COVERING THE FIGHT: THE NEWS MEDIA AND NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING

Rasmus Tue Pedersen
Department of Political Science
University of Copenhagen

First draft, 10 August, 2011

ABSTRACT

It is often noted that media outlets are more likely to report on negative campaign messages than positive campaign messages. Going negative may therefore be a very effective way of reaching voters through the media, and this media amplification of negative messages may be particularly important in non-US campaigns, where politicians often have limited opportunities to use direct communication channels, in particular TV advertisements.

However, media outlets do more than choosing what they want to cover, they also chose how they want to cover it, i.e. how they want to frame their stories. The literature on media framing, have shown that media outlets often cover politics and political campaigns through a “game frame,” which focuses on the motives and strategy behind policy positions, and on the popularity and power of political actors. This paper investigates whether there is an association between a media focus on negative campaigning and the use of a game frame.

The possible association between negative campaigning and media framing is relevant not only for the politicians using such campaign messages, but also relevant from a more general democratic perspective since both negative campaigning and media game framing have been charged with similar, detrimental, effects on the electorate such as voter apathy, cynicism and a lowering of political efficacy. Any association between media coverage of negative campaigning and choice of frame means that we will have to investigate both in conjunction in order to disentangle the possible effects on the electorate.

Therefore, this paper takes a first step by investigating whether a media focus on negative campaigning is indeed associated with a use of the game frame. Such an association have previously been suggested, but it remains to be investigated empirically. This investigation is based on a content analysis of a selection of major news outlets.

Paper prepared for the panel “Negative Campaigning in a non-US Context” at the ECPR General Conference, Reykjavik, 25-27 August 2011. The author can be reached at rtp@ifs.ku.dk
INTRODUCTION

Political campaigning is not always pretty. Numerous commentators and scholars have noticed, analyzed, and often lamented the tendency of politicians and political parties to use negative campaigning, i.e. to attack and criticize their political opponents (e.g. Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995). Negative campaigning is an integral part of modern political campaigning and discourse, both in the US (e.g. Lau and Pomper, 2004, Geer, 2006) and a number of European countries (Hansen and Pedersen, 2008, Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010, Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010). Indeed, it seems probable that politicians and political parties all over the world use the tactic of ‘going negative.’

This tendency to go negative may to some degree be driven by the media environment. Negative campaigning receive far more news media coverage than positive campaigning (Ridout and Smith, 2008), and going negative may therefore be a very effective way of reaching voters through the media. This media bias towards negative campaigning is not surprising, given the pivotal role conflict plays as a news criteria (Schultz, 2007, Cook, 1998:89-90). Negative campaigning is by nature conflictual and therefore appeal to news reporters and editors looking for a good fight.

The news media do not, however, only chose what they want to cover, they also chose how they want to cover it, i.e. how they want to frame a news story (De Vreese, 2005b). Most political news coverage will, essentially, apply one of two different generic news frames: The first frame is an ‘issue frame,’ which focuses on policy, policy issues, the policy positions on these issues, real life conditions with relevance for issue positions, and the effects of enacted policies and initiatives on conditions outside the political sphere. However, reporters and journalists may also chose to use what has been termed the “game frame,” which focuses on the strategy and motives behind policy positions, and the popularity and power of political parties and politicians. Numerous studies have shown that this game frame and similar frames are widely used by the media (e.g. Benoit et al., 2005, Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen, 2009, Strömbäck and Shehata, 2007, Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006, Strömbäck and Aalberg, 2008).¹

Both negative campaigning, the media penchant for negative messages, and media game framing, have often been noted in characterisations of modern day political campaigning and news coverage (e.g. Norris, 2000). However, the quantitative, empirical studies of negative campaigning and game framing have evolved quite independent of each other. We therefore do not really know whether these features are empirically independent of each other, or whether they are indeed associated.

¹ Some studies have used the term “game frame” more narrowly—denoting only coverage focusing on the electoral race—and used terms such as “strategic coverage” or “strategy frame,” when describing media coverage. However, the conceptual overlap between the two frames is great and the terms have been used interchangeably (e.g. Lawrence, 2000).
The relationship between negative campaigning and news framing are relevant from at least two perspectives. First, from the perspective of the campaigning politician, media framing matters when deciding whether to go negative or not. While the literature on negative campaigning have established that the media amplify negative campaign messages, this does not necessarily make negative campaigning more effective as a media strategy, if the media at the same time apply a frame which focus less on your message and more on your tactical reasons for stating the message. Conversely, negative campaigning may be even more effective as a media strategy, if negative campaign messages are covered through an issue frame to a greater degree than positive campaign messages. While the persuasive effects of any interaction between media framing and campaign messages are yet to be investigated, recent studies do suggest that the use of a game frame may significantly impact attitudes towards specific policy issues (Lee et al., 2008, Elenbaas and De Vreese, 2008).

Secondly, the relationship between negative campaigning and media framing is relevant from a more general democratic perspective, because both negative campaigning and game framing have been charged with similar, detrimental effects on the electorate. The literature on negative campaigning have to a large degree revolved around the effects of negative campaigning on efficacy, and voter turnout (for an overview, see Lau et al., 2007), whereas the literature on the game frame have repeatedly shown how this frame might lead to cynicism in the electorate (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997, Elenbaas and De Vreese, 2008, De Vreese, 2004, De Vreese, 2005a, Valentino et al., 2001), and may also lead to lower levels of internal and external efficacy (Pedersen, forthcoming). If there is an association between media coverage of positive and negative campaigning and choice of media frame, then we need to investigate both in order to disentangle the effects on the electorate.

