Negative Campaigning

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The entry is a short introduction to the vast research agenda on negative campaigning (or attack politics), that is, the use of critiques and attacks towards political opponents instead of promoting one's own project and policies, during election campaigns. We will discuss, first, what negative campaigning is and what it isn't, stressing most notably its fundamental conceptual difference with three proximate concepts: negative emotional messages, incivility, and populist rhetoric. We then discuss the roots of campaign negativity, that is, the reasons pushing candidates to go negative on their rivals. We will argue that such roots are to be found both in strategic considerations (e.g., incumbents are much less likely to go negative) and in the profile of politicians themselves, most notably their (dark) personality traits. This will be followed by a section discussing some potential nefarious consequences of attack politics at the systemic level, from voter demobilization to increased affective polarization. A last section concludes on some outlooks for further research.

Negative campaigning, Attack Politics, Elections, Candidates, Systemic consequences, Democracy

Modern politics, because often built on confrontations between opposed ideological camps with irreconcilable ideas, tends to be a rather aggressive business. Perhaps the clearest manifestation of such aggressiveness is the use, by political actors, of messages charged with critiques and attacks towards their opponents. These belligerent utterances, commonly referred to as "negative campaigning" or "attack politics," take many shapes and forms, and can have far-reaching consequences – well beyond, perhaps, their intended scope of spoiling opponents' electoral fortunes. But what is negative campaigning, and how is it different from other forms of confrontational and aggressive rhetoric, such as negative emotional appeals, incivility and populist appeals? Who is more likely to go negative on their rivals? What are the consequences – on the short- and long terms – of all this negativity? And can we identify segments of the population that, perhaps, enjoy when political elites attack each other? The literature dealing with these questions is extensive, and no entry can comprehensively reflect the richness of all existing research on attack politics (see, e.g., Haselmayer, 2019, for an excellent critical introduction to the topic). Instead, we will focus below on what negative campaigning is (and isn't), the profile of candidates who go negative on their rivals, and the potential nefarious consequences of negativity at the systemic level.

Going negative?

The conceptualization of negative campaigning is tricky – at least, trickier than it might seem from a cursory glance. What makes it delicate, is that its simpler (and most frequently used) definition is potentially at odds with a more intuitive understanding that many observers might have when exposed to it. Let's unpack this conundrum. In its simplest definition, negative campaigning entails attacking political rivals instead of promoting one's own profile, accomplishment, or program (Geer, 2006). According to this simple definition, the *tone* of a campaign message can thus be negative or positive (or comparative if both an attack and a self-promotion exist within a given message). A slightly more qualified definition also accounts for the *focus* of the message, differentiating personal attacks against the opponent (e.g., their character) from those focussing on their policy positions and track record.

While a simple, binary definition of campaign negativity has the advantage of being easily applicable (for instance, in empirical research measuring its presence/absence), it nonetheless likely fails to capture important qualitative aspects intrinsic in the act of attacking political rivals. Consider the two following fictive examples of campaign messages: (A) "My

opponent rarely tells the truth;" (B) "My opponent keeps lying to you." In both cases the character of the opponent is attacked, and a relatively severe accusation is made - they lack in honesty and trustworthiness. Yet, the two attacks do not *feel* the same. If we would ask you, dear reader, to rate these two attacks in terms of whether one is more *negative* than the other, chances are that you might identify the second attack (B) as being somewhat harsher. Nai (2020) asked a sample of 800+ scholars in political communication and electoral politics across the world to rate the negativity of a series of comparable vignettes and reached very similar conclusions. This is at the heart of the conundrum. Intuitively, some attacks naturally feel more aggressive, more intense, more *negative* than others. Yet, the simple definition discussed above puts all attacks in the same basket – which feels simplistic – and has indeed been criticized as such in the past (e.g., Sigelman & Kugler, 2003). Analyses that measure the *sentiment* expressed by the message, for instance using graded scales ranging from very negative to very positive, are a good step towards a more nuanced understanding (Haselmayer, 2019). Yet, what is currently still lacking from the field is a consensus towards a conceptual (re)definition of campaign negativity that also takes into account the *intensity* of attacks, and not simply their mere presence.

