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## **Negative Campaigning in the Digital Age: Comparing Cost-Benefit Structures Across Parties, Issues and Communication Channels**

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## **Abstract**

Research on negative campaigning in multiparty systems has outlined several potential costs and benefits of “going negative.” However, most of these cost-benefit structures relate to contextual factors and party characteristics, such as parties’ position in the polls, their incumbency status or ideological extremity. What is often overlooked is that the costs and benefits of negative campaigning can also differ across issues and communication channels. Focusing on the 2017 Dutch General Elections, this study examines how cost-benefit structures of negative campaigning do not just differ across political parties, but also across issues and communication channels. Analyzing 1647 appeals that appeared in newspaper coverage, talk shows and in Facebook posts over a course of two weeks, the results of this study show that opposition parties and parties behind in the polls are more likely to use negative campaigning, that parties are more likely to go negative on issues that they do not own and that negative appeals are more common in newspaper coverage and talk shows than in political parties’ Facebook posts. My findings complement a growing literature on negative campaigning in multiparty systems and add more nuance to our understanding of political elites’ strategic calculus to go negative during campaigns.

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## 1. Introduction

Ever since there have been political campaigns, there has existed a phenomenon that we now refer to as “negative campaigning.” In 64 BC, Cicero’s campaign advice included “to remind the people ‘(...) of what scoundrels your opponents are and to smear these men at every opportunity with the crimes, sexual scandals, and corruption they have brought on themselves’ (Cicero 2012 in Haselmayer, 2019, p. 355). In contemporary political campaigns, negative campaigning is still a dominant strategy in which political actors attack and criticize their political opponents to reduce voters’ positive feelings towards political opponents (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010; Lau & Pomper, 2004). Due to its increasing presence in political campaigns, academic attention to negative campaigning has grown over the past years. Some studies have looked at the effects of negative campaigning, arguing that it demobilizes and polarizes voters (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994) or, more optimistically, encourages voters to learn more about political issues and candidates (Geer, 2008). Other studies have adopted a supply-side approach and examined why and when political actors decide to go negative (Druckman et al., 2009; Lau & Pomper, 2004).

Despite a growing body of academic work, however, there is still a lack of comparative work on negative campaigning. First and foremost, much of what we know about political actors’ strategic calculus to “go negative” only applies to the U.S. context, but we still know little about negative campaigning beyond the American two-party system. Yet, compared to their American counterparts, politicians in a multiparty context might face different costs and benefits when they decide to go negative (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008). A second lacuna in the literature is the poor understanding of the relationship between negative campaigning and certain political issues. While parties strategically try to emphasize the issues on which they are advantaged during campaigns (Petrocik, 1996), issue ownership has hardly been considered as a determinant

of negative campaigning (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010). Third, most studies on negative campaigning have only looked at single communication channels. However, this creates a biased understanding of negative campaigning, as it overlooks the fact that political actors make strategic use of multiple communication channels to disseminate their campaign messages.

To address these shortcomings, this study examines how “3 C’s” - context, content and communication channel - can function as determinants of negative campaigning in the context of Western European multiparty competition. Using the Netherlands as a case study, I analyze political parties’ appeals that were communicated on Facebook pages, political talk shows and in newspaper coverage two weeks ahead of the 2017 Dutch General Elections. My results show that context, content and communication channels all matter as determinants of negative campaigning: First, opposition parties and parties behind in the polls are more likely to use negative campaigning. Second, parties are more likely to go negative on issues that they do not own. Finally, negative appeals are more common in talk shows and in newspapers than on Facebook.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Defining Negative Campaigning**

Interest in the advantages of negative appeals traces back to research in the field of consumer psychology. During the 1920s, Lucas and Benson (1929) employed a series of experiments in which they examined the effect of negative and positive appeals in advertisements. They concluded that different appeal types did not significantly differ in terms of advertising effectiveness. In the field of politics, neither practitioners – such as political consultants and campaign staff - nor scholars had negative campaigning high on the agenda before the advent of the television (Lau & Pomper, 2004). Before the emergence of the television, it was common belief amongst social scientists that political campaigns had a minimal effect on voting behavior (Hillygus, 2010). At most, political campaigns reinforced certain attitudes or political predispositions (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1948). Television, however, changed this. Increasingly, campaigns were built around television because it enabled political actors to rapidly and dramatically communicate their appeals to a wider audience (Jamieson, 1993). In the next decades, many noteworthy negative political advertisements were televised in the United States. From Kennedy’s attack on Nixon in 1960, Johnson’s infamous daisy advertisement from 1964 to Bush’s 1988 “Willy Horton” campaign ad. In the field of political science and communication studies, scholarly interest in negative campaigning took off in the 1990s. Nai and Walter (2015) show that academic articles mentioning some form of “negative campaigning” in their texts or titles saw a dramatic increase from the 1990s onward. Two main reasons account for this development. First, whereas the former decades were marked by the belief that political campaigns did not really matter, the consensus of political campaigns’ “minimal effects” started to dissipate in the 1980s and 1990s (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). During this era, research showed

that mass media did in fact have an effect on voters, influencing what kind of issues people thought about and how they thought about them (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, 1994). Second, and related to the former development, two seminal works on negative campaigning were published in the 1990s. In 1993, Kathleen Jamieson published *Dirty Politics*, in which she analyzed several American presidential campaign advertisements and speeches. In her book, she puts particular emphasis on the different techniques campaign experts use to portray candidates positively and their opponents negatively (Jamieson, 1993). Three years later, Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar published *Going Negative*. In this book, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) focus on the effects of televised “attack ads” on the electorate during presidential elections, arguing that these sorts of advertisements lower voter turnout and polarize voters (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995). Taken together, these important works gave rise to a new field of study: the study of negative campaigning (Nai & Walter, 2015).

Since the publications of Jamieson’s (1993) and Ansolabehere’s and Iyengar’s (1995) works, the literature on negative campaigning distinguishes between an “evaluative” and a “directional” meaning of negative campaigning (West, 1993). The two books mentioned earlier employ an “evaluative” understanding of negative campaigning that is characterized by a normative judgement. According to this meaning, negative appeals are those that are unfair, illegitimate or misleading and often deal with trivial matters (Lau & Pomper, 2004; Jamieson, 1993). *Dirty Politics* emphasizes how negative appeals are deceptive and distract audiences from the issues that really matter (Jamieson, 1993). Conversely, *Going Negative* laments the effects of negative campaigning, arguing that relentless attacks and “bitter contest” demobilize the high-educated and open-minded citizens. The normative angle of the evaluative meaning of negative campaigning is also most typically used by practitioners, such as political consultants, campaign

workers and political journalists, who see negative campaigning as an illegitimate or misleading strategy (Jamieson, 1993). However, the evaluative meaning of negative campaigning finds less traction in more recent scholarship on negative campaigning. This is mainly because of empirical issues. First, it is difficult if not impossible to delineate what is “unfair” or “illegitimate,” which will increase the possibility of measurement bias (Nai & Walter, 2015). Second, unfair or illegitimate appeals do not always have to be negative and, vice versa, negative appeals are not always illegitimate. This is to say that even positive appeals can “stretch the truth” in an unfair or illegitimate way, while negative appeals may actually be fair and warranted (Lau & Pomper, 2004). An evaluative meaning of negative campaigning thus lacks a clear delineation between negative and positive appeals.

