No Time like the Present? Understanding Longitudinal Variation in the Level of Negative Campaigning in a Multiparty System

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Abstract

Pundits and politicians throughout the western world argue that political communication has become increasingly negative during the latest decades. Empirical investigation of such claims remains scarce, however, and entirely absent outside the American context. The present article gain new ground by gauging the level of negativity over four decades in a multiparty system and by evaluating the effect of time as well as a range of contextual factors on the level of negativity. Since the 1970s politics has been mediatized in Europe and parties have internalized the media logic, including the awareness of journalistic news values such as conflict. We argue that this process leads to increasing negativity. We also discuss contextual factors unrelated to time and thus suggest that the reason of an election as well as the number of running parties, incumbent parties, and new parties might affect the overall level of negativity. While we find no unidirectional temporal trend, some of the contextual factors prove helpful to understand longitudinal variation. The empirical case is Danish national elections in the 1970s, 1990s and 2000s. This country and time period is suitable because the process of mediatization is evident here and because the variation on the contextual variables is provided. In this regard we consider our case typical for most European multiparty systems rendering the findings illustrative in the wider European context.

Keywords

Negative campaigning, Mediatization, Content analysis, Multiparty system, Election
Introduction

Negative campaigning has become a hallmark of modern political communication. Pundits, politicians, journalists, and voters agree that election campaigns have come to highlight negative reasons why not to vote for specific candidates and parties at the expense of positive acclaims of themselves (e.g. Brooks 2006: 684-685). Even scholars argue that “campaigns have […] turned increasingly hostile and ugly” (Ansolabehere et al. 1994: 829) – no time is like the present and politics is becoming more and more negative. Or at least so it seems.

Empirical studies providing evidence on the development less than agree in their conclusions, even though they study the same kind of material in a specific case, i.e. television ads in US presidential elections. Benoit (1999: 164) reveals a steady increase in the amount of negative themes in the ads from 1955 to 1996. Likewise Geer (2006: 86) shows that the presidential campaigns became more negative in the 1980s but only after a long period of stability beginning in the early 1960s. Kaid & Johnston (1990; see also Kaid 1997) find a general increase in presidential negativity beginning already in the 1960s and peaking in 1996, but they also conclude that level of negativity went up and down several times over the years. In contrast, Buell & Sigelman (2008: 248) study print media and they are unable to replicate the results of the add studies as they “uncovered no support for the idea that negativity in presidential races has staidly escalated since 1960”. According to (Buell & Sigelman 2008: 246) the most negative campaigns were the ones in 1976 and the 2000, while the most positive ones are found in 1972 and 1992; clearly the level of negativity vary, but it does so without any unidirectional tendency.

Outside the US research on negative campaigning is scarce and we have not been able to find any studies on long term trends reported in English. We notice, however, an impressive Swedish study arriving at an even more conservative conclusion than Buell & Sigelman; analyzing all party election manifestos and party leader debates at national elections from 1948 to 1994, Håkansson (1999: 12-17) concludes that the Swedish parties’ campaign communication is “timeless”. Not only has there been no trend towards increased negativity, the level of negativity even remained quite stable for the entire period. Esaiasson & Håkansson (2002: 172), later supplemented by Bjerling (2007), conclude the same thing studying other campaign outlets of Swedish parties in campaign from 1956 to 2006.
Despite considerable merit on several accounts, the existing literature only provides post hoc discussion and rudimentary theoretical explanations of their empirical temporal findings. Besides its comparative shortcomings, the literature fails to tell us why we should expect campaign communication in democratic systems to be increasingly more negative. It also fails to discuss which other factors than time that might affect the level of negativity from election to election – a question that becomes especially important when acknowledging that no unidirectional trend is rendering political communication ever more negative.