This paper, therefore, aims to clarify the relationship between negative campaigning and the media game frame. This is done, firstly, by a review of extant literature and, secondly, by conducting a first study on the empirical association between negative campaigning and the game frame in Danish newspapers during the 2007 election campaign.

**Litterature review: is it all just a dirty game?**

This section examines the literature on negative campaigning and framing, respectively. The purpose is not to review the specific findings of the literature, but rather to investigate similarities, differences and possible overlaps in focus between these two fields of study. As this section will show, the two strands of literature have progressed rather independently of each other, in spite of the closely connected questions the two fields have sought to answer.
NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING

The aim of this subsection is to show to what degree the literature on negative campaigning have dealt with the mass media, and especially media framing in their studies.

Of course, it is far from given that all studies on negative campaigning should deal with the mass media. Indeed, the role of the media as an independent actor have been sidestepped entirely in a substantial part of the literature, which have focused chiefly on politicians and political parties as dispatchers of negative campaigning or focused on the electorate as recipients of these messages. These studies include empirical studies on the determinants behind the use of negative campaigning (Theilmann and Wilhite, 1998, Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010, Druckman et al., 2010), experiments on the effects of negative ads and statements (Dardis et al., 2008, Brooks and Geer, 2007, Pinkleton et al., 2002, King and Mcconnell, 2003), observational effect studies based on surveys and content analysis (Jackson et al., 2009, Brooks, 2006, Sigelman and Kugler, 2003, Freedman and Goldstein, 1999), and game theoretical models, explaining candidates’ choice to use negative campaigning (Harrington and Hess, 1996, Skaperidas and Grofman, 1995).

Lau and Pomper (2002, 2004) notably did measure press coverage of negative campaigning, but they used this coverage as a proxy measure of the campaign tone. The studies did not, in other words, focus on the independent role possibly played by the media when relaying these messages. The studies did, however, acknowledge that the media might exaggerate the degree of negativism in campaigns (2004:136). And in general, large parts of the literature on negative campaigning have been explicitly aware of the fact that the news media might influence the use and effects of negative campaigning. This was in fact highlighted already in the seminal work of Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995). According to Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995), the use of negative campaign messages in U.S. elections could be attributed to three factors; the competitive nature of political advertising, political interest groups and: “last but not least, to the ways in which reporters cover the campaign” (1995:115). They furthermore noted that “journalist report the campaign with the verve of a sportswriters covering a title fight.” (1995:116), and that:

Negative advertisements make particularly tasty morsels for the media. For journalists, it is a no-lose situation when candidates attack one another. Allegations of dishonesty and incompetence lay the seeds of controversy and scandal. Even if the charges prove to be false, reporters can always rail against the candidate who aired the attack for slandering his or her opponent and engaging in sleazy campaigning. The fight itself becomes the story. (1995:134)

To exemplify this tendency of the media, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) referred to controversial negative ads, which had received considerable attention from the media.
Some notable examples were the press coverage of the attack on presidential candidate Dukakis in the “Willie Horton add,” infamous for being misleading and implicitly playing to potential racial prejudices among voters, and the “Daisy add,” which implicitly attacked US presidential candidate Goldwater in the 1964 election, by hinting that he might start a nuclear war (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995:133, see also Ridout and Smith, 2008).

Numerous later studies on negative campaigning have explicitly recognized that the media does seem to have a bias towards negative campaigns (Lau and Pomper, 2002:61, Lau and Pomper, 2004:136-137, Djupe and Peterson, 2002:847, Ridout and Franz, 2008:161, Lau and Rovner, 2009:287). Investigating ad watch coverage in the media, Min (2002) found that most of the media add watches (60 percent) were devoted to negative ads. However, the study did not compare with the prevalence of negativity in the adds themselves. Geer (2006) noted, that the media grew markedly more interested in negative campaigning in the 1988 presidential election. Geer argues that although the 1988 campaign did see controversial ads such as “Willie Horton,” the campaign was no more negative than previous campaigns (see also Kaid and Johnston, 1991). Citing Patterson (1993), Geer contended that the increasing media coverage of negative campaigning could instead be attributed to the media’s shift of focus from policy to strategy. In other words, this “Patterson hypothesis”, proposed by Geer (2006:130-132) posits that there is a positive correlation between use of the game frame and coverage of negative campaigning. Geer did not, however, proceed to conduct any systematic study on the frames used by the media when covering negative campaigning.

In the to date most systematic study of media bias towards negative campaigning, Ridout and Smith (2008:603-604) found that newspapers, on average, devoted twice as much space to negative ads as they did to positive ads. When controlling for a range of other factors in a negative binomial regression model, they found that negative campaign ads were significantly more likely to be mentioned in newspaper articles (Coefficient 1.437 p=0.001). Outside of a US-context, Hansen and Pedersen (2008) also found the Danish media to be markedly biased towards negative campaign messages, although they did not quantify the extent of this bias.

- The main concern in this paper is not why the press seems to have such bias for negative campaigning and conflict in general, but it might bear mention, that this bias is often explained a as consequence of modern news criteria (Schultz, 2007). In contrast, from a historical perspective, Mark (2006:23) noted that “The most prominent perpetrators of negative campaign tactics during the nineteenth century were newspapers, which were largely partisan rags.” The allusion to the newspapers as partisan rags points to a significant difference in comparison with the majority of modern day media outlets: nineteenth century newspapers did not publicize criticism of political candidates because conflict was a well established news criteria or because they wanted to maximize circulation. Rather, newspapers criticized - or slandered - politicians because the news-
papers themselves were party press and as such actively campaigning for other politicians (Mark, 2006, see also Cook, 1998).

