

How Negative Campaigning Impinges on the Political Game: A Literature Overview

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Assessing the impact of negative messages echoes more general questioning about political campaign efficacy, an issue that has received extensive attention during the last decades. Preliminary results from the early Columbia studies (e.g. Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944) were disappointing, as the researchers found almost no effects at all, which resulted in formulating the ‘minimal effects hypothesis’. However, the interest of the scientific community for political campaigns did not fade; improved procedures to measure both the content of campaigns and their effects forced them to reconsider this pessimistic premise. Nowadays, we know that political campaigns *do* have effects on voters’ attitudes and behaviour (e.g. Iyengar and Simon 2000; Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002; Claassen 2011; Arceneaux 2006). The magnitude of these effects is questionable and harshly debated. However, it seems safe to say that no academic would claim that political campaigns do not have an effect whatsoever.

The notion that campaigns somehow have the power to shape individual opinions and attitudes is shared outside the academic community. Citizens and civil society actors often rant about the persuasive political information flow from the elites and militate against what they call ‘political propaganda’. Just think about the existence of watchdog organisations such as the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD), whose primary mission is to ‘report on spin and disinformation’.¹ Would they complain if they thought that propaganda did not have any effects? In addition, ‘modern’ political elites are nowadays willing to spend large amounts of money on communication campaigns (Swanson and Mancini 1996). Why would they do this if they did not think they could turn the tide? Undeniably, ‘all campaigners have in common a desire to influence events; they also have in common a belief that they can have influence, that their campaign can matter’ (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002: 13).

Today’s academic literature offers a multitude of studies that demonstrate how political campaigns affect voters’ attitudes, opinions and behaviour. Although it is not our goal to present an exhaustive overview of this issue (*see* e.g. Farrell and Schmitt-Beck 2002; Brady and Johnston 2006), it is worthwhile to mention a couple of examples that have paved the way for research on the effects of negative campaigning. Starting from the late 1980s, several studies show that campaign messages have under certain circumstances, the ability to alter the argumentative structure that voters employ to justify their choices. The idea of a ‘priming’ effect (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Iyengar and Simon 1993), although contested (Lenz 2009), assumes that ‘media coverage leads voters to attach more importance to a given consideration in deciding their vote’ (Gidengil *et al.* 2002: 76). The theory stems from the presumption of ‘cognitive minimalism’ (Sniderman *et al.* 1991; Sniderman 2000): given that individuals have limited cognitive abilities to process the immense and complex amount of information they are confronted with, they are forced to pay attention to information selectively. Thus, the ‘priming’ effect exists when the content of media information – and

more specifically, political campaigns – is ‘framed’ in such a way that voters tend to pay attention to specific messages and not to others. As a result, voters will start to think differently about a matter, a candidate or a reform.

Furthermore, academic work has shown that political campaigns can increase voters’ issue knowledge. Media exposure is directly linked with political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Norris and Sanders 2003), and intense campaigns are intended to enhance voters’ attention, learning and knowledge (Bartels 1988; Norris and Sanders 2003; Kriesi 2005; Jerit *et al.* 2006; Marquis and Bergman 2009). As a result, political campaigns affect voters’ electoral choices. The ‘straightforward goals of maximising vote shares, electoral/referendum victory and taking control of government’ (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002: 15) are the main reason political actors campaign in the first place. Since the early Columbia studies, countless research has shown that political campaigns affect candidates and parties’ electoral gains (*see* for the US – Jacobson 1990; Japan – Cox and Thies 2000; Spain – Fernandez-Albertos and Martinez i Coma 2014; the UK – Whiteley and Seyd 2003; Switzerland – Lachat and Sciarini 2002; Germany – Finkel and Schrott 1995; Canada – Carty and Eagles 1999).

In a nutshell, political campaigns in general have a wide range of effects, both intentional and unintentional, at different levels. The question central to this chapter is: Do *negative* campaigns have effects and if so in what way? This is not an easy question to answer. First of all, a multiplicity of phenomena is affected by negative messages, for example voters’ opinions, attitudes, feelings and behaviour. They are logically a result of a complex interaction between predispositions and the content of (political) information that voters encounter along the way. Even more profoundly however, the current debate on negative campaigning and its effects is characterised by a deep fracture between the partisans of an overall detrimental effect of negative campaigning and those advocating positive consequences.

This chapter aims neither to propose a general theory on how negative campaigning works, nor to provide a full account on all the phenomena it affects. More modestly, its goal is to give an overview of research on the effects of negative campaigning, to show its inconclusiveness and that the found effects can be caused by different mechanisms.