The present article aims to remedy these particular deficiencies of the study of negative campaigning. To do so we theoretically discusses why and how time and a range of contextual factors may affect the level of negativity in a given campaign and we empirically study the level of negativity in the 1970s, 1990s, and 2000s in what we consider a typical multiparty system, i.e. the Danish one. Thus, we break new ground theoretically as well as empirically by providing a principal discussion on the determinant of the level of negativity over time and by applying a long term perspective in a different political context than the American one.

The article processes as follows; first we discuss how the process of mediatization might prompt parties to adopt still more negative campaigns. We also discuss a reason why we should expect status quo, and we review a range of factors that may determine the level of negativity in a given campaign independent of time. In the second section we describe the empirical strategy of the study and the dataset compiled for analysis. Third, we report our results and finally we discuss the findings and suggest future avenues of research on negative campaigning.

**Theoretical framework – explaining the level of negativity**

To theoretically underpin the empirical analysis of negativity over time, we draw on three theoretical perspectives. The first perspective advances an argument supporting the general assumption that political communication is increasingly more negative. Specifically we use mediatization theory to argue that the news value “conflict” has been adopted by parties as a mean of maintaining control of the political agenda in the media coverage of politics. Second we deploy a rhetorical perspective which prompts an expectation of status quo – negativity is simply seen as a core mode of argumentation that politicians have used throughout the history. Finally, the third perspective acknowledges that the level of negativity in a country
might go up and down over the years without any temporal trend. Thus, we argue that a range of contextual factors determine the overall level of negativity in a given election independent of time.

Mediatization as a driver of negativity

Scholars agree that democratic politics – as well as society in a boarder sense – has become mediatized during the latest half century and that the process profoundly affects the way politics and political communication is structured (Hjarvard 2008; Kepplinger 2002; Mancini & Swanson 1996).

Mediatization is defined as a process in which politics “has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media” (Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999: 250). The process has taken place in several steps since the Second World War, and began when the media gradually became the most important channel of communication between the people and the political elite (Strömbäck 2008: 236). The classical European mass parties have lost rank and file members and weakened their ties to the organizations within the civil society (i.e. the labour movement, the industrial organizations, and the church) and thereby parties lost a direct channel of communication to their voters. As a consequence the parties became dependent on the mass media to broadcast their political messages. At the same time the media grew independent of the parties and became exclusively guided by professional norms and news values as opposed to the political preconceptions that previously guided them (Brants & van Praag 2006; Neveu 2002). The advent of public service television moved the process even further, because this new medium was obligated by law to produce unbiased journalism (Starkey 2007).

The process of mediatization accelerated in the last decades of the twentieth century as political parties adapted to the new “media logic” (Altheide & Snow 1979); in order to communicate effectively with voters, political elites needed to know and understand how the media produces news, i.e. the relevance of news values, the media's production conditions, their deadlines and other intra-media routines and techniques. In fact, the most mediatized parties “not only adapt to the media logic and the predominant news values, but [they] also internalize these and, more or less consciously allow the media logic and the standards of newsworthiness to become a built-in part of the governing processes” (Strömbäck 2008: 239-240).
Of special relevance to the present study is the importance of the professional news values, especially the conflict criteria that recurrently and universally is identified as an important aspect of news making (Shoemaker 1996: 106; Bennett 1997; Galtung & Ruge 1965; Schultz 2007: 197). To professional journalists, political consensus is not particularly interesting to report because nothing is at stake and no winners or losers can be identified – thus it would not resonate with the audience’s expectation of real news. Political conflict, on the other hand, provides drama and it alerts people that an important issue is discussed and that they should choose sides in the conflict.