Like Geer (2006), Lau and Pomper (2004) briefly touched upon the concept of framing, when noting that: “negative campaigning, mudslinging, and so on are common ways of that stories about campaigns are “framed.” Following this line of reasoning, our [press coverage] data may better reflect how the campaign was reported than how it was actually conducted” (2004:136, emphasis in original). However, framing here seems to be a matter of reporting negative campaigning to a larger degree than positive campaigning, not a question of the construction of media frames.

In sum, the literature on negative campaigning has been well aware of the media bias towards negative campaigning but have until now not investigated how the media frame negative campaigning. The main variable, independent or dependent, in the field has been negative campaigning as opposed to positive campaigning.

**Game framing**

While the literature on negative campaigning have paid little attention to media framing, the literature on the game frame, also known as the strategy frame, to a large degree took the starting point, that negative campaigning, and the media game frame was closely connected. Going back almost 20 years, Patterson (1993) argued that the “game schema” had become the dominant way for reporters to cover politics. Using this schema, the reporters covered election campaigns as a game, focused on polls, and positioned the candidates as performers and the electorate as spectators (the term “schema” has now largely been replaced with the term “frame” in most of the extant literature). However, Patterson also focused on the media tendency to cover the negative, and posited that the game schema predisposes the reporter to highlight controversies (1993:57ff).

This tendency to view the game frame in conjunction with a focus on conflict, and hence negative campaigning, is also apparent in the arguably most central work on the game frame, Jamieson and Cappella (1997). Jamieson and Cappella drew on Jamieson (1992), when defining strategy coverage:

*Jamieson [1992] argues that strategy coverage is marked by several features: (1) winning and losing as the central concern; (2) the language of wars, games and competition; (3) a story with performers, critics, and audience (voters); (4) centrality of performance, style, and perception of the candidate; (5) heavy weighing of polls and the candidates standing in them.*  
(Cappella and Jamieson 1997:33)

Although coverage of negative campaigning and conflict was not an explicit part of the definition in Cappella and Jamieson (1997), the focus on metaphors from wars, games
and competition did suggest that the game frame was somewhat conflictual in nature. And indeed, their study tended to view the strategy frame as related to a focus on conflict and (personal) political attacks, when noting that: “It is impossible to know which came first—the conflict-driven sound-bite-oriented discourse of politicians or the conflict-saturated strategy-oriented structure of press coverage.” (p. 9), and “We will argue that both the contemporary journalistic culture and a focus on strategy, conflict, and motives invite cynicism” (p. 31)

This conflation of the strategy frame, conflict, and negative campaigning was subsequently carried into the following studies on framing: Semetko and Valkenburg (2000:95, see also De Vreese et al., 2001:109), one of the most highly cited articles on news framing,\(^2\) even termed the frames described by Patterson (1993) and Jamieson and Cappella (1997) as the “conflict frame”, when writing that:

“[…] research has also observed that discussion in the news between political elites often reduces complex substantive political debate to overly simplistic conflict. Presidential election campaign news, for example, is framed largely in terms of conflict (Patterson, 1993) Because of the emphasis on conflict, the news media have been criticized for inducing cynicism and mistrust of political leaders […]”

Likewise, referencing Cappella and Jamieson (1997) and Jamieson (1992), de Vreese and Semetko (2002) wrote that: “Indicators of strategic coverage have been defined as coverage of candidate motivations and personalities; focus on disagreement between parties, candidates, or voters; and the presence and emphasis on polls in the news” (p. 617, emphasis added). It should be noted, that de Vreese and Semetko (2000) did not actually use this indicator of the game frame in their content analysis (p. 623). Also, de Vreese (2004) wrote: “Strategic news is defined as news coverage of candidate motivations and personalities, focus on disagreement between parties, candidates or voters, and the presence and emphasis on polls in the news (p. 192, emphasis added). The stimuli used in the experiments did not focus specifically on conflict or negative campaigning.

However, already Lawrence (2000:96) stressed that both the game frame and the issue frame can contain criticism and conflict:

“Elite conflict is, of course, the most basic and crucial element of game-framed news. Without it, journalists would have little to recognize as a “game.” Yet, the key to the game-framed news may not be conflict in and of itself. Not all conflict lends itself equally well to the game schema, nor do reporters apply the game schema equally to all types of political conflict”

---

\(^2\) Cited by 105 articles, according to Web of Science (retrieved 5 August, 2011)
This view seems too have gained hold, as most later studies have not used focus on conflict as an indicator of the game frame (e.g. De Vreese, 2005a, Elenbaas and De Vreese, 2008, Strömbäck and Van Aelst, 2010, Strömbäck and Aalberg, 2008).

Recently, two studies have investigated the presence of a conflict frame (whether there is a substantial level of conflict in the story) in studies also investigating the game frame (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006, Strömbäck and Aalberg, 2008). However, these studies differ from what we aim to do herein two ways: first, the studies look at conflict in general, not specifically conflict in the form of negative campaigning. Secondly, the studies do not investigate the interactions between conflict and the game frame.

In sum, whereas the earlier literature on game framing included conflict, and hence negative campaigning, as a central part of the game frame, the later studies have moved away from this understanding and now view the game frame as being distinct from the conflict focus of the media.