The empirical issues related to the evaluative meaning of negative campaigning are of little importance in more recent scholarship, since there is considerable consensus about the directional definition of negative campaigning. This definition suggests that appeals can go in opposite directions: negative or positive. In the case of a negative appeal, one candidate levels criticism against another candidate (Geer, 2008). This criticism can take on many forms and includes policy-based criticism, such as an opponent’s program or past handlings of issues, as well as character-based criticism such as an opponent’s qualifications or character traits (Benoit, 2017; Lau & Pomper, 2004). Conversely, positive appeals are always about one’s own program, past handlings of issues, qualifications or character traits (Lau and Pomper, 2004). In other words, positive appeals are the “acclamations” or “self-appraisal” political actors use to appear more desirable than their competitors (Benoit, 2017; Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010; Geer, 2008).

While the majority of scholars center their research on a directional definition of negative campaigning (Nai & Walter, 2015), they do employ different nuances in their empirical

strategies. The two most common approaches are those of Geer (2008) and Benoit (2017). Geer's (2008) approach is characterized by its simplicity and straightforwardness. He states that "[a]n appeal in a campaign either raises doubts about the opposition (i.e. negative) or states why the candidate is worthy of your vote (i.e. positive)" (Geer, 2008, p.23). The advantage of Geer's (2008) approach is the clear delineation between appeal types. An appeal is either negative or positive and there is nothing in between. Moreover, the absence of a "gray area" reduces measurement bias and thus makes his measurement of negative campaigning fairly reliable. The disadvantage is that both negative and positive appeals encompass a variety of attacks and acclaims. Thus, there is no conceptual distinction between a relentlessly hard attack and a mild criticism, since both are coded as "negative appeals."

Conversely, Benoit (2017) uses "functional theory" to examine negative campaigning across themes. His approach adds an interactive dimension to campaign appeals, as he states that political actors use not two but three campaign "functions": they either "attack" the opponent (negative), "acclaim" something positive (positive) or "defend" themselves to refute an opponent's attack. Moreover, Benoit (2017) emphasizes how these three functions interact with "topics" or "characters". The former implies an issue-based attack or acclaim, whereas the latter implies a personal attack or acclaim (Benoit, 2017). The advantage of this approach is that functional theory tries to add more accuracy to the substantive analysis of appeals, distinguishing not just between negative and positive appeals, but drawing particularly attention to distinctions between "attacks", "acclaims", and "defenses" and whether these are issue-based or personal. The disadvantage of Benoit's (2017) approach is that it suffers from conceptual unclarity: For coders, it might not be clear how "acclaims" and "defenses" are two differently measured concepts. In addition, functional theory seems less useful for a comparison across

communication channels, since campaign messages do not always have an interactive dimension. For this reason, Benoit (2015) himself regularly excludes “defenses” from his analysis, as defenses barely present themselves beyond election debates (Benoit, 2017).

All in all, I restrict my definition of negative campaigning to that of Geer (2008): Negative campaigning is defined as “any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign,” whereas positive campaigning consists of statements why a political actors is worthy of your vote“ (Geer, 2008, p.23). Geer’s (2008) definition is preferable for two reasons. First, it is in line with previous research on negative campaigning in a non-US context (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). Second, the parsimony of Geer’s (2008) approach allows for easy comparisons across parties, issues, as well as communication channels. Needless to say, this is of much importance in the context of a multi-party system as well as a high-choice media environment.

## **2.2. Rationales for Negative Campaigning: A Vote-Seeking Perspective**

To explain why contemporary political actors decide to use negative appeals in their campaign messages, most scholars ground their work in a rational-choice perspective (Walter & Nai, 2015). According to this perspective, political candidates or parties are rational actors that, during campaigns, will weigh the costs and benefits of their campaign strategies and choose the strategy that maximizes advantages and minimizes costs. What this means in practice is that political actors will try to diminish the votes for opposing parties, while maximizing their own vote share, and negative campaign can be a vehicle for that (Budesheim, Houston & DePaola, 1996). Yet, “going negative” is not without risks. Rational campaigners will also take into account that a negative campaign can be costly and may have damaging effects on the sender – such as credibility or vote loss (Lau & Pomper, 2004). Researchers have identified several

potentially damaging effects. The first is the boomerang effect, which describes the unintended consequence of an attack that results in more negative feelings toward the *sender* rather than the *target* (Garramone, 1984). Another unintended effect may be that people develop positive feelings toward the target, because they perceive the attack as unfair (Lau & Pomper, 2004). Lastly, negative campaigning may impair both the sender and target (Merrit, 1984).

However, the aforementioned potential costs of negative campaigning only provide a general picture. For a more fine-grained analysis of costs and benefits, we need to take into account the more specific factors that rational political actors add to their strategic calculus to go negative, such as the context in which they operate, the content of their appeals, as well as the communication channels they use to disseminate their campaign messages.

### **2.3. Context: Party System and Parties**

The first factor we need to consider is the institutional context in which political parties operate. In other words: we need to turn our attention to the party system. Since most scholarly work on negative campaigning comes from the United States, most of what we know about political actors' strategic calculus to go negative relates to a two-party system consisting of Democrats and Republicans. However, the cost-benefit structure of going negative looks different in a multiparty system. First, because parties and not candidates are the principal actors (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008). Second, parties do not only compete for votes, but also for a place at the negotiation table to form a coalition after the elections are over (Walter & Nai, 2015). In other words, the institutional context matters for determining what constitutes "rational behavior." This difference is neatly explained by Ström and Muller (1999): They argue that political actors are rational if their behavior is guided by three political objectives: seeking office, influencing

policy and obtaining votes. In a two-party system, such where plurality voting takes place in single member districts, political actors can mainly focus on their vote-seeking goals. In other words: once a candidate receives enough votes, she or he will achieve office, and once in office she or he will be able to influence policy. However, this is not the case in a multi-party system. In a multi-party system, political actors need to strike a fine balance between vote-, office-, and policy-objectives (Walter & Nai, 2015). Even if a party receives more votes than any other party, neither government office nor considerable influence over policy is guaranteed (Walter & Nai, 2015). Subsequently, political actors in a multi-party system face more costs as a result of negative campaigning than their counterparts in a two-party system. Besides a potential loss of credibility or support from the viewpoint of the electorate, negative campaigning may also hurt post-election bargaining with other parties to form a coalition (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). In sum, because votes do not necessarily translate into office or policy influence, the potential benefits of negative campaigning in a multi-party context seem less clear than those benefits in a two-party system (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008). We therefore need to take a closer look at which specific parties decide to go negative and under what conditions.

Compared to a two-party system, political parties in a multi-party system face more costs if they decide to go negative: It may reduce their credibility, their electoral support or hurt their post-election coalition bargaining position. However, since not all parties are the same, we cannot assume that the costs of negative campaigning are equally distributed across parties. In fact, there are plausible reasons to expect that negative campaigning is more costly for some parties than for others. The first of such expectations emanates from the American literature on negative campaigning and argues that the incumbency status of political actors matters: Challengers are more likely to resort to negative campaigning than are incumbent actors

(Druckman et al., 2009; Lau and Pomper, 2002). The rationale behind this argument is simple, namely challengers have less to lose and more to gain than incumbents (Walter, Praag & van der Brug, 2014). Because of their incumbency status, the latter group has a more accessible repertoire of experiences and tasks through which they can engage in self-appraisal and acclaims, whereas challengers need not only convince voters why they are worthy of office, but also why incumbents are not (Hale, Fox & Farmer, 1996). Several authors have extended the application of this argument to a multi-party context and found similar results: challengers use more negative appeals than incumbents (Walter et al., 2014; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Hansen & Pedersen, 2008).

