types* of messages that can be either negative or positive in tone. This category measures the content of the appeal, which can include the following: a) *issue* appeals, b) appeals on the opponent’s *record*, c) *personal* appeals and statements on a party’s or politician’s *qualification* for the job, and d) appeals on the *campaign tactic and campaign strategy* of the opponent (see description above). In addition, a category of “Others” was added to include negative and positive messages that do not fall into one of these categories.

**Results**

The results reveal that 1031 of the 1607 press releases (64.1 percent) contained some form of a negative and/or positive message. Yet, when the results are broken into negative and positive appeals, they clearly show that only *going negative* is a campaign messaging strategy utilized by political parties. In fact, 62.1 percent of the party’s press releases contained at least one negative appeal, but in only 2 percent of the analyzed press releases the parties made the effort to present their political opponent in a positive light. No more than 14 press releases contained both kinds of campaign messages. These

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2 Coding was conducted by ten coders. Overall, inter-coder percentage agreement for each of these items falls within the acceptable range, with the vast majority at or above 93 percent. Lower levels of reliability were found for the variables *types of negative campaigning* (.70) and *target of negative campaigning* (.80). Specific reliability statistics are available from the author.
findings indicate that negative campaigning was the preferred communication strategy of Austrian political parties in the 2008 election campaign. Table 1 reports the number of negative and positive appeals in the analyzed press releases for each party.

Table 1. Comparison of Negative and Positive Messages by Political Parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Press Releases with Negative Appeal(s)</th>
<th>Press Releases with Positive Appeal(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPÖ (N = 509)</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ÖVP (N = 430)</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Greens (N = 160)</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FPÖ (N = 258)</td>
<td>64.0</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BZÖ (N = 250)</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 1607</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>998</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Concerning the degree of negativity the results display that the three opposition parties, The Greens, the FPÖ and the BZÖ, equally utilized negative campaigning as communication strategy. About two-thirds of their press releases contained a critique or an attack on the opponent. Yet, there are great differences between the two coalition partners the SPÖ and the ÖVP. Only half of the press releases of the Social Democrats (SPÖ) included a negative appeal, whereas the Conservatives (ÖVP) employed negative campaigning more than any other party (71.1 percent). How can this be explained? About two months before the elections in September 2008 the ÖVP, the junior partner of the coalition government, called off the coalition with the social democratic SPÖ: Wilhelm Molterer, the leader of the ÖVP, declared that ‘It's enough!’, and the parliament decided to hold snap elections. The Conservative can be identified as the challenging party, who was aiming to win the elections and thus retake the chancellorship from the SPÖ. In the 2008 national elections, they had to distinguish themselves from their coalition partner and biggest competitor the SPÖ.

The results in Table 1 also show that political parties hardly intended to present the opposing party or parties in a favorable light. Thus, based on these findings, I assume that the fact that after the elections political parties most likely will depend on other parties support in a coalition government does not play a role in their campaign communication. However, if at all, parties employ positive campaigning in their press releases than this tactic was one of the most common. For example, 13 of the
14 positive messages issued by the Social Democrats, who released by far the most positive appeals of all parties, were targeted at their coalition partner the Conservatives. Moreover, the vast majority of positive messages (5 of 6) emanating from the Conservatives was aimed at the Social Democrats. Nevertheless, due to the overall very low level of positive campaigning in the party’s press releases (2 percent), in the following sections, I will focus on the party’s negative campaign strategies.

Hypothesis 1 aims to investigate whether political parties in opposition use negative campaigning in their press releases to a greater extent than parties in government. Of the five parties integrated in this study, the social democratic SPÖ and the conservative ÖVP had formed a coalition government since the last elections in 2006. The Greens, the FPÖ and the BZÖ were the parties sitting in opposition. The results in Table 2 support the hypothesis that opposition campaigning tends to be more negative than that of the governing parties. Even though, due to the extensive use of negative messages by the ÖVP (see Table 1), there are only minor differences between the two groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Press Releases with Negative Appeal(s)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parties in Opposition (N = 668)</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parties in Government (N = 939)</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>560</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In comparison to the source of the negative campaigning, its target is of great interest. Additionally to the first hypothesis it seems reasonable to ask whether political parties in opposition (The Greens, FPÖ, BZÖ) were the target of negative campaigning rather than parties in government (SPÖ, ÖVP). 86.8 percent of the analyzed negative appeals were aimed at the two parties in government. Of these two major parties, the Social Democrats (SPÖ), the chancellor’s party, had been criticized or attacked by its opponents more often (57 percent) than the Conservatives (ÖVP) (43 percent). The three minor parties were hardly ever the object of criticism or attack (13.2 percent).