When political actors internalize the news values they supposedly shape their campaign messages to meet the media’s demand. Political actors thus need to emphasize conflict when they communicate to the voters (via the media) and negative campaigning might be the best – although not only – way to do so. Thus negative campaigning resembles news framed as conflicts and proves highly compatible with the requirements of modern mass media. In summary; parties’ campaign communication might be increasingly negative due to the mediatization of politics and especially the internalization of the news value of conflict.¹

*Aristotle as a proponent of timeless election rhetoric*

The mediatization argument resonates well with the common wisdom that negativity has been on the raise over the past generations. But it does not compute with the Swedish studies that find immense rhetorical stability, which reminds us no solely to look for theoretical arguments supporting one trend when discussing a possible temporal development. Alternative theoretical arguments might be just as convincing and helpful when understanding the phenomenon at hand. In this respect it is important to realize that the act of negative campaigning is not new – presidents, kings and princes have always criticized their opponents. Richardson (2001: 775) argues for instance, that ”political attack has been a staple of American civic life at least since the nation’s first truly contested presidential campaign in 1776 [and t]oday’s assaults have much in common with their predecessors 200 years ago’”. In fact, negativity has been known as long as the concept of democracy itself; in his classical

¹ Parallel process to the process of mediatization, the media formats also evolved. Especially the invention television is important and Richardson (2001: 779) argues that increasing negativity is a “byproduct […] of audio visual production values.”
work on rhetoric, Aristotle (2005 [350BC]: Book III, chap. 19, part I) points to two distinct communicative strategies

“Having shown your own truthfulness and the untruthfulness of your opponent, the natural thing is to commend yourself, censure him, and hammer in your points. You must aim at one of two objects – you must make yourself out a good man and him a bad one either in yourselves or in relation to your hearers.”

When the ancient speaker ”shows the untruthfulness” of an opponent and aim to ”make him out a bad man” the speaker is arguing in a negative vein parallel to the contemporary definition of negative political campaigning. Thus, negativity is not only a dated concept in politics; it is a fundamental mode of arguing in a boarder sense.

Politicians might balance positive and negative arguments differently over time, but following Aristotle’s reasoning such variation is more likely to be caused by contextual factors such as the speakers and the opponent’s character than any temporal trend. While we do not go into idiosyncratic detail in the present study, the next section considers a range of contextual factors that might explain variation in the overall level of negativity in consecutive election campaigns.

Before we turn to such factors, a third possible trend needs to be addressed. Perhaps negative campaigning is becoming systematically less common over the years. Bjerling (2007: 18) considers this possibility and suggests that decreasing negativity might accompany the ongoing professionalization of politics; as politicians hire spin doctors and communication experts they learn to stay on message and stick to the preplanned communicative strategy – even in heated debates with opponents. A generation ago, politicians did not have consulates and detailed manuscripts for each public appearance, and in this non-professional setting they might have been more likely to engage in controversy and more easily aroused to attack. Since no empirical study indicates that negativity should be on the decline, we do not follow this strain of argument further.

**Contextual factors affecting the level of negativity**

Existing research on negative campaigning suggests that some parties are more negative than others, and that parties in certain situations become more negative than they would in other situations. We review four such contextual factors.
1. The number of parties running for parliament. We suggest a positive correlation between the number of parties running in a campaign and the overall level of negativity. Obviously, a campaign is by definition completely positive when only one party runs for office. While this situation might occur in majoritarian systems with a strong incumbent (for instance Lau & Pomper 2001: show that open seat senate campaigns are more negative than campaigns featuring an incumbent) and no serious challenger, it is unthinkable in proportional systems with multi-member districts such as most European systems. But with an increasing number of parties, the competition for the voters increases and the ideological distance between the parties decreases – at least if all parties continues to adhere to the same dimensions, i.e. the traditional left-right dimension and the newer authoritarian-libertarian dimension (Inglehart 1997), which is to be expected. In such crowded waters parties need to promote and voters need to hear specific reasons why to vote for one and not another rather similar party – here negative campaigns might prove useful as they are “more likely to provide the kind of information with which voters can discriminate between the issue positions […] of the candidates” (Finkel & Geer 1998: 577). Thus we expect the overall level of negativity to be higher in campaigns with many parties running then in campaigns with fewer parties.