**Integrating the two fields**

This section considers the possibility and desirability of an analytical approach which integrates the two strands of literature of negative campaigning and game framing. Is it reasonable to investigate media references of negative campaigning and media framing in the same study? One might object to this with the argument that negative campaigning is something originating from politicians, while framing is something being constructed by the reporters. However, the difference is not as big as it seems: while negative campaign messages do, by definition, originate from politicians, the reporters do have a choice of whether to cover this or other (positive) messages. While we could theoretically imagine a scenario where politicians where completely negative, and thereby leaving no room for reporters to cover positive political campaigning, this scenario does seem to be very unlikely. Therefore, media coverage of negative campaigning is not just a natural result of politicians’ actions, but is also to a very large degree a media artifact. Similarly, while the game frame is being produced by the reporter, politicians might behave in ways, which make it more or less likely to be covered by a certain frame. Keeping in mind, that a frame is essentially: “an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic” (De Vreese, 2005b p. 53), we can therefore also look at media coverage of negative campaigning as an example of media framing. For clarity, however, this paper will use the term “focus” when discussing media coverage of positive and negative messages, respectively, while the term frame will be reserved to denote the difference between the game frame and the issue frame.

If we do look at frames and focus in conjunction, we can conceptually speak of four general types of articles on politics and political (disregarding, for a moment, mixed articles):
1. articles with a focus on negative campaigning and policy issues
2. articles with a focus on positive campaigning and policy issues
3. articles with a focus on negative campaigning and the political game
4. articles with a focus on positive campaigning and the political game

The four different types of articles associated with these two dimensions, are illustrated in figure 1 below (examples are hypothetical):

**Figure 1: Four examples of press coverage, placed on the two dimensions**

Looking at the dimensions as conceptually orthogonal to each other differs from the view in Lawrence (2000), which posited that, although conflict *could* be present in the issue frame, it was *always* a part of the game frame: “*Elite conflict is, of course, the most basic and crucial element of game-framed news. Without it, journalists would have little to recognize as a ‘game.’*” (2000:96). While Lawrence may be right, that the concept of a game logically presupposes some sort of conflict, this does not necessarily mean than this conflict is always explicitly present or emphasized. Again, frames are about emphasis, not what logically follows from the emphasized, so we *can* (easily) have game framed news without an explicit or emphasized conflict—as the example in the lower left quadrant of figure 1.
HYPOTHESES ON EMPIRICAL RELATION BETWEEN THE NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING FRAME AND THE GAME FRAME IN THE MEDIA

Conceptually, we have two different dimensions. The questions is whether the two dimensions are empirically independent of each other?

The “Patterson hypothesis”, proposed by Geer (2006:130-132) posits that there is a positive correlation between use of the game frame and coverage of negative campaigning (Although Geer might view the two as being part of the same frame, we will here treat the hypothesis as an empirical hypothesis on the association between two conceptually distinct dimensions). On the other hand, using a game frame to enhance newsworthiness may be especially tempting for reporters, when covering positive campaign messages, which (unlike negative campaign messages) do not necessarily fulfill the essential news criteria of conflict. It is therefore also a reasonable proposition that the media will tend to cover negative campaigning with an issue frame, focusing on actual policy, while positive campaigning will be covered with a game frame. Without any clear expectation about the direction of association, the following, non-directional, hypotheses is proposed:

**Hypothesis 1:** there is an association between media coverage of negative campaigning and use of the game frame

Previous studies on media coverage of negative campaigning have shown, that a rather large part of newspaper articles do not contain any, positive or negative, campaign messages from the campaigning politicians and parties (Hansen and Pedersen, 2008). At the same time media coverage may often contain conflict in other forms than negative campaigning, e.g. criticism from non-political actors or disagreement between parties that aren’t explicitly attacking each other. To gain a fuller understanding of the interaction between media frames and the focus on conflict, it may be worth expanding the perspective of the empirical investigation, and look on conflict in other forms than specifically negative campaigning. Hence, another (non-directional) hypotheses is suggested:

**Hypothesis 2:** there is an association between media coverage of conflict and use of the game frame

Finally, as explained in the following sections, the game frame can be measured in a number of different ways. While some studies simply differentiate the game frame from the issue frame, others studies focus on and measure several specific indicators of the two frames. Looking at such specific indicators may reveal whether negative campaigning is particularly associated with some parts/indicators. Using typical indicators of the game frame, this leads to the following hypotheses:
Hypothesis 3: there is an association between media coverage of negative campaigning and coverage of politicians/parties winning or losing

Hypothesis 4: there is an association between media coverage of negative campaigning and coverage of political strategy

Hypothesis 5: there is an association between media coverage of negative campaigning and coverage of opinion polls

Hypothesis 6: there is an association between media coverage of negative campaigning and coverage using metaphors of war, games and competition

Similarly, a four hypotheses can be proposed for specific indicators of the issue frame:

Hypothesis 7: there is an association between media coverage of negative campaigning and coverage of policy substance

Hypothesis 8: there is an association between media coverage of negative campaigning and coverage of policy positions

Hypothesis 9: there is an association between media coverage of negative campaigning and coverage of policy implications

Hypothesis 10: there is an association between media coverage of negative campaigning and coverage of previous political results

Please notice that all these hypotheses do not posit any direction of causality. If there is an association, it might be because reporters (1) chose to cover negative campaigning and then, more or less consciously, chose their frame, it might be because (2) choosing a certain frame leads to a focus on negative campaigning, or it might be (3) that the use of a certain frame and a focus on negative campaigning have a mutual cause. The question of causality is obviously rather difficult to determine without somehow looking inside the heads of the reporters, and will not be investigated in this paper.