This chapter is structured as follows: we begin by presenting evidence in support of the ‘negativity bias’, i.e. the tendency to retrieve, process, sample and remember negative messages better than positive messages. Then, we provide a general account of the literature showing the three ways negative campaigning might impinge on the political game. This threefold classification has the advantage to boil down the process of information exposure into separate and subsequent phases. This classification bears close resemblance to the one proposed by Lau *et al.* (2007) or Fridkin and Kenney (2012). First, negative campaigning might have an effect on the psychological foundations of electoral behaviour, and actually affect how voters think about candidates, how they learn relevant political information and how they shape opinions on the issues at stake. Second, negative campaigning might directly affect electoral attitudes such as affect towards candidates, vote choice, and turnout. Third, negative campaigning might have an effect on more general political attitudes (‘systemic effects’; Lau *et al.* 2007), such as views on the political system, sense of political efficacy, institutional trust and so on.

These phenomena are often intertwined: for instance, voters’ attention to a message

(psychological mechanism) is most likely not independent from voters' 'systemic' attitudes such as the sense of political efficacy, and the latter in turn is likely to affect political attitudes such as affect for candidates and turnout. Most research tends to focus on a particular psychological mechanism; this research generally performs well in controlling for intervening factors. A complete overview of the mechanisms at work – from unconscious psychological sparkles to general systemic attitudes – is however still absent in the literature.

The primacy of negative messages

Negative messages are more likely to be retrieved, processed, sampled, and remembered than positive messages. Negative messages 'stick' to the mind of those who are exposed to them. In their meta-analytic re-assessment, Lau *et al.* (2007) find a small but significant effect showing that negative messages have, indeed, higher memorability, a finding supported by Lau and Redlawsk's analysis in this book (see [Chapter Fifteen](#)).

Decades of research on social and cognitive psychology showed the existence of a negativity bias (Rozin and Royzman 2001; Ito and Cacioppo 2005): 'negative information produces a much stronger psychophysiological response than does positive information; [...] people are more reactive and attentive to negative news than they are to positive news' (Soroka and McAdams 2010: 2). As exemplified by Rozin and Royzman (2001: 296), 'brief contact with a cockroach will usually render a delicious meal inedible. The inverse phenomenon – rendering a pile of cockroaches on a platter edible by contact with one's favourite food – is unheard of'. Negative objects, issues, events, and phenomena have the capacity to arouse attention more quickly than their positive counterpart, and are more likely to receive cognitive treatment and to be stored in memory for further use. Evidence also exists that voters 'devote more cognitive energy to thinking about bad things than to thinking about good things' (Soroka and McAdams 2010: 3), that describing a person's negative traits influences impression formation more than describing a person's positive traits, and that negative first impressions are more stable than positive first impressions (Lau 1982: 355). More generally, 'negative information may be more likely than comparable positive information to be noticed and processed, thereby having the opportunity to get its message across' (Lau and Pomper 2002: 47), which comes from the fact that 'negative stimuli are preferentially detected – that is, detected at lower levels of input or exposure than are positive stimuli' (O'Keefe and Jensen 2008: 53).

The reasons for this negativity bias are multiple. In an attempt to uncover how negative biases are manifested, social psychologists Paul Rozin and Edward Royzman, propose four principal mechanisms (Rozin and Royzman 2001: 298–299): *negative potency* (i.e. the fact that negative entities – objects, images, phenomena, events – have a higher saliency than their positive counterparts of identical objective magnitude), *steeper negative gradients* (negative events develop more rapidly – for instance, in time – than positive events), *negative dominance* (when positive and negative events exist simultaneously, the resulting perception of the overall event is more negative than the objective 'sum' of the involved components²), and *negative differentiation* (negative stimuli are generally a more complex and elaborate phenomena and have a wider range of response repertoires).

In a similar way, John T. Cacioppo and colleagues (Cacioppo and Bernston 1994; Ito and Cacioppo 2005) developed a theory that posits a tendency for individuals to start with positive evaluations of elements of objects (*positivity offset*) when information input is weak, and then shift

towards negative evaluations (*negativity bias*) when information input increases in frequency and intensity. Thus, ‘as negative and positive input increases, the negative system responds with greater relative increase in motivational output per quantum of activation than does the positive system’ (Ito and Cacioppo 2005: 2). During the course of a campaign, which naturally increases in intensity as the vote draws near, the balance between how positive and negative messages are perceived by voters is thus likely to favour negative messages.

Whatever the underlying reasons for a negativity bias, when it comes to getting the message across, nowadays it seems common wisdom that ‘bad is stronger than good’ (Baumeister *et al.* 2001). Negative messages ‘may be a kind of guilty pleasure [... for voters] - they claim to dislike them, but inadvertently are drawn to them in much the same way that shoppers find themselves drawn to the tabloids in the checkout aisle’ (Martin 2004: 546). According to political psychologists negative messages are more likely to stick to the mind of those who are exposed to them. In addition, recent research seems to point towards the fact that such a bias is likely to affect conservatives more than liberals (Hibbing *et al.* 2014). Consequently, the question to ask is: how do negative campaign messages affect the subsequent attitudes, opinions and behaviour of the voters exposed to them?