2. The number of incumbent parties. The perhaps most sound conclusion in the negativity literature is that challengers are more negative than incumbents (e.g. Fridkin & Kenney 2004; Kahn & Kenney 1999: 93-97; Hansen & Pedersen 2008; Elmelund-Præstekær 2010). While the incumbent government translates its pledges into official politics and is responsible for all official policies, the opposition has no such responsibility and is free to criticize and not propose new policies. Knowing that incumbent parties are less negative than their challengers, we expect campaigns featuring a relatively high number of incumbent parties to be less negative than campaigns with few incumbents.

3. The number of parties not currently represented. Extending the argument presented above, one might expect that parties currently not represented in the parliament are even more negative than parliamentary challengers; not represented parties have no stake in the policies adopted which provide them with an opportunity to criticize more issues than elected challengers who usually have supported at least some of the government bills in the past term. Moreover, some currently not represented parties are new parties with a need to make themselves heard in the campaign and it could be done by negative campaigning.
4. End of term. Democracy requires elections on a regular basis and all democratic systems thus have a fixed maximum term length, typically four or five years. In many parliamentary systems the Prime Minister, however, has the opportunity to call an election whenever he or she wants. Such “premature” elections are often called if the government expects to lose its parliamentary majority, but they can be called for other reasons as well, e.g. due to considerable conflict over an important issues and in such cases the election becomes a functional equivalent to a referendum on the issue. Thus we suggest that “premature” election campaigns are more conflictual and thus more negative than elections called due to an ending term where there is no obvious issue to disagree on.

**Methodological and empirical considerations**

Negative campaigning as a concept has many connotations and it is often used in a normative way to describe features of politics and political rhetoric that are less than desirable, i.e. “dirty politics” (Jamieson 1993). In an effort to be explicit, we align with Lau & Pomper (2001: 73) when they argue that negativity

> “only means talking about the opponent – the (deficient) nature of his or her programs, accomplishments, qualifications, associates and so on. Positive campaigning is just the opposite: talking about one’s own accomplishments, qualifications, programs, etc.”

This definition has advantages compared to other definitions (e.g. Jamieson 1993) because it differentiates between a dimension of evaluation and one of direction and focuses on the latter. This is of great help to empirical students of negativity since it rules out evaluations which always involve subjective judgments about e.g. the fairness, relevance, and truthfulness of a campaign statement.

In Lau & Pomper’s perspective, a message is negative if it is about (no matter the content) another candidate. One could argue that this definition is problematic in a multiparty context where coalition partners may talk positively about each other. It has, however, been empirically demonstrated that even coalition partners almost never mention each other in a positive way; in the Danish case it happens in less than one per cent of the analyzed messages throughout five campaign in the 1990s and 2000s (Elmelund-Præstekær 2009). Thus we utilize Lau & Pomper’s parsimonious definition of negativity and in the coding process “any
mention of a theme or reason to vote for one candidate [here: party] was treated as ‘positive’; any criticism or reason to vote against the opposition was treated as ‘negative’” (Geer 2006: 29).

*Danish campaigns in the 1970s, 1990s and 2000s as case*

To ensure variance in the independent variables discussed in the theoretical section, we choose Danish parliamentary campaigns in the 1970s, the 1990s, and the 2000s as our empirical case. First, campaigns are chosen because they provide a rich pool of political communication that is comparable over time. Using campaigns instead of everyday politics also make the analysis comparable with the existing literature on negativity, which predominantly focus on campaigns for e.g. parliaments (Hansen & Pedersen 2008; Walter & Vliegenthart 2010), the US Senate (Lau & Pomper 2004; Kahn & Kenney 2004), City Hall (Krabs & Holian 2007), and presidencies (Sigelman & Shiraev 2002; Geer 2006).