3 Although looking inside the heads of reporters could perhaps be done through rather simple experiments with reporters as test subjects
**Empirical analysis: method and data**

To investigate the connection between negative campaigning and media game framing, a content analysis of five Danish newspapers were conducted. The study analyzed news articles from five major Danish newspapers—two morning dailies, a tabloid, and two free newspapers⁴—published in print during the 2007 parliamentary election campaign.

The subsequent content analysis used individual news articles as unit of analysis. Choosing a physical unit (article, ads etc.) as unit of analysis have often been done both in studies of negative campaigning (Jackson et al., 2009, Hansen and Pedersen, 2008, Geer, 2006), as well as in studies of game framing (Lawrence, 2000, Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000, De Vreese, 2005a, Strömback and Dimitrova, 2006), although smaller, thematic units of analysis have also been used, both in studies of negative campaigning (e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010) and media framing (e.g. Benoit et al., 2005).

**Finding negative campaigning and conflict**

Negative campaigning was defined as “criticism directed at political actors (politicians, parties, coalitions of parties) by other political actors”, while positive campaigning was defined as “any other communication from the political actor” (similar definitions have been used by Hansen and Pedersen, 2008, see also Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010, Geer, 2006). Using this definition, articles could be coded as belonging to the following categories: (1) ‘Article is primarily focused on positive campaigning’; (2) ‘Article is focusing equally on negative and positive campaigning’; and (3) ‘article is primarily focused on negative campaigning’. Previous work has shown that it is possible and reasonable to code this way, but also that a rather large part of articles politics and political campaigning does not contain any positive or negative campaigns messages, e.g. when an article is entirely about an opinion poll. (Hansen and Pedersen, 2008). Therefore, an extra category was added: (4) ‘does not contain any/very few messages from political actors.’

Furthermore, all the articles were coded for the presence-absence of conflict. Conflict was defined as any example of conflict or disagreement between two or more actors.

**Finding the frames**

While the game frame has been extensively investigated, there is no clear agreement on how to define and measure it. Two approaches have been used in the empirical studies, (1) coding the metaframe in articles, and (2) coding for specific indicators of the frame. Starting with the former, when coding for the metaframe (the dominant frame in each article), articles are either coded as having a game frame, an issue frame or, sometimes,

---

⁴ Articles were found in the database ‘Infomedia’ by searching for articles published (in print) during the formal election campaign period (25 October to 13 November 2007), mentioning at least one of the nine political parties in the Danish parliament and the word election (“valg”).
a mixed frame (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006, Strömbäck and Aalberg, 2008, Lawrence, 2000). Therefore, this study measured the metaframe of newspaper articles, employing the following definition:

*The issue frame refers to political news that focus on policy, policy issues, the policy positions on these issues, real life conditions with relevance for issue positions and the effects of enacted policies and initiatives on conditions outside the political sphere.*

*In contrast, the game frame refers to political news that frame politics as a game in which the political parties and politicians compete. The game frame focuses on the strategy and motives behind policy positions, and the popularity and power of political parties and politicians. The game frame focuses on the effects on policies and initiatives inside the political sphere, for example whether a policy or policy position will improve the popularity or power of a politician or a political party.*

The definition is a modified and elaborated version of the definition found in Strömbäck and Aalberg (2008), also used in Pedersen (forthcoming).

Coding instructions required that each article was classified in one of four categories: (1) ‘Article is exclusively or primarily using an issue frame’; (2) ‘Article is using a mixed frame, equally using the issue frame and the game frame’; (3) ‘Article is exclusively or primarily using a game frame’; or (4): ‘Cannot be coded - Article is neither game frame nor issue frame.’

Coding instead for indicators of the game frame have often been based on the indicators found in Jamieson and Cappella (1997), or slightly modified indicators. As shown by Strömbäck and van Aelst (2010), the choice between these two coding approaches (metaframes or indicators) can have a strong impact on the results: articles which are clearly using a meta game frame does not necessarily contain indicators such as those mentioned by Cappella and Jamieson (1997). And conversely, articles containing an indicator of the game frame does not always apply the meta game frame (This of course point to a more fundamental problem in the game frame literature, that the object of study is arguably still relatively poorly understood and defined). Recent studies have not only coded for indicators of the game frame, but also coded specifically for indicators of the issue frame (Adriaansen et al., 2010). The present study coded for five indicators of the game frame (winning or loosing, strategy, polls, and metaphors of war and games), while four indicators of the issue frame was used (policy substance, policy positions, policy implications, and previous political results). See appendix A, for the codebook (abridged).

To test for intercoder reliability, a subsample of 60 randomly selected articles was coded by two independent coders. Krippendorff’s α was used as measure of reliability.
(Krippendorff, 2004). Reliability measures, including 95 % confidence intervals (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007), can be found in appendix B. Reliability measures varied somewhat between variables, with the reliability for “political consequences,” “strategy,” and “previous results” being below normally acceptable levels (However, the confidence intervals for the reliability are generally quite large, and a new control coding of more articles might show these variables to be reliable). The reliability of the measure of metaphors from wars, games, and competition was clearly unacceptable, and this variable was therefore excluded from the following analysis.