Negative campaigning and cognitive processes

Political communication – even the ‘negative’ kind – affects voters’ electoral and political attitudes. This happens, bluntly, because voters acquire the content of political information, translate it according to their own political vocabulary, frame it in line or in contrast to their current political predispositions, and accordingly adapt their views and opinions. In other terms, a ‘black box’ of psychological mechanisms links information to attitudes and behaviour.

Decades of research in cognitive and political psychology opened the lid of this ‘black box’ and unveiled part of the mechanisms and processes that occur within peoples’ minds when confronted with a decisional task (e.g. Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Eagly and Chaiken 1993). The field of political psychology has recently produced several studies that show how and why negative messages affect psychological processes during political tasks. The discipline is vast and constantly evolving, behaving like a ‘living organism’ (Marcus 2013: 3), and thus providing a simplified overview is demanding. In this section, we focus on three types of psychological and cognitive mechanisms on which negative messages have shown to have an effect: (1) opinion formation and treatment of political information; (2) learning and knowledge of the issues at stake; and (3) consistency of the ‘cognitive map’ that voters’ use as basis for their political decisions. These three mechanisms somehow represent the different stages of the cognitive processes underlying individual decisions, as shown for instance in Petty and Cacioppo’s Elaboration-Likelihood Model (ELM, Petty and Cacioppo 1986): how the information is acquired and treated and what its effects are on issue knowledge and cognition.

First of all, is the way voters make up their minds, or put differently, the cognitive processes they activate influenced by negative campaign messages? Recent research suggests that voters react to negatively charged political communication by lowering the cognitive effort they put in opinion formation; when campaigns go negative, they simply are less eager to provide consistent effort to make up their minds. This finding has been found in Switzerland during direct-democratic votes, where the use of systematic reasoning, i.e. a ‘comprehensive, analytic orientation to information processing in which perceivers access and scrutinise a great deal of information for its relevance to

their judgment task' (Eagly and Chaiken 1993: 326–327), a mental process in which 'all things are considered' (Barker and Hansen 2005), is significantly lower during negative campaigns (Nai 2014b). When political campaigns go negative, voters become less attentive to what political elites have to say in general, for instance they make less use of information sources (Nai 2014c). Similarly, Pinkleton *et al.* (2002) report experimental data that shows that negative advertisements are perceived as less useful for forming opinions than positive advertisements. Other research shows that exposure to negative advertising decreases voters' campaign interest (Kahn and Kenney 2004; Brader and Corrigan 2006; Brooks and Geer 2007) and that voters perceive negative campaigns as less fair or useful (Sides *et al.* 2003; Brooks and Geer 2007). Consumer research suggests that negative advertising induces negative frames about the product for individuals low in need for cognition (Zhang and Buda 1999).

Although negative campaigns can contain arguments that are easy to process and remember, evidence exists that negative campaigning has detrimental effects on opinion formation and general attention to the political elites. Thus, the priming of negative messages comes with a price, namely a decrease in cognitive engagement.

Negative campaign messages, especially those containing personal attacks can increase anxiety and other negative emotions. Indeed, 'one of the primary goals of negative campaigning is to paint the opponent in the worst possible light. These efforts may raise fears [or anxiety] about the individual candidate, especially among partisans' (Martin 2004: 550). These negative emotions, in turn, have demonstrated to increase the reliance of peripheral-route cognitive processes; Malhotra and Kuo (2009) argue that strong negative emotions facilitate the activation of heuristics used in peripheral routes, whereas weak emotional reactions enhance central-route processing.

Other research suggests that exposure to negative campaigning results in increased attention to the message itself. This is one of the core ideas of the *Affective Intelligence Model* (Marcus and MacKuen 1993; Marcus *et al.* 2000; Marcus 2002). The AIM shows that 'two fundamental systems operate in parallel to produce emotional appraisals that in turn shape the choices and actions of voters. The disposition system generates enthusiasm/satisfaction or depression/frustration as incoming information reports that the execution of one's plans either matches or does not match expectations (or success). The surveillance system generates anxiety/unease or relaxation/calm as incoming information suggests it is either safe or potentially unsafe to go about one's business as usual' (Brader 2006: 60). The point is that some negative emotions are easily associated with increased issue attention.³ Thus, 'anxiety [...] causes individuals to become more aware of their surroundings, in particular novel or threatening circumstances [...] and] stimulates a desire to fully understand and analyse the source of a potential threat, thus promoting active learning and reasoned thinking and decreasing reliance on habits and dispositions' (Steenbergen and Ellis 2006: 111). Are you anxious about something that you have heard about your preferred candidate? If yes, denial and ostrich behaviour will not solve this, but increased attention towards new information probably will. Conflicting expectations on how emotional arousal mediates the link between (negative) messages and interest perfectly represents the embryonic stage of research on the psychological effects of negative campaigning.