Second, we pick the Danish case because it provides the needed variation on the independent variables seen over the latest forty years. To test the main thesis that negativity is increasing due to mediatization, we need a country and a timeframe in which politics have been mediatized. This is the case in Denmark where party bureaucracies have been intensely professionalized from the 1980s and onwards and especially in 1995 (Bille 1994; 1997: chap. 7). Thus, parties have been able to hire spin doctors and media consultants from the late 1990s (Andersen & Pedersen 1999). Simultaneously, Danish media became commercialized beginning with local and commercial radio in the early 1980s, a semi-commercial national television broadcaster in 1988, and fully commercial TV-stations in the 1990s (Hjarvard 1999; Syvertsen 1997). Finally, Denmark had a national school of journalism relatively early (by 1973) imprinting the professional news values and norms into the minds of an entire generation of journalists (for a detailed account of the mediatization process in Denmark consult Elmelund-Præstekær *et al.* 2011; Hjarvard 2008).

With regard to the contextual factors proposed to affect the general level of negativity the chosen case and timeframe also provides the required variation. Table 1 provides an overview of the variables and their values over the years.
Table 1. Overview of the variation in three contextual factors

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of running parties</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of incumbents</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of not represented parties</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End-of-term election</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note: The number of running parties is found in Folketinget (2008). From this source we also deduce the number of parties not currently represented in the parliament. The numbers of incumbent parties are found at the webpage of the Prime Minister’s office (www.stm.dk). Elections called within the last year of a four year term are defined as an “end of term election.”

Compiling the dataset

We compile the dependent variable using quantitative content analysis. The unit of analysis is individual statements in the campaign communication. A statement may consist of several sentences or just one, depending on how much the speaker elaborates on a specific point. Hence, statements are delimited by a change of meaning of the text or speech (for a similar approach see Buell & Sigelman 2008; and Geer 2006). Every statement in the data is coded as either positive (0) or negative (1). However, some statements are mixed in the sense that they refer positively to the campaigning party itself and negatively to an opponent. Such statements are identified but omitted from the analysis because the essentially count as both positive and negative statements. Finally, some statements are neither positive nor negative; this is e.g. the case when referring to historical facts, statistics or other non-campaign issues. Such statements are identified but excluded from analysis (see a coding example in the appendix).²

The empirical material is selected as broadly as possible within the ‘party’ controlled sources of campaign communication (as opposed ‘media controlled’ sources such as news stories). This is a distinct advantage when describing and understanding the level of negativity of parties and not the media’s political communication over the years (Asp & Esaiasson 1996: 77-78) – media emphasizes negativity (Walter & Vliegenthart 2010; Ridout & Franz 2008) and this media bias might increase over the years as a consequence of increased media competition, tabloidization, and commercialization. When going back to the 1970s it is

² An inter coder reliability test was performed by two trained coders recoding a randomly drawn subset of the data (approximately five per cent of the letters and the debates). The average tone of each letter and each party in the debate was compared for the two coders using Krippendorff’s alpha algorithm (Hayes & Krippendorff 2007). Even though this test is one of the hardest in the field, it yielded highly satisfying reliability scores of .93 and .95 in the two channels respectively.
difficult to access party propaganda and systematically collect data suitable for analysis; parties simply do not keep complete records or archives from which all relevant material could be extracted. Thus, we are not able to analyze e.g. press releases, leaflets, posters, and campaign speeches, but via national media archives we have access to a) grand debates featuring all party leaders on national television; b) parties’ newspaper ads printed during the campaign in the five largest national papers (Politiken, Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten, Berlingske Tidende, Ekstra Bladet and B.T.); and c) letter to the editor written by leading party members (defined as ministers, party chairmen, and party spokesmen) in the same papers.³

Unfortunately it has proven impossible to provide the empirical material for all elections in the period from the early 1970s. While we are able to find all material in public libraries from the 1994 election and onwards, earlier debates are not stored. Fortunately we are able to draw on Siune’s (1982) unique transcriptions of the election debates in 1973, 1975 and 1977, but we lack the debates of the elections in 1979, 1981, 1984, 1987, 1988, and 1990. Since we are interested in the long term trends in the campaign communication this lack of material is not critical – an unbroken timeline would be preferable, but possible trends should be evident when comparing campaigns in the 1970s with contemporary campaigns.

