

## Going dirty: Negative campaigning in elections and referenda and its effects on citizens' attitudes and behavior

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### **Abstract**

Negative campaigning has recently been granted special attention in the literature, along two main research traditions. On one side, scholarship describes and explains parties' *use* of negative campaigning, both in the U.S. and in other countries. Present theory on negative campaigning is primarily developed in a presidential and two-party system, while most European countries have parliamentary and multiparty systems. However, most work examining negative campaigning outside the U.S. are single-country studies examining one or a few elections. There is great need for comparative research, as these studies with few exceptions are still absent in the field. More knowledge on the level, characteristics, and conditions under which negative campaigning is present in non-U.S. contexts is thus necessary to come to a general theory on this campaign tactic. On the other side, work examines the *effects* of negative campaigning on voting, turnout, the quality of information, and political trust. This research strand fails to provide a consensual view on the overall effects of negativism. Some find that a negative effect both on individual behavior and the political system is associated with offensive discourse ("demobilization effect"). Negative campaigning has furthermore been positively associated with higher individual cynicism toward political elites, lower cognitive engagement, and feelings of political inefficiency. Others, in contrast, show a globally positive effect of negativism ("stimulation effect"). Offensive discourse is shown to enhance the saliency of the issue, it may be transformed for some citizens into an efficient information source (which may even increase the quality of their decision), and it may increase the quality of information provided during political campaigns. Research on the effects of negativism draws upon a wide range of empirical data and methodological approaches. What is somehow missing in this literature, however, is a convincing discussion of the causal mechanisms showing how negativism affects political behavior. The workshop aims to provide new insights on the use of negative campaigning in comparative perspective and how negative campaigning affects political behavior. We welcome papers contributing theoretically or empirically to a more general theory of negative campaigning as well as papers providing empirical evidence on the effects of negativism on individual behaviour. Innovative insights on the underlying causality supporting such effects are especially appreciated.

## **Workshop outline and relation to existing research**

Negative campaigning, defined as "the extent to which political actors explicitly and directly attack their opponents" (Geer 2006; Lau and Pomper 2004; Nai 2012a), has recently been granted special attention in the literature. Research on negative campaigning distinguishes two strands. First of all, studies describing and explaining parties' use of negative campaigning (see Skaperdas and Grofman 1995; Sigelman and Shiraev 2002; Ridout and Holland 2010). Second, studies examining the effects of negative campaigning on vote choice, turnout, quality of information and political trust (see for an overview Lau, Sigelman and Rovner 2007).

The first strand of work primarily stems from the U.S., but the number of studies examining the use of negative campaigning in other countries is growing (see Elmelund Præstekær 2008, 2010; Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Van Heerde-Hudson 2011; Walter and Vliegenthart 2011; Walter forthcoming). However, these are mainly single country studies examining negative campaigning in a single or few elections. More knowledge on the level, characteristics and conditions under which negative campaigning is present in non-U.S. contexts is necessary to come to a more general theory on this campaign tactic. The current state of the art on negative campaigning is developed in a presidential and two-party system, while most European countries have parliamentary and multiparty systems. In particular there is great need for comparative research on this topic, as these studies with few exceptions are still absent in the field (see Walter 2012; Salmond 2011; Desposato 2008). Furthermore, the U.S. dominance of the studies describing and explaining negative campaigning in election campaigns has led to a one-sided theory, that sees parties solely as vote seeking (Walter 2012).

The second strand of research fails to find a consensual position on the overall effects of negativism: "it would appear, à la Newton's third law, that for every research finding about the effectiveness of negative advertising, there is an equal and opposite research finding" (Lau and Pomper 2004: 19). More specifically, two distinct theoretical traditions appear in the literature. Firstly, a negative effect both on individual behavior and the political system is associated with offensive discourse. In this sense, negativism has been shown as having a direct effect on lower turnout, following the "demobilization effect" theory (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Ansolabehere et al. 1994; Ansolabehere et al. 1999; Lemert et al. 1999). Furthermore, negative campaigning has been positively associated with higher individual cynicism toward political elites (Thorson et al. 2000; Valentino et al. 2001; De Vreese and Semetko 2002) and the political system itself (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995), which naturally increases the gap between the people and the elites (Lau et al. 1999; Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002: 15). Similarly, higher negativism has been shown as having a direct effect on individual cognitive behavior; in this sense, offensive discourse affects negatively a free and comprehensive opinion formation (DeSteno and Braverman 2002; DeSteno et al. 2004; Nai 2010). Finally, negativism enhances feelings of political inefficiency; more specifically, when dealing with offensive campaigning citizens perceive their political contribution as less valuable (Thorson et al. 2000; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995). Secondly, a number of studies show a globally positive effect of negativism. A "stimulation effect" is put forward, where offensive discourse enhances the saliency of the issue; in such configuration, overall turnout increases naturally (Finkel and Geer 1998; Freedman and Goldstein 1999; Martin 2004). Furthermore, higher negativism may certainly discourage part of the electorate but is transformed for others into an efficient information source during opinion formation (Crigler et al. 2006), which may increase the quality of individual's decision (i.e. the chance that a "correct voting" exists; Nai 2012b). More generally, negativism has been shown as increasing the quality of information provided during political campaigns (Geer 2006). What is missing in this literature is a convincing discussion of the causal mechanisms pointing to how negativism may affect political behavior.