Second, are negative campaign messages more likely to increase issue knowledge? Are voters 'learning' from negative messages? As we discussed before, scholars agree that negative messages are more easily remembered than positive messages. But then, do these negative messages increase what voters *know* about issues? It is common wisdom that fear appeals are widely used in health

communication to increase awareness on potentially harmful behaviour. An excellent example is the anti-drug ‘fried egg’ TV commercial⁴ (see e.g. Witte 1992). Does this also work for political advertising and more specifically for negative political advertising?

Once again, the field is split into two camps. On the one hand, negative messages are reported to lower attention and to be perceived as less informative. For example, experiments with US undergraduate students highlight that negative campaigns are perceived as less informative and less useful for opinion formation and are globally evaluated more negatively (Pinkleton *et al.* 2002). On the other hand, exposure to negative advertisements increases voters’ levels of ‘issue information’, most likely via increased attention towards (and saliency of) the issues covered in these advertisements (Ansolabehere *et al.* 1994). Therefore, negative political information might not be harmful, but useful (Geer 2006). The rationale for such a positive effect comes from the fact that negative advertisements contain ‘more facts, more on issues, more on the subjects that people care about, more information that draws on the candidates’ records and, overall, more that allows voters to make an informed choice by pointing to what candidates disagree about [than positive advertisements]’ (Allen and Stevens 2013: 6). The finding that negative campaign messages tend to contain more issue-information than positive campaign messages might explain why the former are often perceived as having a greater impact (Stevens 2012).

Third, do negative message change the ‘cognitive map’ (i.e. the set of feelings and opinions related to the issue at stake) that voters use to justify their behaviour such as vote choice? James and Hensel (1991) predict that the effectiveness of negative messages on opinion change (i.e. the implementation of a ‘central route to persuasion’, Petty and Cacioppo 1986) is lower when the messages are perceived as too extreme (James and Hensel 1991: 61), in other words excessive negative advertisements are unable to reframe voters ‘cognitive map’. However, negative advertising has been shown to encourage the use of counterarguments when pondering pros and cons of a given option or decision to take (Wilson and Muderrisoglu 1980; Belch 1981). Therefore, negative campaigning might increase the tension between conflicting arguments. Recent research on direct-democratic voting supports this finding. Nai (2014b) reports that high levels of negative advertising during direct democratic campaigns in Switzerland lead to an increase in ambivalence, i.e. strong support for arguments in favour and against policy changes (or strongly rejecting both types of arguments). In a similar vein, negative direct-democratic campaigns reduce the likelihood of ‘consistent’ decisions, i.e. vote choices in line with voters’ opinions on issue arguments (Lanz and Nai 2015).

Negative campaign messages are more likely to be acquired and processed. However, this does not necessarily mean that they positively influence the cognitive structure of those who process them. Evidence exists that negative messages decrease cognitive efforts (Nai 2014b) and increase confusion and support for conflicting arguments (Nai 2014a; Lanz and Nai 2015). However, these studies are quite specific and we should be cautious generalising their findings; they study a specific political setting, Switzerland, which deals with direct-democratic campaign dynamics and legislative issues instead of elections with competing candidates. At the same time, negative campaigning has been linked with increased learning, issue knowledge and increased attention. Furthermore, Lau and Redlawsk (see [Chapter Fifteen](#)) show surprising results on the effects of negative messages on correct

voting. Correct voting is at its lowest when both candidates go negative, but also when both candidates stay positive; campaigns where one candidate stays positive and the other goes negative are more likely to score high on correct voting.

Research on the cognitive effects of negative campaign messages is still at an early stage, if we exclude research on the presence of a ‘negativity bias’. Existing literature is in particular in need of research that digs deeper within the black box of psychological processes. New technologies allowing exciting advances in brain imagery such as ‘clarity’ (Chung *et al.* 2013) or optogenetics (Deisseroth *et al.* 2006; Mancuso *et al.* 2010) can help scholars to come to a better understanding of what is really going on there.

Negative campaigning, candidate affect and turnout

Evidence exists that negative campaign messages can alter the psychological foundations of political attitudes and behaviour. Lau *et al.* (2007) call this ‘intermediate effects’. Much more has been written on the direct effects of negative campaigns on electoral attitudes and behaviour than its psychological foundations. This section discusses research on two of these attitudes, respectively (1) affect towards a candidate and (2) the decision to cast a vote (turnout). We begin with the attitude that bears the stronger link with psychological considerations (affect) before discussing the attitude with larger systemic implications (turnout).