Results
We identify and code 28,445 statements in 1,008 letters, 13 election debates, and 1,757 newspaper ads. Table 2 reports a summary of the empirical material. It is evident that the earliest campaigns contain more statements than contemporary campaigns, which is not surprising because more letters were written and the debates were considerably longer back then. Moreover, Table 2 suggests that contemporary campaign material contain fewer statements, i.e. is shorter, than the same type of material was a generation ago – a development corresponding to the trend in journalism rendering sound-bites still shorter (e.g.

³ While the content of the ads are completely defined by the sponsoring party, letters to the editor are subject to the editor’s professional criteria of selection and perhaps editors prefer “juicy” negative letters to “boring” positive ones. Letters are, however, vehicles of elite communication in Denmark, they are predominately written by authors who are not affiliated with the paper (i.e. Wahl-Jørgensen 2004) and one could expect that the editors would especially make room for letters by party-leading authors, no matter the letters’ tone. Finally debates are moderated by a journalist and parties are obviously not free to campaign as they see fit – but while the moderator might pitch issues, keep track of time, and make sure that everybody has a chance to speak, he or she will not dictate the tone of the contributions (for further discussion on the nature of different campaign channels see Elmelund-Præstekær 2011).
Schulz & Zeh 2005: 401). We do not suspect this development to affect the level of negativity in and of itself, however.

**Table 2. Overview of the empirical material – numbers of units and coded statements within three channels in eight election campaigns**

| Year | Letters | | Debates | | Ads | | Totals |
|------|---------|---|---------|---|-----|---|
|      | Units   | Statements | Units   | Statements | Units   | Statements | Units   | Statements |
| 1973 | 250     | 2,864 | 1       | 724  | 229   | 2,161     | 480     | 5,749 |
| 1975 | 115     | 2,266 | 1       | 1,169| 120   | 1,842     | 236     | 5,277 |
| 1977 | 53      | 716   | 1       | 1,215| 99    | 1,200     | 153     | 3,131 |
| 1994 | 121     | 990   | 2       | 772  | 210   | 1,023     | 333     | 2,785 |
| 1998 | 153     | 1,063 | 2       | 604  | 315   | 1,440     | 470     | 3,107 |
| 2001 | 98      | 663   | 2       | 704  | 265   | 1,299     | 365     | 2,666 |
| 2005 | 113     | 943   | 2       | 624  | 380   | 1,810     | 495     | 3,377 |
| 2007 | 105     | 745   | 2       | 1,036| 139   | 572       | 246     | 2,353 |
| Total| 1,008   | 10,250|13       | 6,848|1,757  | 11,347    | 2,778   | 28,445 |

Turning to the level of negativity in the campaigns, Figure 1 provides an overview. It is evident that the total proportion of negative statements is fairly stable over time and that no uniform temporal trend presents itself; the most negativity is found in the 1977 campaign (28 per cent), while the 1973 and the 2001 campaigns were the least negative (20 per cent). Most campaigns consist of 23-25 per cent negative statements and they do not differ significantly from each other – only the 1977 election is significantly different from all other elections (ANOVA, lsd at the .05-level).