RESULTS
The content analysis confirmed that both the game frame and a focus on negative campaigning can be found in press coverage the Danish election campaign. As shown in table 1 below, the majority of articles (52.6%) apply the game frame when covering the election. Less than a fifth (18.5%) of the articles are using an issue frame, while 20.5% are using a mixed frame. A small portion of the articles (8.4%) are not using either the issue frame or the game frame. When it comes to a focus on negative versus positive campaigning, the media outlets seem to cover both forms of campaigning almost to the same degree (9.6 % and 11.4%, respectively), often focusing on both in articles (“mixed”; 22.7%). Please note, this does not mean that the media is not biased towards coverage of negative campaigning. Danish politicians are primarily positive campaigners (Hansen and Pedersen, 2008, Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010), so the fact that negative campaigning receives the same amount of media coverage as positive campaigning does suggest a media bias towards negative campaigning. The most striking result, when looking at the media focus is, however, that the majority (56.3%) of the articles neither focus on positive nor negative campaigning from the politicians.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frame</td>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Game</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Positive campaigning</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative campaigning</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=405
To test hypothesis 1 on the association between negative campaigning and the game frame, table 2 below combines the two measures:

**Table 2: Association between framing and overall negative/positive campaigning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Positive campaigning</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Negative campaigning</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>4,2% (17)</td>
<td>4,9%</td>
<td>0,7% (3)</td>
<td>8,6% (35)</td>
<td>18,5% (75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>3,2% (13)</td>
<td>9,4%</td>
<td>2,7% (11)</td>
<td>5,2% (21)</td>
<td>20,5% (83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game</td>
<td>2,0% (8)</td>
<td>7,9%</td>
<td>7,9% (32)</td>
<td>34,8% (141)</td>
<td>52,6% (213)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>0,2% (1)</td>
<td>0,5%</td>
<td>0,0% (0)</td>
<td>7,7% (31)</td>
<td>8,4% (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9,6% (39)</td>
<td>22,7%</td>
<td>11,4% (46)</td>
<td>56,3% (228)</td>
<td>100,0% (405)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Values are percentages (n) of articles within specific category

Disregarding for a moment the articles without any positive/negative campaigning and articles not using the game frame or issue, we see that there is indeed a positive relationship between focus on negative campaigning and a use of the game frame: articles with a focus on negative campaigning apply the game frame to a larger degree than articles with a focus on positive campaigning, which tend to apply an issue frame (tau-c=0.336, p<0.00001). These results are in line with hypothesis 1.

However, the fact that articles with a focus on negative campaigning are mostly using a game frame, does not mean that game framed articles are mostly about negative campaigning. The vast majority of articles with a game frame contain neither positive nor negative campaign messages. In contrast, articles with a mixed frame or an issue frame are much more often associated with a focus on either positive or negative campaigning. Hence, there is a strong association between frame and whether articles contain campaign messages at all (tau-c=0.262, p<0.00001). In other words, articles with a game frame often does not tell us very much about the policies, promises, attacks etc. of the politicians and political parties, compared to other articles.

The fact that negative and positive campaign messages are absent from such a large part of campaign coverage, makes the measure of conflict even more relevant. The content analysis revealed that almost two thirds (64.0%) of all the articles analyzed contained
some sort of conflict. Table three below shows the association between a focus on conflict and use of frame:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>11.4% (46)</td>
<td>7.2% (29)</td>
<td>18.5% (75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>16.3% (66)</td>
<td>4.2% (17)</td>
<td>20.5% (83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game</td>
<td>32.6% (132)</td>
<td>20.0% (81)</td>
<td>52.6% (213)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>3.7% (15)</td>
<td>4.7% (19)</td>
<td>8.4% (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>64.0% (259)</td>
<td>36.0% (146)</td>
<td>100.0% (405)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Values are percentages (n) of articles within specific category

Although there is a significant association between focus on conflict and use of frame (Cramers V=0.156, sig=0.011 [disregarding articles with neither frame]), the relationship is not monotonic: focus on conflict is most prevalent in articles with a mixed frame, while the focus on conflict is almost the same in articles with issue and game frame. In other words, conflict in general does not seem to be a typical characteristics of the game frame.

Finally, hypotheses 3-10 posited associations between a focus on negative campaigning and specific frame indicators. Table 4 below shows the associations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Association between focus on negative vs. positive campaigning and indicator (tau-c)</th>
<th>Association between articles with vs. without (positive or negative) campaigning and indicator (tau-c)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winning or losing (game)</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political consequences (game)</td>
<td>n.s</td>
<td>n.s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy (game)</td>
<td>0.238***</td>
<td>0.086*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polls (game)</td>
<td>n.s</td>
<td>n.s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphors (game)</td>
<td>[not calculated because of very low reliability]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance (issue)</td>
<td>-0.297***</td>
<td>0.230***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positions (issue)</td>
<td>-0.299***</td>
<td>0.378***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications (issue)</td>
<td>-0.175***</td>
<td>0.116***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous results (issue)</td>
<td>-0.348***</td>
<td>0.140***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n.s: not significant; ***: sig at 0,01; **: sig at 0,05; *: sig at 0,1

As column two in table four shows, there is an association between the indicators of the two frames and a focus on negative campaigning: negative campaigning is positively
associated with coverage of political strategy, while it is negatively associated with coverage of substance, positions, implications and previous political results. These results are in line with hypotheses 4, 7, 8, 9, and 10. The associations between three of the game frame indicators (winning or loosing, political consequences and polls) are insignificant, meaning that hypotheses 2, 3, and 5 must be rejected in this study. Hypothesis 6 on the association with metaphors from war, games and competition is not tested because of the very low reliability of this measure.

It is noteworthy that only one of the game frame indicators are significantly associated with a focus on the game frame. Furthermore, moving to column three of table two, we see that the association between articles with versus without (positive or negative) campaigning and the indicators are significant for the issue frame indicators, but generally not for the game frame indicators (with strategy being borderline significant). In other words, while the presence of substance indicators in an article makes the article significantly more likely to include positive or negative campaign messages, the presence of game frame indicators does not tell us anything on the article includes (positive or negative) campaign messages or not.