First, a classical question from the perspective of campaign strategists, spin doctors and other political masters of puppets is ‘are attack messages effective’? In other words, does negative campaigning produce a net gain for the attacker or a net loss for the target? Do attacks undermine the targets’ credibility and more generally voters’ affect for the target? At the heart of these questions lie two conflicting dynamics. On the one hand, negative campaigning is likely to increase support for the attacker. Negative campaign messages are easily remembered and recalled, and point toward the target’s weaknesses which naturally decreases its popular support. As a result attack behaviour can produce a loss of support for the target and thus a net gain for the attacker. Evidence for such a positive effect can be found in studies by Kaid (1997), Fridkin and Kenney (2004), Arceneaux and Nickerson (2005) and Coulter (2008).

On the other hand, attacks can backfire. Attackers might wrongly point to weak issues, in which case rebuttal from the target is an easy task. Furthermore, when asked about negative campaigning, voters describe negative messages as vile, a form of discursive practice that does not honour the democratic principles of respect and civil debate. Therefore, the use of negative campaigning can potentially undermine the credibility of the sponsor; this is also why the share of negative advertisements sponsored by ‘anonymous’ third parties such as superPACS is constantly growing (Brooks and Murov 2012; see also Nai and Sciarini 2015). In this situation the attacker loses support, which creates a net gain for the target. Evidence for the ‘backlash effect’ (Roese and Sande 1993) is abundant (*see for instance* Basil *et al.* 1991; Hitchon and Chang 1995; Lau and Pomper 2002).

The decision to ‘go negative’ thus faces two opposing potential outcomes, which are likely to exist simultaneously: a decrease in the (intended) target’s support and an unintended decrease in the attacker’s support. The question is, which one prevails? Is the net advantage in favour of the attacker or the target? As Dassonneville (2010: 6) points out, ‘the size of [the] backlash determines the effectiveness of a negative campaign’; such ‘size’ matters less in first-past-the post systems where a

positive net gain suffices, than in PR elections, where each vote lost weakens the power both in parliament as in the government coalition after the election.

Lau and his colleagues provided two meta-analyses of existing research on the effects of negative campaigning. The first meta-analysis (Lau *et al.* 1999) is based on forty-seven studies examining affect for the target, affect for the attacker and net affect, shows no effect of negative campaigning whatsoever. The authors revised this conclusion in their second-meta analysis. This study (Lau *et al.* 2007) based on eighty-one studies reports mixed findings, namely a ‘modest tendency for negative campaigning to undermine positive affect for the targeted candidates’ (Lau *et al.* 2007: 1182). De Nooy and Maier (*see Chapter Seventeen* in this volume) also find that negative campaigning in German televised debates does not affect the audience’s response significantly. Viewers tend to evaluate the candidate independent of the candidate’s strategy (i.e. attack or acclaim) or their partisan attachment.

Second, does negative campaigning affect turnout? This is the question that received by far the most attention in the literature, most likely because of the systemic implications of low turnout. Scholars from an elitist tradition (e.g. Schumpeter 1979) do not consider low turnout a problem but simply an indication of ‘citizens’ basic satisfaction with the performance of the political system, which means that they can concentrate on their personal matters’ (Anduiza Perea 2002: 645; *see also* Rosema 2007). However, most scholars support the idea that abstention (or non-participation) from the electoral process is a concerning development in today’s democracy, as political participation can compensate for socioeconomic inequality and avoid exclusion of already underprivileged social groups (e.g. Verba and Nie 1972). Low turnout, described as democracy’s principal ‘unresolved dilemma’ by Lijphart (1997), affects the electoral process negatively.

The literature is again inconclusive. Seminal work of Stephen Ansolabehere, Shanto Iyengar and their colleagues has laid the foundation for the ‘demobilisation’ theory (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Ansolabehere *et al.* 1994; Ansolabehere *et al.* 1999). They argue that negative campaigning is one of the major causes for voters’ feelings of disaffection towards the political elite. Voters ‘become fed up with the mudslinging and decide to stay at home on Election Day. Attacks that last the length of a long campaign may spill past assessments of the candidates and alter citizens’ views of the political system. [...] Citizens may begin to readjust their attitudes toward politics in general, become less trustful of government, less politically efficacious and less interested in politics’ (Fridkin and Kenney 2012: 178–179). All this makes that voters become ‘disenchanted with the business of politics as usual’ (Ansolabehere *et al.* 1994: 835), which discourages turnout. Negative campaigning can also depress political participation outside the electoral arena and increase overall political alienation. Researchers have consistently found support for this effect in recent years (e.g. Wattenberg and Briens 1999; Lemert *et al.* 1999; Lawton and Freedman 2001). However, these findings are again contested by others (e.g. Brooks 2006, Finkel and Geer 1998; Freedman and Goldstein 1999). First of all, a large share of research shows negligible or null effects of negative campaigning on turnout (Garramone *et al.* 1990; Thorson *et al.* 2000; Brader and Corrigan 2006; Brooks 2006; Krasno and Green 2008). Moreover, recent research points toward opposite findings, i.e. negative campaigning produces higher turnout, (e.g. Finkel and Geer 1998; Freedman and Goldstein 1999; Kahn and Kenney 2004; Niven 2006; Jackson and Carsey 2007). The rationale behind a ‘mobilising’ effect is threefold (Martin 2004: 549–551): first of all, negative campaigning puts issues forward that polarises the electorate and thus