Austria has a party-based electoral system; hence, hypothesis 2 investigates to what extent political parties as collective mind are the targets of negative campaigning instead of the individual politicians. Table 3 displays the combined summary score for all parties: 53.2 percent of negative appeals in political party’s press releases were aimed at the collective entities. 46.8 percent of the analyzed negative
appeals were targeting individual politicians. With regard to the assumption that more negative campaigning will be targeted at political parties as collective entities than on individual politicians, H2 is supported. But differences are rather minimal.

Table 3. Percentage of Negative Appeals Targeted at Political Parties and Individual Politicians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party (Top Candidate)</th>
<th>Collective Entity</th>
<th>Individual Politicians (Single Entity)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPÖ (Faymann)</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>51.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ÖVP (Molterer)</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>41.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Greens (Van der Bellen)</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FPÖ (HC Strache)</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BZÖ (Haider)</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>60.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>53.2</strong></td>
<td><strong>46.8</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 90 negative appeals have been aimed at other collective entities or individuals than those included in the study and therefore are not shown in the table.

Analyzing the results for each singly party, the comparison demonstrates that the BZÖ shows a different pattern than all other parties: 60.7 percent of the negative appeals were aimed at the party’s individual politicians. With Jörg Haider, the BZÖ had a very strong and outstanding top candidate running the campaign in 2008. Since the age of twenty, in 1970, Haider has held various positions in the right-wing Freedom Party, before he became the chairman of the newly founded BZÖ in 2005. Hence, I assume that the general foci of negative appeals targeted at the BZÖ were aimed at Jörg Haider. To determine to what extent the party’s top candidates were the target of negative appeals, the number of negative appeals on individual politicians is broken down into two groups, top candidates and other individual politicians (see Table 3). As expected, nearly all negative messages that focused on an individual politician of the BZÖ were criticizing or attacking the top candidate Jörg Haider. Moreover, with 57.1 percent of all negative messages aimed at the BZÖ, Jörg Haider drew the most criticism. A similar trend can be observed for the FPÖ: 38.8 percent of the negative messages were aimed at the top candidate of the FPÖ, Heinz Christian Strache, who is a highly controversial right-wing populist. Other individual politicians of the FPÖ were only seldom targeted (3.8 percent).

The third hypothesis stated that negative messages rather focus on ‘hard skills’ than on ‘soft skills’. Table 4 illustrates the dispersion of the 998 analyzed negative appeals by type of messages. The re-
Results demonstrate that significant differences exist in types of negative messages and they are not in line with the expectations. Clearly, it appears that political parties preferred to produce messages that criticize or attack ‘soft skills’. The comparison shows that about 60 percent of all negative appeals fall within this category. Whereas less than 40 percent of all negative messages focused on ‘hard skills’ such as the policy views (issue) or the record of the opposing party or parties. Hypothesis 3 must thus be rejected. In the 2008 national elections political parties employed negative campaigning by accentuating their opponent’s ‘soft skills’ rather than the ‘hard skills’. Overall, of the five analyzed types of negative messages, the majority of all appeals (50.2 percent) criticized or attacked personal characteristics or the qualification for the job.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Negative Message</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N (= 998)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hard Skills</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft Skills</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Characteristics/Qualification</td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Tactic and Strategy</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lastly, I investigate the impact of an essential contextual factor of election campaigns: proximity to Election Day. For this analysis, the dependent variable is the degree (percent) of negative campaigning in party’s press releases and the independent variable are the days prior to Election Day. Hypothesis 4 predicts that as the Election Day approaches the likelihood that Austrian political parties will go negative will increase. The results in Figure 1 do not support the hypothesis. The results show that the level of negativity in political party’s press releases remained (relatively) constant throughout the campaign.
Conclusions and discussion

In the 2008 Austrian election campaign, political parties, to a large extent, used their press releases to emphasize their political opponents’ shortcomings. Based on the presented results, negative campaign strategies of Austrian political parties, which are utilized in press releases, can be summarized as follows:

- Opposition campaigning tends to be more negative than that of the governing parties. In fact, about two-thirds of the analyzed press releases of the three parties sitting in opposition, the minor parties, contained at least one negative message. However, on the contrary, they were hardly ever the object of criticism or attack. In general, Austrian minor parties have just little or no experience as ruling party; hence, focusing on their own qualifications for government, their record or their leadership abilities may be less successful when trying to convince the voters. This may be the reason for their behavior. Even though, The Greens in comparison to the FPÖ and the BZÖ, the two right-wing populist parties in the Austrian parliament, have little in common. Nevertheless,
during election times it seems like the opposition parties are building a united bloc opposed to the parties in government.