The analysis of these indicators should be taken with some caution. The indicators of the game frame generally have a rather low reliability (c.f. appendix b), and the absence of associations could therefore be a results of measurement error.

**Newspaper level results**

The analysis have up until this point analyzed associations between focus and frame on the level of individual articles. However, lumping together different types of newspapers may potentially be misleading, as the association between focus and frame may be contingent upon type of newspaper. Previous studies have shown systematic differences in framing, as the tabloids seem to use the game frame significantly more than traditional morning papers (Pedersen, forthcoming, Strömbäck and Aalberg, 2008), and there may also be systematic differences in the different papers’ focus on negative campaigning. The distribution of articles in the different types of newspapers are summarized in table 5, below:
TABLE 5: NEWSPAPERS, FRAMING AND FOCUS ON NEGATIVE/POSITIVE CAMPAIGNING (N=405)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Tabloid free daily</th>
<th>morning daily</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Tabloid free daily</th>
<th>morning daily</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>1.8% (1)</td>
<td>19.8% (17)</td>
<td>positive</td>
<td>1.8% (1)</td>
<td>11.6% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21.6% (57)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10.6% (28)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>18.2% (10)</td>
<td>20.9% (18)</td>
<td>mixed</td>
<td>16.4% (9)</td>
<td>8.1% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20.8% (55)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28.8% (76)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game</td>
<td>63.6% (35)</td>
<td>46.5% (40)</td>
<td>negative</td>
<td>10.9% (6)</td>
<td>2.3% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>52.3% (138)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14.4% (38)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neither</td>
<td>16.4% (9)</td>
<td>12.8% (11)</td>
<td>neither</td>
<td>70.9% (39)</td>
<td>77.9% (67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3% (14)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46.0% (122)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0% (55)</td>
<td>100.0% (86)</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0% (55)</td>
<td>100.0% (86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100.0% (264)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0% (264)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, when conducting the analysis individually for each type of newspaper, the association between frame and focus is still positive and significant for all types of newspapers (tabloid: tau-c=0.589, sig=0.000; free dailies: tau-c=0.316, sig=0.014, morning dailies: tau-c=0.276, sig=0.000). Hence, the association between media focus on negative campaigning and the game frame does not seem to be driven by certain types of newspapers.

**CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

This study has investigated the relationship between the media’s focus on negative campaigning and the media game frame. A literature review revealed that although both negative campaigning and media game framing have been studied extensively, the relationship between these two phenomena have remained curiously unexplored. The literature on negative campaigning have generally not looked at media framing. The earlier literature on game framing tended to conflate the game frame with conflict and negative campaigning. This conflation was later on more or less solved by simply ignoring the role of conflict and negative campaigning.

This paper have sought to take a first step in investigating the relationship between a media focus on negative campaigning and use of the game frame. The results show, that there is indeed an association between the two, when looking at the overall meta game frame and negative campaigning. However, when looking at the association between a focus on negative campaigning and a general focus on conflict or specific frame indicators, the association is less clear.

Furthermore, while negative campaigning is often covered with a game frame, the game frame is not primarily characterized by being about negative campaigning. The game frame is more often characterized by being about neither positive nor negative campaign messages from the political actors.
These results should of course be treated with some caution. First of all, there may be significant differences in newspaper coverage of negative campaigning across countries, and in different contexts (electoral/non-electoral time periods). Secondly, low reliability in some parts of the content analysis may obfuscate some relationships.

Assuming that the results do hold, what do they mean? For the campaigning politician, it might be worth considering media framing when deciding whether to go negative or not. Going negative may be an effective way of getting the attention of the media, but if the attention of the media is on the politician’s strategic reasons for attacking, it might not generate electoral support.

In a more general perspective, the results indicate that future empirical studies on campaign and media effects should consider investigating negative campaigning and game framing in conjunction. Both phenomena are not only associated with each other but also believed to be related with central democratic variables—voter turnout, cynicism, efficacy etc. Investigating negative campaigning and media framing in the same studies is necessary to disentangle the effects. Theoretically, the two phenomena may have the same effect on, e.g., efficacy, but they might also potentially work in opposite directions or perhaps create a multiplicative interaction effect. Until we investigate the effects in conjunction we don’t know for example whether any detrimental effects of negative campaigning is contingent upon the use of frame.
APPENDIX A: CODEBOOK [ABRIDGED]

[...]  
**VARIABLE 4: FRAME**

Newspapers mainly use one of two different metaframes when covering politics:

The *issue frame* refers to political news that focus on policy, policy issues, the policy positions on these issues, real life conditions with relevance for issue positions, and the effects of enacted policies and initiatives on conditions outside the political sphere.

In contrast, the *game frame* refers to political news that frame politics as a game in which the political parties and politicians compete. The game frame focuses on the strategy and motives behind policy positions, and the popularity and power of political parties and politicians. The game frame focuses on the effects on policies and initiatives inside the political sphere, for example whether a policy or policy position will improve the popularity or power of a politician or a political party.

*Clarification:* The frame definitions list all the characteristics that can be found in articles with a given frame. The article does not have to include all these characteristics – for example, an article on the popularity of a party is game frame, even if it does not mention the strategy and motives of this party.