Similar but different: negative emotional appeals, incivility, and populism

A second difficulty in pinning down the precise boundaries of the concept of attack politics resides in the existence of proximate phenomena – which often go hand in hand with the presence of campaign negativity, but should not be subsumed under its conceptual umbrella. While more of them likely exist, we briefly discuss here three of such phenomena: the use of negative emotional appeals in political messages, incivility, and populist rhetoric.

First, the use of messages intended to trigger anger, rage, or even fear is a well-known component of modern campaigning (Brader, 2006). While attack message can include a fair share of negative emotional appeals, and negative emotions can be triggered by exposure to negative campaigning, the two phenomena can also exist independently. Thus, a politician being angry, or a campaign triggering contempt amongst voters is not necessarily "going negative" – not in the sense commonly understood in research on attack politics, at least. In other terms, campaigns that rely on appeals to emotions traditionally qualified as "negative" are qualified as "negative campaigning" only if they also include an explicit attack towards a political opponent. They often do, but not necessarily. Attacks do not necessarily elicit

negative emotions, and negative emotional appeals can exist without explicit attacks towards opponents.

Second, a strong conceptual intersection exists between the use of particularly harsh attacks – most notably, the use of insults and vulgar language towards the opponent – and political *incivility*. This latter, also facing definitional challenges, tends to be associated with the breaking of social norms of politeness and respect (personal-level incivility) and with the disrespect of norms of deliberativeness and reciprocity (public-level incivility) in social interactions (Muddiman, 2017). Yet, although insulting a political opponent is certainly both a political attack and the use of an uncivil language, not all attacks are uncivil, and not all incivility is necessarily expressed as a political attack. For instance shouting and refusing to consider the arguments advanced by the opponent are seen as rather uncivil behaviors, but do not necessarily imply a *negative* stance towards that opponent, that is, an attack against them. In this sense, subsuming incivility as a form of negativity (or vice versa) likely misses the mark.

Third, a particularly aggressive rhetoric is often showcased by populists, who have a *raison d'être* in attacking the political and intellectual establishment (Bos & Brants, 2014). Yet, if indeed it seems undeniable that populist rhetoric is intrinsically belligerent (and so are *populists* themselves, from Trump to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Viktor Orbán in Hungary), the attacks levelled by such rhetoric should not be automatically conflated with negative campaigning. Populists have been shown to often go negative on their opponents, but much of their campaigns attack elites or the system in a diffuse way, not specifically political opponents in an electoral race. Thus, negative campaigning and populist rhetoric can exist independently.

Negative emotional appeals, incivility, populism, and negative campaigning all have in common a "darker" core of rhetorical aggressiveness and antagonism, and often exist side-by-side (Nai & Maier, 2024). Yet, there are in our opinion sufficient conceptual differences to advocate, strongly, for a generalized effort not to conflate these proximate phenomena.

Who goes negative?

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From a political marketing standpoint, the million-dollar question is whether negative campaigning is a successful electoral strategy. Evidence in this sense is rather mixed (see, e.g., the meta-analysis in Lau et al., 2007). Political attacks can reduce support for the target but are also risky and can backfire against the sponsor (Walter & van der Eijk, 2019). In a recent analysis comparing the use of attack politics during the 2019 EU elections, Mendoza et al. (2023) show, for instance, that voters tend to move away from parties that go negative if they have viable alternatives to do so.

Going negative is a risky business, and because of that the use of political attacks has mostly been understood within a strategic framework (Maier et al., 2023). For instance, because they have much more to lose than challengers, incumbents have been shown to be significantly less likely to go negative (while attracting most of the attacks; Nai, 2020). Similarly, negativity is particularly used when candidates lag behind in the polls, as they have likely nothing to lose anyway (Walter & Van der Brug, 2013). Yet, non-strategic considerations necessarily also come into play in the decision to attack during election campaigns. For instance, Nai & Maier (2024) compare the rhetoric used by 191 "top" candidates worldwide (from Donald Trump to Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, Vladimir Putin, and many more), and show that the use of political attacks is substantially higher among candidates scoring lower on agreeableness, and higher on psychopathy. The character of the candidate, in other terms, seems to be a strong predictor of whether they decide to go negative or not on their rivals, above and beyond strategic considerations. A further fascinating strand of research investigates whether the gender of the attacker comes into play in the decision to go negative, and its consequences (Craig & Rippere, 2016). Quite surprisingly evidence in this sense is much less clear than one might imagine – even if on paper we could expect women to face harsher backlashes when going negative due to the (still) widespread existence of gender stereotypes that expect them to behave in a more kind and cooperative way than their male counterparts.