- Overall, in terms of the target of negative campaigning, Austrian parties go negative on other political parties as collective entity rather than on individual politicians. Yet, the phenomenon of personalization can be observed in the person of Jörg Haider, the top candidate of the BZÖ, and partly in the case of HC Strache, the top candidate of the FPÖ. It seems logical that Jörg Haider as the founder of the BZÖ and the ‘face’ of the party was the target of negative messages to a greater extent than his party. Moreover, for many years, the two right wing populist politicians are monopolizing the political discussion in Austria: They are always in the center of attention of the media.

These findings conclude to previous results of studies on party-controlled communication channels conducted in multiparty systems (Elmelund-Præstekær 2011; Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Schweitzer 2010).

- In contradiction to previous findings are the results on the content of negative messages and on the contextual factor the proximity to Election Day. First, Austrian political parties rather focused on ‘soft skills’ (i.e. the opponent’s personal traits, campaign tactics and strategies) than as predicted on ‘hard skills’ (i.e. appeals on issues and on the record of the opposing party). Among the five analyzed types of negative messages appeals on the opponent’s character traits and qualifications for the job were most common (over 50 percent). Second, political parties did not alter the tone of their messages over the course of the campaign. Unlike in Danish election campaigns (or in US campaigns) the amount of negativity did not increase as the campaign proceeded (Elmelund-Præstekær 2011: 9).

These findings seem to relate to the analyzed communication channel, the political party’s press releases. Via their press releases parties send their public announcements to the news media, often several times a day; thereby trying to indirectly reach the public. Political parties are always fighting for public awareness. However, they need to capture the media’s attention with their information; especially, during the campaign period when the mass media is swamped with press releases. Going negative against an opponent, in general, and criticizing or attacking personality traits of the opponent
Going Negative and Going Positive

(‘soft skills’) (Walter and Vliegenthart 2010: 452; see also Haynes et al. 2006: 122), in particular, are tactics to entice the media: It’s all about emphasizing conflict rather than cooperation.

On the basis of political party’s press releases this study contributes to the discussion on negative campaign strategies in elections across Europe. Certainly, the trends that have been identified in the press releases of Austrian political parties need to be confirmed in other multiparty electoral contexts before the findings can be generalized. Moreover, there are some limitations to the work presented here. First, the dataset only included political party’s press releases. Future studies need to further validate the presented findings for other party-controlled communication channels, such as advertisements, posters or electoral debates. In particular, campaign posters are a very prevalent communication channel in Austrian election campaigns. Second, the presented findings need to be built into a broader framework. This study measures negative (and positive) campaigning solely on how it is conducted by political parties. Yet, the purpose of a political party is to win elections; hence, further exploration should measure whether negative messages increase or suppress voter turnout in Austrian elections. An important question to ask in this context is does negative campaigning has a mobilizing potential for voters to vote against the criticized opponent? After all, research findings from Germany and the UK indicate that going negative is rather counter-productive for the sponsoring party. Such an approach would also include to investigating mass media coverage; and thus the interplay between party press releases and news coverage.

The results of the present article contribute to our understanding of negative and positive campaigning in multiparty systems; and thereby providing an empirical examination of the hitherto existing theoretical assumption that negative campaigning is a frequently used communication strategy by Austrian political parties in election campaigns. On the contrary, the findings show that positive messaging, i.e. presenting the opponent in a favorable light, has rarely been employed by Austrian political parties in their press releases during the 2008 election campaign. Even though, under the proportional representation system it is very likely that political parties have to cooperate. In fact, since the Second Republic (since 1945), with the exception of the years 1966 to 1987, Austria has always been ruled by coalition governments. Based on these findings, it is recommended that future studies in similar settings might very well refrain from integrating this variable in their research design.
Literature


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