However, we can identify several caveats that arise when extrapolating this argument to the context of multi-party competition. Unlike in the United States, multi-party systems are predominantly characterized by an electoral system of proportional representation. Thus, votes for challenger parties also translate into parliamentary representation. This may reduce the effect of an incumbency status on the amount of negative appeals because challenger – or more formally “opposition” - parties can also use their parliamentary activities – such as their introduction of amendments, interpellations or motions - as a source of self-appraisal and acclaim. In addition, in the absence of a demonstrable track record of government, opposition parties can proclaim instead what they will do in the future (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008). All in all, however, it seems plausible to expect that even in a multi-party context opposition parties use more negative appeals than incumbent parties. Not only because the scope of acclaims and self-appraisal remains bigger for incumbents than for challengers, but also because challengers still need to convince voters why current incumbents should be replaced (Hale et al., 1996). This

makes it more likely that their appeals include considerable criticism leveled at their political opponents. I therefore hypothesize that:

**H1:** Opposition parties are more likely to use negative appeals than incumbent parties.

A second factor that emanates from the American literature is a political actor's standing in the polls: A theoretical expectation is that political actors that are losing in the polls – such as those in American Senate elections - are more likely to use negative campaigning than those that are winning (Lau & Rovner, 2009; Druckman et al., 2009; Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995). According to Druckman et al. (2009) the main dynamic that underlies this pattern is the amount of risk political actors are willing to take: For a candidate that is winning in the polls, the stakes are higher than for a losing candidate. In other words, the former's advantage is that it can avoid risk by focusing on securing voters with positive appeals (Haselmayer, 2019). Conversely, the latter group has less to lose since they are already losing in the polls. They may therefore be more more willing to face the risks – such as a potential backlash effect – of negative campaigning (Walter et al., 2014).

The application of the poll-standing hypothesis in a European multi-party context yields mixed empirical support. While Elmelund-Præstekær (2010) finds that the prospect of electoral failure is a determinant of negative campaigning in the Danish multi-party system, Hansen & Pedersen (2008) find no such effect in the same party system and neither did Walter et al., 2014 find such an effect in the Dutch multi-party system. The question then is why some authors do find an effect while others do not. We may find a partial answer in the scope and form of the analysis. While Walter et al., (2014) analyze several campaigns, they focus on just one medium: party broadcasts. The problem is that political actors produce these broadcasts *before* the election campaign even starts (Walter et al., 2014), making them a less suitable medium to observe the

relationship between poll standings and negative campaigning. On the other hand, Hansen and Pedersen (2008) analyze party broadcasts *as well* as political advertisements and debates, but their analysis of negative campaigning is limited to a descriptive presentation of the overall tone of campaign messages, ranging from positive to negative using a 5-point scale (Hansen & Pedersen, 2008). All in all, evidence against the poll-standing hypothesis is not compelling enough to completely discard it, although we should be cautious not to overstate the effect. I therefore hypothesize that:

**H2:** Parties that are losing in the polls are more likely to use negative appeals than parties that are gaining in the polls.

A last contextual factor is ideology. In the American case, Lau and Pomper (2004) find that Republicans are more likely to use negative campaigning than Democrats. While these empirical results are of limited use beyond the United States, Lau and Pomper (2004) do give reasons to believe that ideology can play a role in political parties' rhetorical strategies (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010). Therefore, researchers of negative campaigning in the European context have taken ideology into account in their research arguing that the ideological "intensity" of a party is a determinant of negative campaigning (Walter et al., 2014; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010). In other words, the more extreme the party, the more likely it is that it will resort to negative campaigning. There are several theoretical reasons why this might be the case. First, because ideologically more extreme parties are more likely to criticize policies or other political parties (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010). Particularly radical-left and radical-right parties are known for their populist mode of appeal in which they blame an elitist "establishment" for undermining the will of "the people" (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). Second, and related to the first point, ideologically more extreme parties are less likely to be

suitable coalition partners (Walter et al. 2014). A key indicator of coalition “potential” is the distance to the median seat in parliament (Bartolini, 1998), so the more extreme a party, the further it is removed from the median seat. From this point of view, more extreme parties face fewer potential costs of negative campaigning since their odds of being a coalition partner are already low. All in all, it seems fair to expect that more extreme parties use more negative campaigning, either for rhetorical reasons or because their office-seeking goals are futile. I therefore hypothesize that:

**H3:** The further a party is away from the median party position, the more likely it will use negative appeals.

#### **2.4. Content: Issues**

Contextual factors only tell us part of negative campaign rationales. Another important consideration is the substance of campaign messages. Some campaign scholars have drawn attention to the connection between political issues and the tone of campaign messages (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011; Benoit & Stein, 2005). There are good reasons to include political issues in the study of negative campaigning. First, because voters increasingly identify parties on the basis of political issues instead of ideologies (Mair et al., 2004). Second, as a consequence of the former development, political parties’ deliberate emphases of specific issues during campaigns has become a strategic part of political parties’ “campaign toolkit” (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011; Green-Pedersen 2007). In short, it is therefore a plausible expectation that issues also play a role in the strategic calculus of parties when and where to use negative campaigning.

To assess the relationship between negative campaigning and the content of campaign messages (i.e. political issues), it is useful to understand the strategic underpinnings of campaign

messages. Campaign messages are designed as a means to an end: they should persuade voters to vote for one political candidate over the other (Benoit & Stein, 2005). As such, negative campaign messages and positive campaign messages can both be used for persuasive purposes. However, their respective functions change. While the function of negative campaigning is primarily to damage the reputation of political opponents, positive campaigning is primarily a means for a political actor or party to build or maintain their own reputation (Bernhardt & Ghosh, 2020). In other words, positive campaigning can be used by political candidates or parties to reveal good features about themselves, whereas negative campaigning serves the purpose of revealing a bad features about political opponents (Polborn & Yi, 2006).

However, the credibility with which a party can make claims about their good features is dependent on voters' perceptions of the ability of a party to handle certain issue-related problems of concern to voters better than their political opponents (Petrocik, 1996; Budge & Farlie, 1983). This is what the concept of issue ownership denotes: issue ownership can be understood as a party's policy reputation among voters. Political parties can build up such a reputation because they have a history of giving considerable attention to an issue or by showing assertiveness or innovation in a given policy area (Stubager, 2018). Issue ownership, then, serves as a party's reputational stock: It gives parties the advantage of credibility on handling certain issues better than their competitors (Sides, 2006; Riker, 1996); a reputation that, in the context of multiparty competition, is rather stable over time (Seeberg, 2017). In order to protect (the stability of) their reputational stock during campaigns, rational political actors will strategically emphasize their record on an owned issue, their current policies or by laying out their future plans (Petrocik, 1996; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995). In other words, the best means by which a political actor can advertise their reputational stock is positive campaigning. Acclaims and self-appraisal enable

candidates to highlight their advantages and benefits compared to their political opponents (Benoit et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, political actors are not always able to ignore the issues that they do not own. They can deviate from their own issues to attract undecided or independent voters (Aldrich & Griffin, 2003). The underlying logic of such a decision is that loyal partisans will simply converge toward the new issue, while the party also attracts new voters (Buell & Sigelman, 2009). While this argument specifically applies to the American two-party system, a similar argument has been made in the case of European multi-party competition. In a multi-party system, parties are only able to deviate so much from their own issue agendas. De Sio & Weber (2014) therefore argue that “issue yield” is a much-used party strategy where parties strategically emphasize the issues that reconcile two goals. First, they should be able to mobilize a party’s own group of core supporters and second, they should be able to attract new supporters. However, an important nuance that the authors add is that these yield-based strategies are less common if they come close to another party’s owned issue (De Sio & Weber, 2014). The reason is that the closer a party comes to another party’s issue, the riskier it becomes to make positive claims about that issue (De Sio & Weber, 2014). Because a non-owning party lacks the credibility to make praise themselves for the handling of certain issues, it would make more sense to use negative campaigning on non-owned issues. Elmelund-Præstekær (2011, p. 12) argues that “[t]his way the party can at least try to cast doubt about the issue-owning party’s policies – and perhaps in the longer run try to conquer the issue ownership in question.” All in all, it therefore seems plausible that issue ownership is a determinant of a more positive campaign message, since acclamations about positive features become riskier in the absence of credibility. I therefore hypothesize that:

**H4:** Political parties are less likely to use negative campaigning on issues that they own than on issues that they do not own

## **2.5. Channel: News Media, Soft News Media and New Media**

Finally, we need to consider the communication channel through which political parties disseminate their campaign messages. Most research on negative campaigning has focused their analysis on a single communication channel, such as political advertisements (Geer, 2008), Facebook posts (Auter & Fine, 2016) or newspaper coverage (Buell & Sigelman, 2009). However, the drawback of this almost exclusive focus on one communication channel at a time is that it makes it difficult to generalize empirical findings to other communication channels. This is problematic, since political actors use several communication channels to communicate their campaign messages to voters (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). A focus on a single communication channel gives a heavily biased understanding of the scope of negative campaigning. In other words, the question that lies ahead is how the scope of negative campaigning differs across communication channels.