All in all, the use of political attacks likely stems from a combination of personal characteristics (who the candidates are), their strategic placement in the political game (what they have to win or lose, and the chances that they increase their positive standings if going negative), and the nature of the context in which the election takes place. This latter factor – the role of the context – has received only little attention in the literature, likely due to the difficulties inherent in conducting large-scale research on communication dynamics. Yet, it

seems quite likely that the specific setting matters quite a bit for the decision to go negative. For instance, campaigns have been shown to be more negative when the party system is very fragmented (Papp & Patkós, 2019), and in countries with deeper ethnic fragmentation and higher cultural individualism (Maier & Nai, 2022).

Dark campaigns, dark consequences

The most worrisome aspect of attack politics lies in its potential to have nefarious systemic effects for the democratic exercise as a whole. While some evidence exists that attack politics can engage less interested citizens (Martin, 2004), a nourished series of articles have rather drawn a much bleaker conclusion. According to this more pessimistic outlook, attack politics could be responsible for a general depression in civic attitudes and political engagement in the electorate. Exposure to negative campaigning has been associated with a more cynical and disgruntled electorate, with an increased distrust in political elites, and with a general trend towards demobilization (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995).

Even more worrisome is recent research suggesting that, on top of depressing civic attitudes, negative campaigning might be responsible for inciting antisocial mindsets and behaviors. Increasing evidence links exposure to attack politics with affective polarization, the deepening affective rift between opposite ideological camps (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012; Martin & Nai, 2024). According to this line of research, exposure to attacks between elites can be perceived as a threat towards the in-group (that is, the ideological or social group individuals adhere to, consciously or not) and reinforce the sentiment of belonging to the latter by strengthening social identity. At the same time, attacks against segments of the populations can legitimize a hostile environment between ideological groups, deepening the rift between them. Ideological adversaries are no longer simply to be disagreed with, they are reviled, and at times outright hated. Against this backdrop, some evidence even exists linking exposure to more aggressive political rhetoric with an uptick of support for violence against political opponents (Kalmoe, 2014). The fact that negativity seems particularly appreciated by segments of the population who showcase a lack of empathy towards the misfortunes of political opponents (high Schadenfreude, Nai & Otto, 2021), suggest the presence in the electorate of a reservoir of aggressive voters who revel in political aggressiveness from elites, likely setting up a symbiotic relationship with unforeseen consequences on the short and long term.

Conclusion

All in all, a good way to think of negative campaigning and its role for democracy is to compare it to tourism in historic cities like, say, Venice or Amsterdam: it is everywhere, it is often loud and vulgar, it is generally disliked, and can have worrisome corrosive effects on the venerable foundations of the latter (Nai & Otto, 2021). Given all of this, it is unsurprising that a considerable attention has been granted in the past decades to dynamics of attack political, in America, Europe, and (increasingly) beyond. Looking ahead, the literature on negative campaigning faces challenges that go from the conceptual (as discussed above, related for instance to the adoption of a more nuanced and qualitative understanding of negativity, beyond the mere presence of attacks towards opponents) to the methodological (in terms, e.g., of computational measurement when scholars face large data across time, space, cultures, and languages). Recent advances in our understanding of how communication works from a multimodal standpoint – that is, the joint effects of messages and the characteristics of the mediums in which they are delivered (images, videos, sounds, music, voice pitch, and so forth) – will hopefully unlock new ways of thinking about what is negativity, how it unfolds (and why), who is more susceptible to it, and with what consequences for elections and democracy.

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