Before we dismiss the general proposition that campaigns become still more negative, we consider the trends within the three communication channels under study. Doing so, the picture becomes less clear. On the one hand, negative campaigning seems to gain ground in letters; here the two most recent campaigns are significantly more negative than the two earliest campaigns (ANOVA, lsd at the .05-level), but the level of negativity fluctuates to a considerable extent leaving the 1977 and the 2005 campaign equally negative (38 per cent). On the other hand, the debates tend to become less negative over time – at least when comparing the two easiest campaigns with each one of the more recent ones (ANOVA, lsd at the .05-level). The 1998 campaign, however, is significantly more positive than all other campaign – thus we are not witnessing an unbroken trend towards positivity. Finally, the
newspaper ads display greater stability; the proportion of negativty remains at a stabile level of 16-19 per cent apart from two exceptions, i.e. the elections in 1975 and 2007 (both significantly different from all other elections, ANOVA, lsd at the .05-level), where the parties brought almost no negative advertising.

Figure 1. Temporal trends in Danish parties’ negative campaigning in three channels of communication. Negative statements as proportions of all statements.

Note: N(letters)=8,910; N(debates)=5,591; N(ads)=10,119; N(total)=24,620. Incongruence with Table 2 is expected because statements being both positive and negative as well as statements neither positive nor negative are omitted.

In sum; the data at hand does not support the proposition that parties’ campaign communication gradually becomes more and more negative – the level of negativty indeed vary from election to election, but not in any clear temporal pattern. Here it is important to remember that we lack data from the 1980s which, if included, might add even more fluctuation to the picture.

This conclusion leads us to the second part of our theoretical discussion, i.e. a test of the contextual variables. Table 3 presents the results of a binary logistic regression model.
predicting the probability of statements being negative in each election campaign. To test the robustness of the presented models, we specified them in several different ways by dropping one independent variable at the time. This procedure yielded essentially the same results as the ones presented here, only the number of parties not represented at the time of election affects the probability of negative statements differently when we alter the model specification. Thus we are hesitant to draw firm conclusions with regard to this variable, and on the basis of the presented specification we dismiss this particular variable as unrelated to negativity.

Table 3. Logistic regressions modeling the likelihood of negative statements in three channels of Danish parties’ campaign communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Letters</th>
<th>Debates</th>
<th>Ads</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of running parties (9-12)</td>
<td>***1.88 (.06)</td>
<td>***.77 (.06)</td>
<td>***1.35 (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of incumbent parties (1-4)</td>
<td>***1.54 (.07)</td>
<td>.87 (.08)</td>
<td>*1.17 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of parties not currently represented (0-6)</td>
<td>.99 (.02)</td>
<td>.98 (.02)</td>
<td>***1.12 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End-of-term election (=1)</td>
<td>*.71 (.10)</td>
<td>*.82 (.10)</td>
<td>***1.61 (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election year (1-8)</td>
<td>***1.23 (.02)</td>
<td>***.89 (.02)</td>
<td>1.01 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>***.00 (.80)</td>
<td>*16.26 (.81)</td>
<td>***.00 (.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>8,910</td>
<td>5,591</td>
<td>10,119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke R²</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
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*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01 ***p < 0.001. Expected odds ratios and standard errors in parenthesis.

The regression analyses support the temporal trend discussed above; the likelihood of negative statements in parties’ letters increases for each election, while the opposite is true in televised debates. In the ads no temporal trends are evident, which also mirrors the bivariate analysis above. When including only the temporal variable in the regression models, the directionality remains the same but the overall model strength decreases which indicates that the included contextual factors in fact improve our understanding of why some campaigns are more negative than others.

Before turning to the specific contextual variables, we notice that several of them affect the likelihood of negative statements differently in different channels. We already know that some channels become more and more negative while others become more positive for each election, and on this background it might not be surprising that the circumstances of a given election affect party communication in different ways depending on the outlet. But this
finding is still unexpected and it adds considerable nuance to the understanding of the dynamic of negative campaigning. The finding is also theoretically unexplained and we cannot provide such explanation in the present study. We merely suggest possible reasons as we discuss the specific contextual factors below.