To assess this, we would normally begin with an examination of the literature and build on already established theories or hypotheses. However, several problems arise if we look at the current literature. First, as noted before, most studies do not employ a comparative perspective in their analysis of negative campaigning and consider just one communication source. This makes it difficult to make substantive claims about the different degree and content of negative campaigning across communication channels, as scholars use different research designs and operationalizations of key variables. Second, studies that do focus on a comparative analysis of negative campaigning across communication channels have based their case selection of

communication channels on the amount of control political actors exert over their content (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). However, these studies conclude that the explanatory power of this selection criterion is limited (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). Lastly, the inferences we can draw from these studies are limited due to an idiosyncratic mix of compared communication channels (i.e. election debates, newspapers, party broadcasts). The problem is that this constellation of communication channels is less attentive to or representative of a broader media landscape (Tufekci, 2014). Therefore, I propose a different strategy. Following Baum (2013), I analyze communication channels that are representative of three broadly defined yet different media types: newspapers (traditional news media), political talk shows (soft news media), and Facebook (new media).

In the context of campaigns, Baum (2013) proposes that political actors have two strategic “leadership” goals. First, he argues that political actors need to “preach to the choir.” This entails that political actors reach out to their core supporters base in order to mobilize them (Baum, 2013). Second, he argues that political actors need to “convert the flock,” which means that political actors need to increase their support by reaching beyond their base of core supporters. His argument, then, is as follows: some media types are more suitable for converting the flock, while others are more suitable for preaching to the choir. In other words, some media offer more favorable opportunities to persuade new voters to vote for one’s party. What this means in relation to negative campaigning is that if the possibility to convert the flock goes up, so does the efficacy of negative appeals. After all, in this case a political actor needs to persuade a voter to change their attitudes, beliefs or, at best, vote intention. In doing so, they not only need to highlight their own positive features (Polborn & Yi, 2006), but also what distinguishes them from their political opponents, which increases the efficacy of criticism regarding political

opponents. However, consider the situation in which a political actor only needs to “preach to the choir” and excite their core supporters to show up and vote (Baum, 2013). In this case, it is particularly important for political actors to maintain their reputations through positive campaigning (Bernhard & Gosh, 2019). Negative campaigning is less efficacious since the political actors already communicate with their core supporters and therefore have less need to change voters’ attitudes, beliefs or vote intentions.

To support his argument, Baum (2013) makes the distinction between three media types that compete for the public’s attention: the “traditional news media” including national newspapers and broadcast networks, “new media,” which includes cable tv and the internet and “soft news media” which includes daytime and late-night (political) talk shows and tabloid news magazine programs (Baum, 2013). While Baum (2013) argues that new media and traditional news media are less attractive to convert the flock than soft news media, we need to be cautious about his conclusions for two reasons: First, his argument applies to the U.S context, but media systems in Western Europe can differ greatly from the American media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Second, Baum (2013) does not account for differences between communication channels. Yet, there are good reasons to believe that political actors’ communication strategies not only differ per media type, but also per communication channel: Even within certain media types, we need to be attentive to the “balkanization” or the fragmentation of the communication environment (Ballard, Hillygus & Konitzer, 2016). I will therefore focus on the efficacy of negative campaigning across three communication channels that fall within each of Baum’s (2013) media types: newspapers (traditional media), political talk shows (soft news media) and Facebook pages (new media).

### *Traditional News Media: Newspapers*

First, Baum (2013) notes that traditional news media used to be *the* vehicle for political actors to reach a mass audience, but that declining news audiences since the 1990s and a partisan gap between news outlets have made it more difficult to reach a broad cross-section of the United States (Baum, 2013). He argues that therefore these traditional news media have lost a substantial part of their utility for political actors in the United States to “convert the flock.” But we may expect that this is less so the case in the Dutch media system. First, because there is less of a partisan bias ((Van der Pas, van der Brug & Vliegenthart, 2017). Even though some newspapers are more left-leaning and others more right-leaning, there are no parallels between newspapers and political parties. Second, the decline of news audiences has prioritized commercial news values. Most notably, conflict and negativity emphases have become determinants of what makes it into the news or not (Kleinnijenhuis, 2003). This heightens the efficacy of negative campaigning, because it enables political actors to reach a relatively large cross-section of society at no cost (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). In sum, Dutch newspapers have considerable utility for political actors and a focus on conflict and negativity incentivize the use of negative appeals.

### *Soft News Media: Political Talk Shows*

Second, Baum (2013) argues that soft news media are particularly useful media for political actors to convert the flock. In the case of political talk shows, there are at least two advantages: First, these talk shows typically benefit from large audiences, which enables political actors to reach a large segment of persuadable voters. Second, the audiences for political talk shows are on average less partisan, more moderate ideologically and less politically engaged when compared to traditional news media audiences (Baum, 2013; Zaller 1992). This makes it easier to

persuade voters who have low levels of political interest or have no party affiliation (Brown, 2011). However, the efficacy of negative campaigning in talk shows is not just high because of the large and more easily persuadable audience, but also because political talk shows often follow a specific and predictable format in which conflict (i.e. a debate) between political actors or institutions is covered (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999).

#### *New Media: Facebook Pages*

Finally, Baum (2013) argues that new media are the least suitable to convert the flock since they appeal to more narrow segments of the society (Baum, 2013). This is in line with research on online political candidate communication: personal webpages, social media and blogs are primarily aimed at mobilizing or activating existing supporters rather than trying to persuade new voters (Ballard et al., 2016). The same argument applies to Facebook pages, which enable political candidates to communicate directly with their constituencies (i.e. the likers of the page). These candidates are more likely to “preach to the choir” because they communicate with an audience of supporters (Ballard et al., 2016). The efficacy of negative campaigning is therefore lower than in newspapers or on political talk shows, since political candidates need not change the hearts and minds of their supporters, but should primarily be concerned with maintaining or improving their reputation amongst supporters, which can most successfully be done through positive campaigning (Bernhardt & Ghosh, 2020; Polborn & Yi, 2006). All in all, I argue that the degree of negative campaigning across communication channels is a function of efficacy: If the efficacy to use negative campaign messages becomes higher, we can expect that the degree of negative campaigning increases. I therefore hypothesize that:

**H5:** Negative campaigning is more frequent in talk shows and newspapers than in Facebook posts

### **3. Research Design**

In this chapter, I will describe all matters related to my research design. First, I will describe my case study and argue why it is a valuable test case. Second, I will explain what my data sources are and how I retrieved my data. Then, I will elaborate on my coding procedure. Lastly, I will explain how I operationalize my dependent variable and independent variables.