stimulates the republican duty of voting. Second, negative campaigning arouses anxiety, which has shown to stimulate attention and involvement. Third, from a rational choice perspective, negative campaigning can be perceived as an indicator of a close race, in which the marginal utility for individuals to participate in the electoral process is higher. Research shows that the presence of a mobilising or demobilising effect depends on the type of the attack (issue-based versus person-based; Kahn and Kenney 1999a; Min 2004) and/or focus of the campaign (defending status quo versus defending policy change; Nai 2013).

To summarise, the literature consists of contradicting theories. Even more so, the underlying narrative to justify mobilisation instead of demobilisation relies on distinct paradigms; if demobilisation theories 'rely on a reading of the cultural tastes of the mass public, [...] the mobilisation arguments rely on a reading of the psychology of negative information' (Martin 2004: 547). As for the outcome, efforts have been made to extract from existing literature the 'average' net effect of negative advertisements on turnout. Meta-analyses from Rick Lau and colleagues (Lau *et al.* 1999, Lau *et al.* 2007) found no significant effect on (intended or actual) turnout, which results in the general conclusion that existing research cannot be summed up to a mobilisation or demobilisation effect. However, this does not imply that systematic empirical assessments of the literature are not worthwhile. On the contrary, the finding that such a wealth of research adds up to no significant 'average' result opens up avenues for further research that aims to disentangle the dynamics at work.

Negative campaigning and general political attitudes

This last section discusses how negative campaigning affects more general political attitudes. The main research question is 'are negative campaign messages producing systemic effects on public opinion'? All in all, existing research shows little support for such findings (*see* Lau *et al.* 2007). This is partly due to the research designs implemented. The vast majority of effect studies rely on surveys or experiments, which are relatively ineffective methods to find long-term effects (Fridkin and Kenney 2012: 181). To our knowledge no comprehensive longitudinal analysis has been conducted to examine the stability of those systemic effects over time. The literature does not address the general issue of political 'disaffection', but focuses on three principal issues, namely (1) political trust; (2) sense of political efficacy; and (3) interest in politics. All in all, empirical evidence suggests that citizen's trust and sense of political efficacy are only limitedly affected by negative campaigning, whereas it can enhance political interest.

First of all, research both based on experimental as well as survey data suggests a decrease in voters' political trust after exposure to negative campaigning (Wanta *et al.* 1999; Pinkleton *et al.* 2002; Brader 2005). This makes also sense intuitively if we consider both possible outcomes of attack advertisements on citizens' affect for candidates. If attacks are successfully lowering the affect for the target, political trust can be negatively affected. However, if attack advertisements 'backlash' the sponsor loses credibility and popular support (or affect), which can lower trust in politics (or politicians). Negative advertisements tend to emphasise someone's weaknesses and these weaknesses are either believed or not by the general public; in both cases the credibility of the candidate takes a blow and political trust for politicians and the political system weakens. Although some studies suggests a harmful effect of negative campaigning on political trust (Wanta *et al.* 1999; Pinkleton *et al.* 2002; Brader 2005), other studies found no significant effect (Lau and Pomper 2004; Geer 2006) or a

spurious relationship between negative campaigning and political trust when one controls for basic political predispositions (Martinez and Delegal 1990).

Moreover, a rationale for the opposite effect of negative campaigning on political trust is easily formulated. Citizens might feel that highlighting of the opponent's flaws demonstrates the nastiness inherent to the whole political system. However, negative campaigning might make politics easier to understand for the ordinary voter, which, at the end, enhances political trust. Studies suggesting that negative advertisements are perceived as more informative than positive advertisements (Ansolabehere *et al.* 1994; Geer 2006) support this view.

Second, some scholars argue that negative campaigning shrinks the (reported) feeling of political efficacy (e.g. Ansolabehere *et al.* 1994; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Finkel and Geer 1998; Craig and Kane 2000; Brader 2005). Negative messages, these scholars argue, reduce the faith that individuals have in the political system itself. As a result of negative campaigning those voters feel that their vote does not count, that politics is just a game that they have little say about and that politicians do not care about them. The rationale behind a decrease in political efficacy as a result of negative campaigning comes from a decline in political trust. Voters do not appreciate negative campaign messages, which increases cynicism towards political elites, which in turn increases distrust and yields a 'perceived lack of ability to produce a desired outcome or effect' (Pinkleton *et al.* 1998: 36).