In letters and ads a higher number of running parties has the expected effect on negativity, i.e. it increases the likelihood of negative statements. In the debates the opposite is true – here the likelihood of negative statements decreases as more parties are represented in the debate. Perhaps this unexpected finding is due to the format of the debates; while debates have the same duration regardless of the number of running parties, there is no restrictions on the amount of letters and ads that the parties can purchase. Thus, an increasing number of parties might force parties to focus on their own policies in debates while they have opportunity to discuss both their own and their opponents’ policies in letters and ads. This possible explanation is based on the general assumption that parties only become negative after they have had the opportunity to present their in policies in positive terms (e.g. Damore 2002: 672).

Next, the regression analyses show that campaign statements in letters and debates are less likely to be negative when elections are called due to ending terms then when they are called prematurely. This finding corresponds to our expectation. The relationship is opposite in ads, however. Why this is so, we fail to explain – perhaps parties need to advertise their positions and critique of opponents more intensively in ads when no apparent conflict (i.e. the reason for a premature call for an election) is defining the choice between parties. In premature elections, the level of conflict might, in other words, be so high that it is not necessary to spend money on negative ads to make the party differences clear to the voters.

Finally, the results do not support the expectation that campaign statements are more likely to be positive in campaigns with many incumbent parties. In fact the opposite pattern is found in both letters and ads. This finding strike us as particularly odd, and it might be a statistical artifact given the rather small variation in the number of incumbent parties over the years. Denmark had either one or two parties in government all years with the exception of 1994 – here there were four incumbent parties but it did not mean that the 1994 campaign was particularly positive. In short; reasons special to the 1994 campaign might drive the overall result in the incumbent factor. The unexpected result might also be genuine and expose a flawed theoretical argument; one explanation could be that the more incumbents the
opposition faces in an election campaign, the more possible targets of negativity it has which in turn stimulates the opposition’s trigger finger.

**Conclusion and discussion**

The empirical analysis dismisses the common wisdom that political campaigns are becoming still more negative. Instead the results suggest that negativity is gaining ground in some campaign outlets, while positive appeals flourish in others. When pooling all data, these temporal trends cancel each other out and leave us with an almost timeless political rhetoric. Thus, we conclude that mediatization has no – at least no unidirectional – effect on parties’ negativism. We also conclude that it is important to study multiple channels of campaign communication and handle them separately in the analysis when trying to understand the dynamics of negativity.

Even though we find no universal temporal trends in the level of negativity, it would be imprecise to suggest that the campaign communication is timeless. Just as existing studies on the US presidential campaigns, we show that the level of negativity fluctuates significantly in consecutive campaigns. But in contrast to previous works, we discuss and empirically test a range of contextual factors independent of time in an effort to explain these fluctuations. We uncover no universal laws and the studied contextual factors affect negative campaigning differently in different campaigning channels. On the basis of logistic regression models we conclude that the number of parties running for parliament, the number of incumbent parties, and the reason (i.e. the level of conflict) of the election help us explain why some campaigns in some outlets are more or less negative than others. Surely, we cannot explain the variation in the level of negativity between elections completely, and it seems that idiosyncratic factors or coincidence as well as non-theorized systematic factors are at play. To develop a more comprehensive understanding of the longitudinal dynamics of negativity, future studies obviously are required.

The present study provides a first step, however, and we see no reason why the conclusions should not apply in other multiparty systems. The Danish case is a rather typical example of a western European multiparty system which has undergone a process of mediatization and party professionalization, has varying numbers of parties running for parliament, has differently composed government constellations, and where election campaigns are called for different reasons. To test our claim of generalizability and to further develop the general
understanding of fluctuations in the level of negativity, future studies might not only include more election campaigns, but also campaigns from different countries. Future cross-national studies might include systemic factors which are impossible to include in a longitudinal single-country study; for instance, might the mechanics of the party system (Sartori 2005 [1976]) affect the level of negativity – campaigns in systems characterized by centrifugal party competition might be less negative than campaigns in systems defined by centrifugal competition because parties in the latter system all compete for the same – i.e. the median – voters.
References