#### **3.1 Case Selection**

Until now, I have only talked theoretically about negative campaigning in a multi-party context. To test my hypotheses, however, I need to use a multi-party system as a case. In this study, I will focus on The Netherlands as my case. The Netherlands is a valuable test case for two important reasons. First, because of its highly diverse multi-party system. Since the Netherlands uses an electoral system of proportional representation, a high number of parties (>10) is typically represented in the Lower House of Parliament (Walter et al., 2014). This is beneficial to my analysis since it allows for comparisons among a range of ideologically diverse parties such as those on the radical right and the far left. Second, due to its high levels of internet penetration and diverse media landscape, the Netherlands is an ideal case for comparisons of negative campaigning across new and traditional communication channels. The Dutch are in the top-ten of countries when it comes to internet-penetration rates (94%) and citizens as well as political actors are among the most active world-wide social media users (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). More specifically, I will limit my focus to political parties' campaign messages ahead of the 2017 Dutch General Elections. During these elections, voters elect the 150 members of the *Tweede Kamer*, the Dutch House of Representatives. Although there are elections on the national, regional and local level in the Netherlands, the focus on a national-level election is

preferable since negative appeals play a more important role during these election campaigns than during regional or local election campaigns (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010). A focus on campaigns, in addition, requires a delineation of a distinct time period. While campaigns in the U.S. are typically quite long, Dutch campaigns only last for around four weeks (Walter et al., 2014). I therefore examine a campaign period starting from February 15, 2017 to March 14, 2017, the last day before Election Day.

Lastly, considering feasibility, I construct a representative sample of Dutch political parties instead of analyzing all the political parties that competed in the 2017 General Elections. This sample includes incumbent parties, opposition parties, as well as parties that are far away from or close to the median party position. This sample of parties is displayed in Table 1. “SP” is an acronym for the *Socialist Party*, “GL” for *Green Left*, “PvdA” for the *Labor Party*, “VVD” for the *People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy*, “PVV” for the *Freedom Party* and “FVD” for *Forum for Democracy*.

**Table 1: Sample of Political Parties**

Parties	Party Family	Incumbency Status	Issue Ownership	Extremity <sup>1</sup> (1 – 10)	Poll Loss/Win
SP	Socialist	Opposition	Healthcare	1.27	-12%
GL	Green	Opposition	Environment	2.60	317.5%
PVDA	Socialist	Governing	Jobs	3.87	-70.53%
VVD	Liberal	Governing	Economy	7.87	-38.05%
PVV	Radical Right	Opposition	Immigration	9.27	58.67%
FVD	Radical Right	Opposition	NA	9.53	140%

<sup>1</sup> Ideological extremity ranges from 1 (far left) to 10 (far right)

### 3.2. Data

My data consists of campaign messages from the parties displayed in Table 1. I focus on their campaign messages in newspapers articles (traditional news media), talk shows (soft news media) and Facebook posts (new media). For my study of campaign messages in newspaper articles, I include two Dutch national newspapers in my analysis: The more left-leaning quality newspaper *de Volkskrant* and the more right-leaning tabloid-style newspaper *de Telegraaf*. I choose these newspapers for several reasons. First, because they have the largest readership in the Netherlands (Walter & Vliegthart, 2010; Bakker and Scholten, 2007). In addition, these newspapers offer a balanced sample of a more left-leaning and a more right-leaning newspaper as well as between a quality and a tabloid-style of news reporting (Walter & Vliegthart, 2010). Newspaper articles were retrieved using the digital *Nexis Uni* database. To ensure a high yield of relevant articles, I used the following search string: (“surname of the party leader” OR “party name”) AND (“verkiezing” OR “campagne”).

For my study of campaign messages in talk shows, I included three different talk shows: *Pauw and Jinek*, aired by left-leaning broadcaster *BNN-VARA*; *WNL Op Zondag*, aired by right-leaning broadcaster *WNL*, and *Tijd voor Max*, aired by “50 +” broadcaster *Omroep Max*<sup>2</sup>. Lastly, I included Facebook messages posted on the official pages of the political parties displayed in Table 1 as a new media source. In sum, my case study thus includes a sample of Dutch political parties’ campaign messages disseminated through newspaper coverage, talk shows and Facebook posts during the 2017 Dutch General Elections. Talk shows were retrieved using the digital archive of the Dutch Foundation for Public Broadcasting and were subsequently transcribed.

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, it was not possible to retrieve talk show episodes from commercial broadcasters. Due to these access limitations, I only included the talk shows that were broadcasted on the Dutch Foundation for Public Broadcasting.

Finally, Facebook data was available from a previous research project. However, since this dataset only included textual messages, I additionally transcribed the videos, photos or links that were part of these messages.

### **3.3. Coding Procedure**

As discussed in the previous subsection, I rely on textual data for my analysis (i.e. transcriptions of written and spoken statements). This textual data was analyzed by means of content analysis; a “research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use (Krippendorff, 2004, p.18). More specifically, I performed a *manual* content analysis (as opposed to a computer-assisted semi-automatic or fully automatic content analysis). While the disadvantage of this approach is that it limits the amount of data I can observe, the advantage is that this approach allows for a better understanding of the data; and to recognize a range of meanings (i.e. sarcasm, irony) that are not easily recognized by automated content analyses (Tufekci, 2014). In addition, my content analysis is *quantitative* meaning that my textual data will be categorized and measured in numerical terms (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 102).

For my analysis, I used a codebook provided by Dr. Annemarie Walter (University of Nottingham). This codebook lays out a coding procedure for quantitative inquiries into negative campaigning. My unit of analysis will be *appeals*, which are defined as “any type of mention in which parties praise themselves or in which they level criticism at their opponent”. Concurring with Geer (2008), I believe these are more fine-grained units of analysis than sentences or statements to make claims about the frequency of negative campaigning. Another advantage of appeals as the unit of analysis is that they are relatively easy to compare across parties, issues and communication channels.

The scope of my coding procedure is limited to written and spoken appeals only. In my analysis of Facebook appeals, this means that I will focus on written or spoken appeals that appear in Facebook messages or the transcriptions of photos, videos and link titles that were part of these messages. Since my interest is in candidate behavior, I exclude comments, reactions and shares from my analysis because these are not produced by political actors or parties. While I acknowledge that these can be meaningful components of campaign messages (Doucounos, Hillygus, Carlson, 2019), they are beyond the scope of this study. I also exclude live videos from my analysis. An initial screening of these live videos showed that these are often passively recorded events – such as debates or party gatherings. In my analysis of talk show appeals, I focus on written and spoken appeals made by party candidates only. This means that I will exclude appeals made by the talk show host(s), other guests or audiences. In addition, I will exclude non-verbal cues from my analysis. While non-verbal cues constitute an important part of political actors’ television performances (Druckman, 2003), an identification thereof requires a different empirical strategy than the one presented in this study. Finally, in my analysis of newspaper coverage, I focus on written appeals made by party candidates. Most typically, these are recognized by quotation marks or paraphrasing. This means that I will exclude appeals made by the author of the article (i.e. the journalist).

### **3.4. Operationalization of Variables**

In this section, I will explain how I operationalized my variables. In other words, I will explain how I defined my variables and how I measured them. This starts with an operationalization of my dependent variable – the tone of an appeal – whose variation I try to explain with the input of my independent variables.

### 3.4.1. *Dependent Variable*<sup>3</sup>

#### *Tone of Appeal.*

The dependent variable in this study is the tone of an appeal. Appeals are seen as mentions in which political actors either praise themselves or criticize their opponent. It is therefore operationalized as a binary classifier, meaning that an appeal is either negative, in which case it will be assigned a “1,” or positive, in which case it will be assigned a “0.” Negative appeals consist of any form of criticism leveled against opposing parties or political candidates, while positive appeals consist of any form of self-appraisal or acclaim. To clarify what constitutes an appeal and whether these appeals are negative or positive, consider the following examples:

Example 1: Party A: *‘We are truthful, clear and hardworking’.*

This statement contains three appeals. Namely, party A claims to be “truthful”, “clear”, and “hardworking”. All three appeals are forms of self-appraisal (rather than criticism against opponents) and will therefore be coded as positive appeals.