Although to our knowledge no study has shown the opposite (i.e. that negative messages *increase* voters' sense of political efficacy), several studies report that negative campaigning and political efficacy are empirically unrelated phenomena. For instance, the work of Wattenberg and Briens (1999), Rahn and Hirshorn (1999), Pinkleton *et al.* (2002), Goldstein and Freedman (2002), Lau and Pomper (2004) or Jackson *et al.* (2005) shows few or no significant effects of negative campaign messages on the reported feeling of internal or external political efficacy. To sum up, no consistent conclusion can be drawn on declining political efficacy as a result of negative campaigning.

Third, evidence exists that negative campaigning increases general political interest (*see* Pinkleton and Garramone 1992; Bartels 2000; Brader 2005 and Brooks and Geer 2007). These authors argue that an increase in political trust comes from an increase in attention for negative messages and saliency for messages framed with a negative tone. Thus, under some conditions a negative campaign 'becomes a colorful, exciting display that reminds voters that politics isn't boring and dull. Just as people are drawn to celebrity disagreements in tabloids or the viewing of car accidents on freeways, it may be that malicious, personal politics garners interest from people who would not otherwise notice the electoral process' (Brooks and Geer 2007: 19). Furthermore, this attention-grabbing effect seems larger for messages with person-based attacks (Dassonneville 2010).

Wrapping up our review on political interest, we go back to our initial disclaimer: the outcomes discussed here are often intertwined. Political interest strongly defines how voters are exposed to media and campaign information, and directly influences attention to its content (Lupia and Philpot 2005; Strömbäck and Shehata 2010).

Conclusion: Exiting the stalemate?

The wealth of existing research on how negative campaigning affects the political game makes providing an overall conclusion a difficult task. Is negative campaigning harmful or is it just a way to get the message across? Regardless which perspective scholars support they will not have a hard time

finding supporting empirical evidence. This being said, some final issues deserve close attention. The apparent stalemate between ‘optimists’ (i.e. those who see potentially positive effects) and ‘pessimists’ (those who do not see positive effects or even see negative effects) can potentially be solved by looking more closely at the definition of negative campaigning, its measurement and the source of negative campaigning.

First, scholars do not have a similar understanding of what constitutes a ‘negative’ message (*see Chapter One* in this volume). Most research defines negative campaigning in terms of acclaims (positive statements about a candidate) versus attacks (critique towards the opponent) versus defences (refutation of attacks and criticisms) according to functional theory (Benoit 2007; *see also Benoit’s Chapter Two* in this volume). However, some scholars focus in their work on the use of ad-hominem attacks (e.g. Fridkin and Kenney 2008; Nai 2013; Nai 2014a), thus adopting a more narrow definition of negative campaigning. Negative campaign messages vary in substance, for instance what is attacked (the candidate’s personality or his policy propositions) and in what terms (civil or uncivil), but also in the emotional charge they carry (Brader 2006). Thus, ‘it is very different to question an opponent’s honesty by pointing out that “he didn’t keep the promise he made to his community” as compared to saying that he “turned his back on everyone in his community, by deceiving them with lies and deceptions.” Both are negative messages. Both are negative trait messages. But one crosses the line of civility, while the other does not’ (Brooks 2006: 694). In addition, unwarranted attacks are not the same as rebuttal attacks and are perceived quite differently (Whaley and Holloway 1997; Wicks and Souley 2003; Roese and Sande 1993).

Second, the method used to test the effects of negative campaign messages on turnout matter. As Martin (2004) points out, empirical evidence suggesting voter demobilisation comes generally from research employing an experimental design, whereas evidence suggesting voter mobilisation tends to stem from survey research. Both methods have clear advantages and disadvantages in terms of external and internal validity, such as the possibility to control for spurious effects or generalisability. Studies that combine both types of data are still rare in the literature, notable exceptions are Martinez and Delegal (1990) and Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995). However, although combining experimental and survey or aggregate data is undoubtedly time-consuming and expensive, this might be necessary to move forward.

Third, what is also likely to matter for the effect of negative campaigning on attitudes and behaviour is the identity of the attacker. The same attack made by two different actors is likely to be perceived differently. In Switzerland, Nai (2013) found that negative campaigns defending the status quo (‘no’ campaigns) are likely to lower actual turnout in contrast to campaigns defending policy changes (‘yes’ campaigns) that tend to enhance turnout. Nai argues that this could be related to the mediatory effect of increased aversion felt by voters towards ‘no’ campaigns, which are almost always negative by nature, and increased enthusiasm experienced by voters towards ‘yes’ campaigns. In addition, evidence exists that US challengers are more likely to benefit from negative campaigning than incumbents (Kahn and Kenney 2004). The point is, everything else being constant – the electoral setting, the nature and content of the attack – effects might differ depending on who is going negative.