(An example of an issue frame could be an article on the substance of the environmental policies of party x, while an example of a game frame could be a article on how party x is trying to win voters through a new environmental policy)

*Both game frame and issue frame can contain criticism and conflict, so conflict does not define any of the two frames. An issue frame will focus on the substance in the conflict (what are the conflicting viewpoint, what are the arguments for or against?), while the game frame will focus on the strategic reasons for disagreement, the effects of disagreement on the electorate etc.)*

*The article should be coded “99 – neither”, if it writes about parties or politicians purely as object to which something happens. Similarly, articles purely about the personal life of politicians should be coded “99-neither” (For example the death of a politician or threats made against a politician)*

Type in which frame the articles uses:

- 1: Article is exclusively or primarily using an issue frame
- 2: Article is using a mixed frame, equally using the issue frame and the game frame
- 3: Article is exclusively or primarily using a game frame
- 99: Cannot be coded - Article is neither game frame nor issue frame

[...]

20
Variable 5: Winning or Loosing
Does the story deal with politicians or parties winning or losing elections, debates, governing negotiations, or winning or losing in politics generally? The story should explicitly mention winning or loosing – or any synonym of these two. (An example would be a story mentioning that politician was the winner of last night’s debate or a story on how recent polls indicate that party x will be the big winner of the election)

- 1: Yes
- 2: No

Variable 6: Strategy
Does the story deal with politicians’ or parties’ strategies for winning elections, negotiations, or issue debates, i.e., campaign tactics, legislative maneuvers, the way they campaign? This includes articles were the actions of a politician is seen as instrumental to consolidating or improving public support? (An example would be a story mentioning that Party x proposed better retirement benefits because they want to improve their popularity with the elderly or how party x is using social media to get in contact with young voters)

- 1: Yes
- 2: No

Variable 7: Political Consequences
Does the story deal with the consequences of elections, governing negotiations, debates or other news events for politicians or parties, i.e., how politicians or parties might be affected by elections, governing negotiations, legislative debates, or other events? (An example would be a story mentioning that a good election result for party x would probably make them part of the next government or a story mentioning that an election results will give party x the power to ensure a government majority)

- 1: Yes
- 2: No

[...]

Variable 9: Polls
Does the story deal with polls and politicians’ or parties’ standing in the polls? This also includes poll about public opinion on other issues than voting. Please note in “comment”, if poll is not about choice of party/politician.

- 1: Yes
- 2: No
VARIABLE 10: USE OF METAPHORS
Does the story use any metaphors taken from wars, games, and/or competition? (An example would be if a story mentioned that a debate was “a clear knockout win for politician x”)
- 1: Yes
- 2: No

Variable 13: Substance
Does the story deal with substantive public policy issues, problems, and solutions? Does the story deal extensively with real-world problems, situations, or processes (i.e., reality) that explicitly or implicitly have policy implications? If the article only mention policy positions of politicians/parties, answer “no” (An example of a substance story would be a story mentioning rising unemployment or the war in Afghanistan)
- 1: Yes
- 2: No

Variable 14: Policy Positions
Does the story provide descriptions of politicians’ stance or statements about substantive policy issues? (An example would be a story mentioning that Party x is anti-immigration and that they want to toughen up the law on refugees)
- 1: Yes
- 2: No

Variable 15: Policy Implications
Does the story deal with general implications or impacts of legislation or proposed legislation for the public? (An example would be a story mentioning that the environmental policies of the government have improved or will improve water quality)
- 1: Yes
- 2: No

Variable 16: Previous Actions/Accomplishments
Does the story deal with previous legal/administrative actions taken by the political actors? (an example would be an article mentioning that the party x have previously voted in favour of higher retirement benefits or increased the number of hospital beds. This does not include previous election results)
**Variable 17: Focus on negative or positive campaigning**

Does the article mainly focus on negative campaigning or positive campaigning from the politicians? Negative campaigning is criticism directed at political actors (politicians, parties, coalition of parties) by other political actors, while positive campaigning is any other messages from the political actor. *(For example, party x criticizing the environmental policies of party y is negative campaigning, while party z (or politician z) presenting its own environmental policy is positive campaigning).* Articles may not contain any (or very few) positive or negative campaign messages from the parties. If that is the case, the article should be coded 99

- 1: Article is primarily focused on positive campaigning
- 2: Article is focusing equally on negative and positive campaigning
- 3: Article is primarily focused on negative campaigning
- 99: Article does not contain any/very few messages from political actors

[...]

**Variable 20: Conflict**

Does the article contain any examples of conflict or disagreement between two or more actors? The article does not have to mention specifically what the conflict/disagreement is about (an example would be an article writing about increasing disagreement between two parties)

- 1: Yes
- 2: No
### APPENDIX B: DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
<th>Intercoder reliability, Krippendorff’s α (95 % CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance (yes)</td>
<td>87.7%</td>
<td>0.9526 (0.8578-1.0000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>issue</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>0.8804 (0.7134-0.9819)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mixed</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>game</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neither</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>0.5561 (0.1122-0.8890)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winning or losing</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>0.6924 (0.4361-0.8975)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political consequences</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
<td>0.4914 (0.2603-0.7226)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>53.8%</td>
<td>0.5267 (0.2686-0.7849)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polls</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>0.9097 (0.7743-1.0000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphors</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
<td>0.2904 (-0.0200-0.5565)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>0.7594 (0.5188-0.9519)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positions</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
<td>0.7824 (0.5648-0.9565)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>0.8169 (0.5728-1.0000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous results</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>0.5986 (0.3119-0.8280)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mixed</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>0.7056 (0.5267-0.8762)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neither</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
<td>0.7415 (0.5260-0.9138)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>63.1%</td>
<td>0.7824 (0.6083-0.9565)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