Example 2: Party B: *“Unlike Party A, we stand for equal opportunities”.*

This statement contains two appeals.: One the hand, Party B claims to “stand for equal opportunities” (1 positive appeal) but on the other hand it criticizes Party A for not doing so (1 negative appeal).

Example 3: Party X: *“Politician Y makes false promises. He is unable to create more jobs.”*

This statement contains two appeals: Party X criticizes politician Y for making false promises (first negative appeal) and his inability to deliver more jobs (second negative appeal).

The former examples are general examples of the tone of appeals. To test my hypotheses, I will also distinguish between two types of appeals: “trait appeals” and “issue-based appeals.” First, trait appeals refer to appeals about the characteristics of a political actor or party. This includes

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed description of the operationalization of my dependent variable, including more examples, I refer to Annemarie Walter’s codebook.

aspects of a political actors' personal life (i.e. marital situation, controversies), or the competence or integrity of a political actor or party in general. Consider the following examples:

Example 4: Party A: *"During these difficult times, we have shown real leadership."*

This statement contains a positive trait appeal: Party A acclaims to have shown real leadership; a "trait" shown by their party.

Example 5: Party B: *"Politician Z doesn't know how to make tough decisions; she is totally unfit for the job."* This statement contains two negative trait appeals: Party B criticizes politician Z for being unable to make tough decisions (first negative trait appeal) and questions her fitness for the job (second negative trait appeal).

Second, issue-based appeals refer to appeals about the policies and plans of a political actor or party. This includes appeals about how political actors or parties have handled certain policies or plans in the past, in the present or will handle in the future. Consider the following examples:

Example 6: Party X: *"We will improve our current healthcare system and make sure that nurses receive a decent salary."* This statement contains two positive issue-based appeals. Party X acclaims that they will improve the current healthcare system (first positive issue-based appeal) and acclaims that they will make sure that nurses receive a decent salary (second positive issue-based appeal).

Example 7: Party Y: *"The economy has come to a halt due to government cutbacks. People have lost their jobs because of this. We ensure that these people can return to work."* This statement contains two negative issued-based appeals and one positive issue-based appeal. Party Y criticizes the government's cutback because the economy has come to a halt (first negative issued-based appeal) and because people have lost their jobs because of this (second negative issue-based appeal). Lastly, party Y acclaims that they will ensure that these people can return to work (positive issue-based appeal).

### 3.4.2. Independent Variables

#### *Incumbency Status*

The first party characteristic that will be operationalized as an independent variable is the *incumbency status* of a political party. This independent variable indicates whether a party is in government or not. Following the same logic as the dependent variable, which either takes on the value of “1” or “0,” *incumbency status* is also operationalized as a binary classifier. If, at the time of the elections, a party is *not* in government, it will be assigned the value “1.” If a party *is* in government, it will be assigned the value “0.” An overview of parties’ incumbency status is displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2: Sample of Political Parties**

Parties	Party Family	Incumbency Status	Issue Ownership	Extremity <sup>4</sup> (1 – 10)	Poll Loss/Win
SP	Socialist	Opposition	Healthcare	1.27	-12%
GL	Green	Opposition	Environment	2.60	317.5%
PVDA	Socialist	Governing	Jobs	3.87	-70.53%
VVD	Liberal	Governing	Economy	7.87	-38.05%
PVV	Radical Right	Opposition	Immigration	9.27	58.67%
FVD	Radical Right	Opposition	NA	9.53	140%

#### *Poll Standing*

The second party characteristic that will be operationalized as an independent variable is a political party’s *poll standing*. This variable indicates whether political parties, compared to their actual number of seats in parliament, are winning or losing in the polls. However, we have to take some caveats into account when operationalizing this variable. First, there are several

<sup>4</sup> Ideological extremity ranges from 1 (far left) to 10 (far right)

pollsters with different predictions about political parties' position in the polls. Choosing one pollster over another thus introduces a bias. To prevent this, I sum up all poll results from the five best known research agencies and calculate the mean value<sup>5</sup>. A second caveat is that political parties' poll standings fluctuate over the course of the campaign. Picking a specific moment of observation in the campaign would therefore introduce another potential bias. To circumvent this, I add up all the observations of the predicted number of seats per party over the course of the 4-week campaign period and calculate the mean value for the entire period. Third, because parties differ in size, the predicted number of seats parties gain or lose in the polls are biased predictors, because these losses or gains appear larger for big parties and smaller for small parties. Therefore, I transform the loss of or gains in seats into percentages.

Example: the *PVV* had 15 seats in parliament and the predicted number of seats in the polls was, on average, 23.8. This is a positive difference of 8.8 seats; a 58.67% gain.

The last caveat is that not all parties in my sample have parliamentary experience. *FVD* had no prior seats in government. Therefore, we cannot calculate a loss or gain in terms of percentage points from 0. To solve this problem for *FVD*, I add a +1 to their previous seats in parliament as well as their predicted number of seats in the polls. The equation thus looks as follows: *FVD* had 0 (+1) seats in parliament and the predicted number of seats in the polls was, on average, 1.4 (+1). This is a positive difference of 1.4 seats (2.4 – 1); a 140% gain.

### *Ideological Extremity*

This variable indicates how 'extreme' a party is ideologically, either left or right. It was operationalized using the 2017 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). In this survey, experts ranked political parties in Western Europe in terms of their overall ideological extremity on a scale from

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<sup>5</sup> These are *Peil.nl*, *I&O Research*, *Kantar Public/TNS NIPO*, *Eenvandaag* and *Ipsos (Politieke Barometer)*.

0 to 10 with “0” standing for extreme left and “10” standing for extreme right. Subsequently, the ideological extremity of a party was operationalized as the deviation from the position of the ideologically *median* party in the Dutch parliament. According to the CHES, this happens to be the *Pensioners Party (50Plus)* with a score of 5.23 on the 0-to-10 scale. Thus, if we draw from Dutch political parties’ “extremity scores” as displayed in Table 2, these deviations can be expressed in numbers. The higher this number is, the more extreme a party is.

Example: *FVD* has been assigned a value of 9.53 in the CHES. Its deviation from the median party position is therefore  $9.53 - 5.23 = 4.30$ . *GL* has been assigned a value of 2.60 in the CHES. Its deviation from the median party position is therefore  $5.23 - 2.60 = 2.63$ . *FVD* is thus more extreme than *GL*.

### *Issue Ownership*

If an appeal is issue-based, this variable indicates whether the source of the appeal (i.e. the political party) is the owner of this issue. However, to measure issue ownership, we first need to establish what the issues are that the parties in my sample “own.” In other words, we need to establish which parties, according to Dutch voters, handle certain issue-related problems or concerns better than others (Petrocik, 1996; Budge & Farlie, 1983). To do this, I follow previous authors in using voter survey responses. I rely on survey responses from the Dutch component of the *Issue Competition Comparative Project (ICCP)*; a project that sought to map issue competition in party systems of six Western European countries, including the Netherlands (De Sio & Weber, 2017). In this survey, respondents were asked which party they trust the most to reach certain issue-related goals. If a respondent selected a party, a “1” would be assigned. If a respondent did not select a party, a “0” would be assigned. To determine parties’ ownership of issues, I rely on the survey questions about valence issues – these are issues about which there is

an absolute consensus (Stokes, 1963).<sup>6</sup> Because and compare parties' mean scores.<sup>7</sup> The party with the highest mean score will be coded as the "issue owner". Issue-ownership will then be operationalized as a binary classifier. If appeals are about the issue that a party owns it will be coded as "1" and otherwise as a "0". Table 2 displays the issues owned by the parties in my sample. All the parties, except for *FVD*, have been assigned ownership of an issue. This makes sense, because *FVD* was a new party during the 2017 General Elections and had not yet built up a reputation of handling some issue(s) better than other parties (Petrocik, 1996).

