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Why We Need to Pay Attention (Again) to Negative Campaigning, and the Challenges Ahead[1]

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A common diagnostic of contemporary politics is that it is getting "dark." And perhaps for good reasons. Misinformation and conspiracy theories are rampant (Bennett & Livingston, 2020), political preferences are often expressed in terms of disliking (or even hating) the opponents (Iyengar et al., 2019), uncompromising and aggressive political elites are on the rise (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), and the political discourse is frequently rife with incivility and political attacks (Stryker et al., 2016; Haselmayer, 2019). This essay focuses on this latter component of modern democracy – namely, the use of *negative campaigning*. It is not a secret that politicians attack each other all the time, even if perhaps some casual observers might be surprised at the extent of such negativity. During the 2019 European elections, almost one in five Facebook posts of political parties contained a political attack. And these, of course, received considerably more engagement than the positive ones (Baranowski et al., 2023). In 2020, more than one-third of all TV ads aired in the months leading to the presidential election in the USA included an explicit attack against the opponents (Ridout et al., 2021) – and this share went well above 50% in earlier elections (Geer, 2012). Does all this negativity matter? And if it does, how can we, scholars, do a good job in investigating its dynamics and effects? We tackle these two fundamental questions below.

Why negative campaigning matters

So what if politicians decide to go a bit rough against each other? Politics is the realm of conflict, after all, and we certainly are not electing representatives to be nice – we elect them to work for us, including when things get tough and the obstacles along the road pile up. Is it then really a bad thing that politicians showcase a muscular rhetoric – in particular when competing for positions of power? The answer to this (admittedly provocative) question is… quite likely, yes.

The field has in the past paid a great deal attention to the effects – intended and otherwise – of attack politics, but focused mostly on electoral effects, mostly consisting of election results, candidate likeability, and turnout. An authoritative meta-analysis published a few years ago (Lau et al., 2007) suggested that the effects of negative campaigning on the electoral fortunes of competing candidates are, at best, weak. Yet, there is much more than electoral results when it comes to the potential effects of negative campaigning. On the one hand, a robust scholarship in cognitive psychology has shown, quite clearly, that information framed negatively is much more memorable and effective than comparable positive information (Soroka et al., 2019). With this in mind, assuming that the effects of political attacks and other forms of rhetorical aggressiveness from elites are limited only to whether or not such elites win or lose at the ballot box seems rather incomplete. If negativity has such a fundamental physio-psychological role, certainly it produces deeper effects than simply swaying our perceptions of candidates or willingness to go out and vote to support them.

Existing research has, indeed, shown the presence of deeper, systemic consequences when exposing voters to excessive negativity – from demobilization (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995) to cynicism (Yoon et al., 2005) and depressed public mood (Stevens, 2008). Lau et al.'s (2007) meta-analysis suggests the existence of such potentially nefarious effects, hinting at the presence of "slightly lower feelings of political efficacy, trust in government, and possibly overall public mood" due to exposure to negative campaigning (p. 1176).

Recent research goes one step further and suggests that negative campaigning could possibly act as a contextual driver of *affective polarization* (Iyengar et al., 2019). On paper, this makes sense: if affective polarization expresses generalized dislike for political opponents and a growing chasm between the in- and the out-group, then seeing politicians going at each other's throats is unlikely to reconcile people across the political divide. Only a handful of studies have empirically tested this assumption, but the results (so far) converge quite strongly. For instance, Iyengar et al. (2012) show that the total state-level volume of negative ads aired on TV during the 2004 election is positively associated with affective polarization in the public. This observational evidence is matched by results from a handful of experimental studies: Lau et al. (2017) discuss experimental evidence gathered in the direct aftermath of the 2012 presidential election and show that respondents who were exposed to negative ads score, under some conditions, significantly and substantially higher in affective polarization than voters exposed to positive ads; similarly, Nai & Maier (2023, 2024a) discuss experimental evidence gathered in 2019 on a convenience sample of American respondents and show that participants who were exposed to a mock newspaper article where a candidate attacked his opponent were, compared to respondents exposed to a positive condition, more likely to express positive feelings for the in-party and negative feelings for the out-party, in particular for respondents that were ideologically close to the target of the attacks (2003) and for respondents high in populist attitudes (2024a). The positive link between (exposure to) negative campaigning and affective polarization is also supported by a large-scale comparative investigation (Martin and Nai, 2024), where the authors triangulated post-election survey data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) with expert data used about negative campaigning worldwide (Nai, 2020).