Those research traditions failed to achieve a consensual position, and scholars within a specific tradition don't hesitate to "go dirty" on their opponents: "Ansolabehere et al. exaggerated the demobilization dangers posed by attack advertising. [...] In the face of our evidence, it becomes quite difficult to maintain that an awareness of negative advertisements demobilizes voters in the real

world" (Wattenberg et Briens 1999: 891 and 897). Two major shortcomings can be furthermore mentioned in this literature: a theoretical and a methodological one. On the theoretical side, literature fails to provide convincing insights on the causal mechanisms linking negativism during campaigns to individual behavior (if we exclude rare exceptions as Martin 2004 or Nai 2012a). On the methodological side, the apparent stalemate between the two research traditions may be related to the specific methodological tools used: it seems indeed (Martin 2004: 545 ff.) that a demobilizing effect is more likely found with experimental data (e.g., Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Ansolabehere et al. 1994; Ansolabehere et al. 1999), whereas research with survey data seems to point toward a mobilizing effect (e.g., Finkel and Geer 1998; Freeman and Goldstein 1999; Martin 2004). The workshop especially welcomes papers that address those shortcomings.

The aim of the workshop is hence to provide new insights on the use of negative campaigning in comparative perspective and on how negative campaigning affects political behavior. In this sense, the workshop welcomes papers that theoretically or empirically contribute to a more general theory on negative campaigning by examining parties' use of negative campaigning (preferably non-U.S. context or in a comparative perspective) and work that provides empirical evidence on negativism's effects on individual behavior, and especially innovative insights on the underlying causality supporting those effects.

This workshop relates to a research project (started on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF); the research project deals with negativism in four political spheres in the Swiss political system: parliamentary debates, elections, direct democracy, and deliberation within political parties.

## **Participants**

Likely participants include scholars within sub-disciplines as political communication, electoral behavior, cognitive political psychology, and affective behavior; we believe that the workshop can draw participants from these different sub-disciplines and stimulate interdisciplinary exchange. We aim to balance senior and junior scholars. We also aim for members of international research networks on opinion formation, political behavior, political communication and political psychology (e.g. ECPR standing groups on "Public opinion and voting behaviour in a comparative perspective" and on "Political sociology", ESA research network on "Sociology of communications and media research"), and more broadly scholars working on this topic in Europe as well as elsewhere.

## **Type of paper**

The workshop is open to any kind of papers, both theoretical and empirical, framed in a national or comparative perspective. However, papers stressing the interplay of theoretical ideas and empirical evidence will be prioritized.

More specifically, we especially welcome papers that fit into one of the following categories:

- 1) Those that compare the use of negative campaigning across a wide range of political situations, either comparing different countries and/or political systems, or elections in a substantial time frame;
- 2) Those that propose theoretical arguments on negative campaign tactics, especially in non-U.S. contexts;
- 3) Those that provide empirical evidence on negative campaigning effects on political behavior (e.g., but not limited to, turnout, vote intentions, opinion formation);
- 4) Those that provide theoretical insights on the causality between negativism and individual behavior (e.g., by discussing the mediatory effects of emotions);

5) Those who address the methodological issues discussed above (i.e., the fact that different results are obtained through different designs).

Please note that papers should not be framed on normative issues alone, even if we welcome non-empirical contributions.

### **Expected outcomes**

The workshop will result in two outcomes.

1) A network of scholars coming from different sub-disciplines of political science in order to develop and institutionalize the field and to further our empirical and theoretical understanding of how political parties employ negative campaigning and how negativism in political advertising affects political and cognitive behavior.

2) We will pursue to publish the papers of the workshop in an edited volume (e.g., special issue in peer-reviewed journal or edited book) that will attract an interdisciplinary audience across the sub-disciplines of political communication, electoral behavior, cognitive political psychology, and affective behavior.

### **Funding**

Funding will be sought by applying to national and international agencies. In particular, junior participants can apply to the grants and scholarships for people who participate in ECPR organized or sponsored activities.

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