Example: In the ICCP survey, respondents were asked which party they thought was most credible to maintain the current economic growth. *VVD* had the highest mean value and will be considered the issue owner of economy-related issues.

#### *Control variable: New Party*

Although not of primary interest in my research design, a "control variable" will be added to my analysis. This means that this variable may have an effect on the explanatory power of my independent variables and should thus be controlled for. The control variable I add to my analysis is an indicator of whether a party is a new party or not. I add this variable to my analysis because new parties might behave differently than established parties (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010). It is operationalized as a binary indicator (1 = new party, 0 = not a new party). I only code a party as a "new party" if it has not yet entered the parliamentary arena. This means that, in my

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<sup>6</sup> For example: Reducing unemployment is a valence issue, since nobody wants to increase unemployment.

<sup>7</sup> Although most questions about valence issues in the ICCP survey are straightforward, the question about valence issue "Protecting the Netherlands against terrorist attacks" can be read in multiple ways. In other words, it could represent credibility in terms of reducing crime, establishing law and order, but also controlling (unwanted) immigration. I chose to operationalize this question as credibility in terms of matters related to immigration for two reasons. First, because the months leading up to the 2017 General Elections were characterized by a string of Islamic fundamentalist terrorist attacks against the backdrop of a global refugee crisis. Second, because the *PVV* has the highest mean score on this question, I looked at parties' scores on positional issues. The *PVV* exclusively scores the highest means on matters related to immigration, but not on issues related to law and order or reducing crime.

sample, I will assign a “1” to *FVD*, since the party had no parliamentary presence before the 2017 General Elections and a “0” to all other parties who do have parliamentary experience.

### *Summary Statistics*

Table 3 summarizes the variables I discussed and operationalized in this subsection and shows the number of appeals that were coded using the variables (N), the mean value and standard deviation of the variables, as well as their range (min-max).

**Table 3:** Summary Statistics

Variables	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min - Max
(DV) Tone of Appeal	1647	0.41	0.49	0 – 1
Opposition	1647	0.62*	0.49	0 – 1
Poll Standing	1647	55.89	134.82	-70.53 – 317.50
Ideological Extremity	1647	3.05	1.06	1.36 – 4.30
Issue Ownership	1184	0.16	0.37	0 – 1
New Party	1647	0.17	0.38	0 – 1

## 4. Results

In this chapter I turn to the empirical results of my study. In total, 1647 appeals were coded. 817 of these appeals appeared in Facebook posts, 518 in talk shows and 312 in newspaper articles. To test my hypotheses, I perform six logistic regressions. Table 4 shows these logistic regression models. First, let me explain something about my models. Logistic regressions are used to make predictive analyses about the outcome of a binary dependent variable, which in my study is whether an appeal is negative (=1) or positive (=0). To make those predictions, we use the independent variables in the left column as “predictors.” The advantage of such a model is that we can perform a multivariate analysis in which we can analyze the effect of predictor variables while holding all other relevant variables constant (*ceteris paribus*).

The coefficients in the rows of Table 4 show how my predictor variables affect the odds that an appeal is negative (=1) versus positive (=0) if a predictor variable changes by one unit. First, for my binary indicators (see Table 2), this one-unit change implies that we are comparing one group versus the other group. For example, *Opposition* (=1) shows the odds that opposition parties use negative appeals versus incumbent parties (=0). The one-unit change means something different for the variables that are not binary indicators: For *extremity*, the coefficient shows the odds of a negative appeal if we move 1 unit on the ideological extremity scale (1.36 – 4.30) and for *poll standing* the coefficient shows the odds of a negative appeal for every percent a party gains in the polls. The values of the coefficients express *log odds* which refer to the logarithm of odds. To simplify these values, we can exponentiate the coefficients to derive the *odds ratio*.

Consider the following example:

Example: In Model 1, the coefficient for *opposition* is 0.754. If we exponentiate this value we get  $\exp(0.754) = 2.13$ . Thus, holding all else equal, the odds that an opposition party uses a negative appeal are more than two times higher for opposition parties than

for incumbent parties.

The regression table shows six models. From left to right, the first two models show a general model of negative appeals, meaning that negative appeals include *all* criticism leveled against political opponents. The third and fourth model show only the negative appeals that include personal criticism (e.g. character traits, competence). Finally, the fifth and sixth model show only the issue-based negative appeals. To compare the odds ratio of negative appeals for all communication channels, the models alternate between reference categories. In models that are numbered with a “1” the reference category is Facebook and in models that are numbered “2” the reference category is talk shows<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> This means that in the “1” models the coefficients of *Talk shows* and *Newspapers* show the log odds of a negative appeal compared to *Facebook* (reference) and in the “2” models the coefficients of *Newspapers* and *Facebook* show the log odds of a negative appeal compared to *Talk Shows* (reference)

**Table 4: Logistic Regressions of Determinants of Negative Campaigning**

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>					
	Negative Appeal					
	General (1)	General (2)	Personal (1)	Personal (2)	Issue (1)	Issue (2)
Opposition	0.754** (0.281)	0.754** (0.281)	1.290** (0.432)	1.290** (0.432)	0.866+ (0.457)	0.866+ (0.457)
Poll Standing	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.003* (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)	-0.003** (0.001)
Extremity	-0.014 (0.114)	-0.014 (0.114)	-0.128 (0.166)	-0.128 (0.166)	-0.151 (0.192)	-0.151 (0.192)
Issue Ownership					-0.793*** (0.227)	-0.793*** (0.227)
Talk shows	0.482*** (0.123)		0.304 (0.204)		0.528** (0.203)	
Newspapers	0.318* (0.144)	-0.163 (0.146)	0.303 (0.246)	-0.001 (0.238)	0.326 (0.218)	-0.202 (0.227)
Facebook		-0.482*** (0.123)		-0.304 (0.204)		-0.528*** (0.203)
New Party	-0.087 (0.180)	-0.087 (0.180)	0.009 (0.293)	0.009 (0.293)	-0.279 (0.308)	-0.279 (0.308)
Constant	-0.823*** (0.239)	-0.341 (0.228)	-0.009 (0.363)	0.294 (0.330)	-0.699* (0.415)	-0.171 (0.397)
Observations	1,647	1,647	624	624	736	736
Log Likelihood	-1,094.071	-1,094.071	-412.039	-412.039	-449.762	-449.762
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,202.141	2,202.141	838.078	838.078	915.523	915.523

*Note:*

+p<0.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

#### 4.1. Context

My first set of hypotheses was related to the contextual determinants of negative campaigning. First, I hypothesized that opposition parties are more likely to use negative appeals than incumbent parties. Not only because incumbent parties have more to acclaim, but also because negative appeals are more costly for incumbents than for opposition parties. The general model confirms this hypothesis. Holding all else equal, the odds that an opposition party uses a negative appeal are more than twice as high than those of incumbent parties ( $p < 0.01$ ). If we focus on personal negative appeals specifically, the odds become even higher. The personal model shows that the odds that an opposition party uses a personal negative appeal are 3.6 times higher than for incumbent parties ( $p < 0.01$ ). Interestingly, the issue model shows that the odds of using issue-based negative appeals are not significantly higher for opposition parties than for incumbents.