Perhaps even more worrying is recent preliminary evidence suggesting that exposing respondents to aggressive rhetoric from elites can lead to upticks in support for politically

motivated violence, measured, in the experiment as respondents indicating whether "it is justified for in-party voters to use violence in advancing their political goals these days" (Nai & Young, 2024), echoing trends found by Kalmoe (2014) when it comes to support for political violence as a function of exposure to violent metaphors.

All in all, what this preliminary evidence seems to suggest is that elite aggressiveness should not be discounted as a potential structural driver of affective polarization and radical partisanship. While partisan identification and affect are undoubtedly strongly driven by individual predispositions, it does not seem unlikely that these predispositions can be activated when exposed to ambient aggressiveness and negativity.

Four challenges for the study of negative campaigning

If negative campaigning matters, as I would argue it does, then we, as scholars, owe it to ourselves to put all the chances on our side to investigate it to the best of our capacity. Yet, four major challenges lie on our way.

The first challenge is *conceptual*. What is negative campaigning, after all? Are we sure that we all understand the same thing when discussing political attacks? Critical voices have in the past raised this fundamental question (e.g., Sigelman & Kugler, 2003), and if I believe that excessive pessimism is perhaps unwarranted, several critical matters remain to be resolved:

(i) Are all attacks the same? While the literature has espoused the notion that a fundamental difference exists between policy and character attacks, the fact remains that some attacks seem harsher than others, and more negative; yet, current definitions of negative campaigning fail to account for such nuances in degrees (or intensity) of negativity (but see Haselmayer, 2019). Similarly, what to make of political incivility, that is, the explicit pushing of normative boundaries of politeness and respect (Stryker et al., 2016)? Is going uncivil on your opponent a type of political attack (as argued, e.g., by Brooks & Geer, 2007), or are negative campaigning and incivility two related but conceptually independent phenomena?

(ii) Thinking of campaign messages in general, are we sure that the presence of an attack is really the only thing there is, when it comes to its effects? Specifically, a case could be made that political attacks carry – directly or indirectly – also an emotional cue. For instance, political attacks exposing malfeasance or portraying a candidate under a particularly pessimistic light (e.g., this candidate is a wannabe dictator), almost necessarily include an anxiety cue; the problem, here, is not that we cannot assess what the effect of such a cue is – after all, there is quite a bit of research investigating dynamics of emotional campaigns (Brader, 2005) and the role of emotions for attitudes and behaviors (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015) – but rather that if attacks carry an emotional cue, then identifying specifically whether the effects are driven by the former and not the latter is, likely, quite hard (especially in non-experimental settings). If all attacks carry an emotional cue, can we really confidently say that it is the attack that matters and not the emotion that is carried with it? How to disentangle the two?

(iii) Where do the conceptual boundaries of negative campaigning stop? For instance, should morally questionable actions of parties and candidates during the campaign also be included, even if they go beyond the content of their rhetoric? Reiter and Matthes (2024), for instance,

make the case for such a conceptual broadening, and suggest including also the use by competing actors of disinformation and deceitful techniques, into what they call "dirty campaigning" techniques. While such re-conceptualizations somewhat move away from the original narrow definition of attack politics, they nonetheless suggest the importance of not taking existing concepts for granted uncritically.

The second challenge is *theoretical*: what are the mechanisms associated with the effects of negative campaigning? Specifically, (i) can we really understand negative campaigning in a vacuum, without accounting also for specifically *who* is going negative? Strong evidence exists that certain types of candidates are much more likely to go negative, such as populists (Nai, 2021) or candidates showcasing a darker personality profile (Nai & Maier, 2024). This is not really a surprise – attacks, quite simply, are more "in character" for politicians with a more aggressive and uncompromising profile. A case could almost be made that attacks are *expected* of them, and indeed they seem more likely to benefit electorally from them (Nai et al., 2022). If populists and dark candidates are more likely to go negative, and even make such negativity a defining characteristic of their profile, then to what extent should we simply investigate negativity in itself? Does it still make sense to test for the effects of political attacks (e.g., in an experimental setting), without accounting for the fact that in real life this is often the expression of strategic profiling enacted by more aggressive candidates? I am not sure.

(ii) Is exposure to political attacks equally effective (or detrimental) for everybody? Growing evidence seems to suggest that this is not the case – for instance, Weinschenk and Panagopoulos (2014) show that negative campaigning is more mobilizing for respondents high in extraversion, but potentially demobilizing for respondents high in agreeableness, whereas Nai and Maier (2021) show that it is particular among respondents with a darker personality profile (high psychopathy) that political attacks are more likely to be effective. These studies are part of a broad literature highlighting the importance of focusing on individual differences when investigating the effectiveness of political communication (e.g., Mutz & Reeves, 2005). In light of the strength of these moderated effects – that is, different effects for different respondents – does it still make sense to expect that any given communication message exerts uniform effects across the public? Very unlikely.