Where to go from here? First of all, as argued, scholars linking campaign tone to attitudes and behaviour should be attentive to *what* is measured (issue-based criticisms, personal or ‘ad-hominem’ attacks, incivilities), *how* it is measured (experimental manipulations, survey data, mixed protocols),

and *who* looms behind the attack (who goes negative).

Second, future research should make use of longitudinal (panel) survey data and repeated experimental protocols and examine whether negative campaigning has long-lasting effects on voters' (systemic) attitudes. For instance, research should examine whether voters are also better able to remember negative advertisements than positive advertisements in the long run. In addition, recent results from a study combining observational and experimental data (Krupnikov 2014) show that while keeping everything constant, the timing of exposure to negative advertisements produces unique effects. Early exposure to negative advertisements while still evaluating the candidates mobilises voters, whereas exposure to negative advertisements after deciding which candidate is preferred demobilises voters.

Third, regardless of the wealth of existing research on negative campaigning and its effects, the field has not yet provided an integrated framework that combines unconscious psychological responses (e.g. memory), behaviour (e.g. turnout) and structural political attitudes (e.g. efficacy). These intertwined phenomena form a complex causal network that defines how we respond to stimuli and translate them into political actions. Recent research focusing on personality traits (e.g. Mondak 2010; Gerber *et al.* 2011; Vecchione and Caprara 2009; Vecchione *et al.* 2011) and the genetic foundation of social behaviour (e.g. Fowler and Schreiber 2008; Hatemi and McDermott 2011) complicates this relationship further.

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1. <http://www.prwatch.org/cmd>.
 2. For instance, if we consider two identical advertisements (whatever this might mean), one perceived as 'positive' and the other as 'negative' the overall perception would not be 'neutral' but rather negative. This, furthermore, might explain why observers systematically feel that political campaigns are almost exclusively negative.
 3. Interestingly, Malhotra and Kuo (2009) show that experiencing negative emotions might decrease cognitive engagement.
 4. The commercial, promoted by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America and aired nationwide in US in 1987, shows a man standing right in front a frying pan. He takes an egg ('this is your brain'), points to the frying pan ('this is drugs'), puts the egg into the hot frying pan ('this is your brain on drugs'), and shows us the obvious result ('any questions?').

The Effects of Advertising Tone on Information Processing and Vote Choice

Richard R. Lau and David P. Redlawsk

Every election season media attention is drawn to the presumed power of ‘negative’ or ‘attack’ political advertisements. In recent years we have heard how Barack Obama wants to teach kindergartners about sex, and how John McCain is mentally unfit to be president. Candidates have been accused of being atheists (Kay Hagan, 2008 North Carolina Senate race), or even of worshipping an ‘Aqua Buddha’ (Rand Paul, 2010 Kentucky Senate Race.) And, as we all know, Mitt Romney had no concern whatsoever for the average person, and was even accused of being responsible for the death of the wife of a worker who was laid off when Romney’s company, Bain Capital, ‘restructured’ his employer. According to conventional wisdom (e.g. Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Jamieson 1992; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991; Lau *et al.* 1999) advertisements like these and others have an unusual ability to convince voters about the undesirable characteristics of the target (we are being gentle here), which by comparison makes the sponsor of the attack seem like a statesman with the backbone to point out his opponent’s weaknesses. Attack advertisements get noticed, they are more memorable, and while such advertisements are not liked, they typically provide a significant net benefit to candidates who employ them, both in terms of relative popularity ratings and at the ballot box. At least that is the conventional wisdom.

In fact, there is little consistent empirical support for many of these ‘facts’ about negative political advertisements. Recent meta-analyses of all existing studies of the effects and effectiveness of negative political campaigns (e.g. Lau *et al.* 2007) found significant support for only one aspect of what candidates who employ negative advertisements are trying to accomplish: a lowering of affect for the opposing candidate, the target of the attacks. But this effect was counterbalanced by an opposite and even larger (and more often significant) backlash against the sponsoring candidate. Thus the *net* effect of differential change in candidate affect tends to be negative – that is, counter to what the candidate sponsoring the negative advertisements wants to achieve. Studies that look at intended or actual *vote* have on average found a similar result, that negative campaigns are counter-productive for the candidate sponsoring the negative advertisements (although the vote effects are rarely significantly different from zero). There are some suggestions in the literature (most of which, until very recently, has been conducted in the US) that Republicans view negative campaigning as more acceptable than Democrats (e.g. Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995), which could mean that Republicans who go negative are less likely than Democrats to suffer backlash effects from their own supporters – but then also less likely to make any headway with their opponent’s supporters (Perloff and Kinsey 1992). Negative advertisements are a little more memorable than positive advertisements (a common explanation for why negative advertisements are more effective), although the average effect is not as large as one might expect (an average delta of only 0.28). And most recently, Mattes and Redlawsk (2015) build on Geer’s (2006) informational argument to show that *without* negativity, the campaign environment