(iii) Are the effects of (exposure to) political attacks direct or indirect? As hinted at earlier in this essay, attacks likely carry an emotional component, and as such the intervening role of emotions cannot be discounted. Indeed, evidence exists that the effects of negative campaigning are driven by the specific emotions felt by respondents (e.g., Martin, 2004). Additionally, isn't negativity in the eye of the beholder? Is the same attack perceived as an attack by all observers? This as well seems unlikely – suggesting that what could potentially matter, beyond exposure to an attack, is how strongly the attack itself was perceived. For instance, Maier and Nai (2023) show that it is in particular for respondents that perceived an attack as strongly negative that exposure to said attack increases affective polarization. Does negative campaigning really matter, if the public does not really see it as negative? Recent research that adopts a constructionist approach (e.g., Vargiu, 2022) will have a fundamental role to play in developing more nuanced theoretical accounts for the effects of negative campaigning (and beyond).

The third challenge – or series of challenges – is *empirical*. How are we going about to test all this? The issues here are both in terms of what we do, and what we can do. (i) How to move

away from the usual focus on the rich West, and expand towards areas of the globe that have not yet been properly investigated, most notably relying on non-WEIRD samples? The field of political communication as a whole is (at last) facing a reckoning in this sense (Chakravartty et al., 2018; see also the issue #28 of *Political Communication Report* on "De-westernizing PolComm Theories and Research: More Perspectives, New Directions"), but the empirical challenges remain.

(ii) Relatedly, how to move away from case studies towards large-scale comparative studies? Evidence exists that the dynamics of attack politics have a strong cultural component – for instance, Maier and Nai (2022) show that political attacks during elections tend to be much more frequent in countries with deeper ethnic fragmentation and higher individualism. Yet, large-scale comparative investigations into the realm of communication effects are not easy. Specifically, how to measure the presence of political attacks across countries (and languages) as different as, say, Japan, Finland, Argentina, or Nigeria? Advances in natural language processing and generative artificial intelligence hold promise for the scaling up of coding of political texts (Gilardi et al., 2023), even across languages, but this is a field relatively in its infancy. Alternatively, the use of expert ratings has been shown to provide fast, reliable and scalable measures for the presence of political attacks worldwide (Nai, 2020) – admittedly, I might not be fully objective here – but expert surveys as well are not exempt from critical issues (see, e.g., Budge, 2000). All in all, no silver bullet seems to exist yet to provide data that is fully comparable across different contexts, which is at odds with the empirical imperative to go in the direction of comparative research.

(iii) Experimental research also faces a strong empirical challenge, most notably in terms of sufficient statistical power to pick up the expected effects (Aguinis et al., 2005). If the challenge discussed above to expand the theoretical models to include also moderated and mediated effects (and for different actors, and across different types of messages) is taken seriously, then the usual samples of a couple of thousand respondents that we often rely on for experimental research are certainly not sufficient anymore.

The final, and perhaps more perfidious, challenge is *normative*. Negative campaigning is, likely, a detrimental force in contemporary democracy, as discussed above. With this in mind, the (moral) incentives to present negative campaigning and its effects under a dark and uncompromising light – for instance, via a pessimistic frame – are strong, and this essay is certainly no exception in this sense. While I would argue that such pessimism is generally deserved, there is an intrinsic risk of missing specific trees by focusing on the whole forest. Is negative campaigning all dark? This is unlikely. Indeed, some scattered evidence exists that political attacks can have normatively positive effects. For instance, exposing voters to negative messages can increase their interest and attention to politics (e.g., Martin, 2004; Finkel & Geer, 1998). Similarly, anxiety generated by exposure to attack messages could open the mind of voters and help them think more critically about the matters at stake – after all, copious evidence exists that anxiety is able to uncouple voters from their predispositions, fostering critical thinking (Marcus et al., 1993). Finally, a case could be made that political attacks are, at times, morally legitimate per se, regardless of their potential effects. For instance, would it not be legitimate to expose cases of corruption, malpractice, abuse of power, or predatory behaviors in politicians? Certainly, in these cases, silence is complicity – meaning, concretely, that attacking them for their misdeeds is the morally right thing to do. With this in mind, the normative challenge ahead is to put into perspective the likely nefarious effects of attack

politics and their possible positive consequences. How to make sure that the latter are still part of the picture, if the former keep piling up? And, at the same time, how to make sure to consider that a morally legitimate act can have detrimental consequences? At the very least, scholars working on negative campaigning – including yours truly – should strive to resist the temptation of overly simplistic (yet effective) normative framing when discussing matters as complex as political attacks.

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