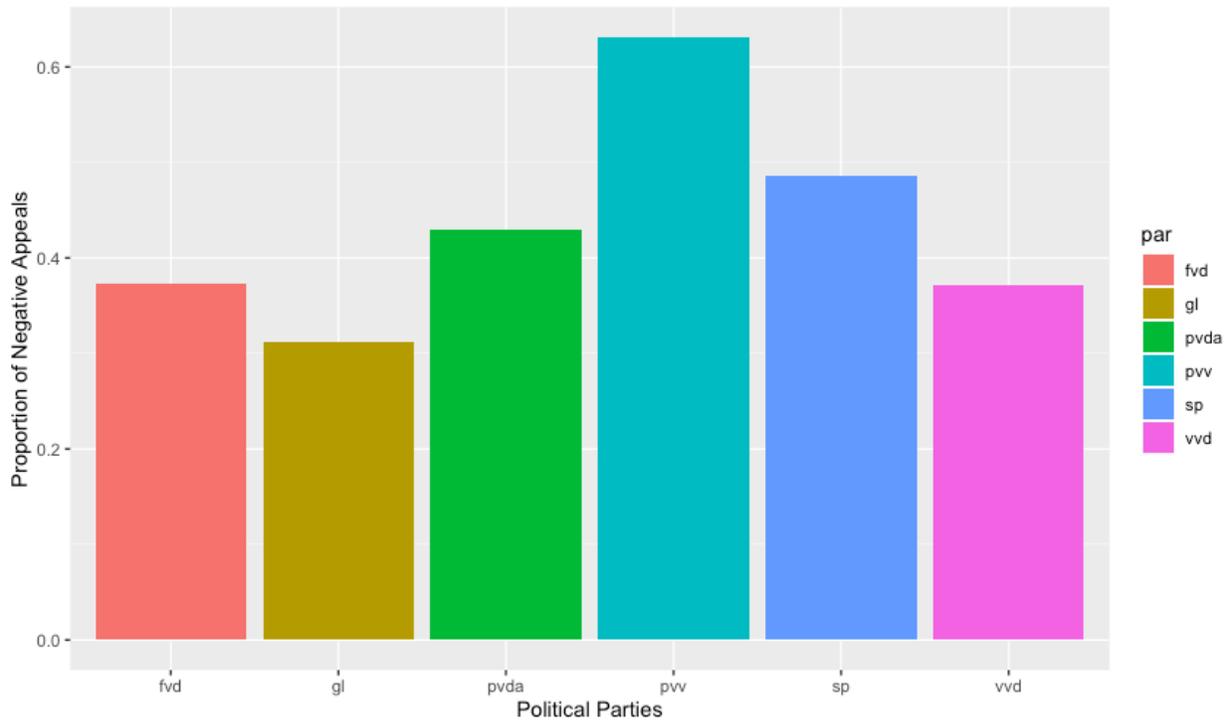
Second, I expected that a political party's standing in the polls could have an effect on the use of negative appeals. I hypothesized that parties losing in the polls were more likely to use negative appeals than parties who were winning in the polls. This hypothesis is confirmed in all my models and the coefficients remain constant across models. Holding all else equal, every 1% gain in the polls reduces the odds of using negative appeals by 0.003%. Although a small effect, it is highly significant in the general model ( $p < 0.001$ ) and significant in the personal model ( $p < 0.05$ ) and issue model ( $p < 0.01$ ) reduces the odds of a negative appeal. The value of the coefficient holds across models, meaning that a competitive standing in the polls is a determinant of the odds of both personal and issue-based attacks.

Third, I expected that the ideological extremity of a party could have an effect on the use of negative appeals. I hypothesized that the further a party was removed from the median party,

the odds of using negative versus positive appeals increased. None of my models confirm this hypothesis, as all my “extremity” coefficients are insignificant. Thus, according to my models, the odds of using negative appeals do not increase as parties become more extreme. This leads me to reject my third hypothesis.

The rejection of this hypothesis seems to be in line with Elmelund-Præstekær (2010), who concluded that there was no systematic effect of ideological extremity on the degree of negative appeals in the Danish party system. Interestingly, however, the rejection of my third hypothesis diverges from the findings of Walter et al. (2014) who also focus their attention on the Dutch party system and do find a significant effect of extremity on the degree of negative campaigning. The question then is why my results differ from theirs. We may find a clue in Figure 2, which shows a bar chart of the proportion of negative appeals across political parties. In line with my expectations, the more radical parties *PVV* (radical right) and *SP* (far left) are indeed the most negative campaigners amongst the parties. 63,1% of all the *PVV*'s appeals are negative, whereas 48,6% of the *SP*'s appeals are negative. However, we can also identify two “outliers” in this bar chart that may account for the rejection of my first hypothesis. First, new party *FVD*, although the most ideologically extreme amongst my sample of political parties, is actually the most positive campaigners (just 37,2 % of appeals are negative) after *GL* (31,2% of appeals are negative) of all parties in my sample. This highlights the importance of controlling for new parties in regression models, because the empirical results show that these parties behave do differently from established parties (Elmelund-Præstekær (2010)). A second outlier is the *PVDA*, which, in contrast to my expectations, behaved as quite an aggressive campaigner for an incumbent and moderate party (42,9% of all appeals are negative). This pattern seems to be in line with other studies of the 2017 Dutch General Elections that conclude that the PvdA did not

behave strategically during the 2017 campaign (Van Ditmars, Maggini, Van Spanje, 2020).



## 4.2. Content

Besides contextual determinants of negative campaigning, I also focused on the content of appeals. In the case of issue-based appeals, I hypothesized that issue-ownership is a determinant of negative campaigning. The issue model confirms this hypothesis. Holding all else equal, the odds that an appeal is negative are 55% lower if a party talks about an issue that they own than if they talk about an issue that they do not own ( $p < 0.001$ ). What this means, for example, is that a party like the *VVD* is indeed more likely to acclaim than to attack on economic issues, a party like *GL* is more likely to acclaim than to attack on environmental issues, and the *PVV* is more likely to acclaim than to attack on immigration-related issues. An exception in my sample is *FVD*, which, as a new party, naturally has not yet built up credibility in the eyes of the voters to handle certain issues better than other parties. Not all parties, however, are equally as strategic in their use of negative campaigning across issues. Table 5 shows parties' mean values of negative

appeals across owned issues and non-owned issues. Of all parties in my sample, *VVD* and *SP* used their issue ownership most strategically and acclaim more than they attack on owned issues. *GL* and *PvdA* only use slightly more positive appeals when talking about their owned issues. Interestingly, *PVV* is the only party in my sample that uses slightly more negative appeals on issues that they own; this raises an interesting question to what extent campaign strategies of the radical right differ from those of other parties.

**Table 5: Mean Values of Negative Campaigning Across Issues**

Parties	Owned Issue	Non-Owned Issue	+/-
SP	M = 0.27	M = 0.51	.24
GL	M = 0.21	M = 0.29	.08
PVDA	M = 0.31	M = 0.38	.07
VVD	M = 0.17	M = 0.36	.19
PVV	M = 0.67	M = 0.59	-.08
FVD	NA	M = 0.34	NA

### 4.3. Communication Channel

Finally, I hypothesized that negative appeals are far more likely to appear in newspapers and on talk shows than in Facebook posts, because negative appeals are far more efficacious in the former two communication channels. My general model supports this hypothesis. Compared to Facebook, the odds that an appeal is negative are both higher in newspapers and in talk shows. In newspapers, it is 37% more likely that an appeal will be negative compared to Facebook ( $p < 0.05$ ). In talk shows, it is even more likely that an appeal will be negative compared to Facebook (62%,  $p < 0.001$ ). These results give the impression that the efficacy of negative appeals does play an important role in political parties' campaign strategies. However, the efficacy

hypothesis does not seem to hold true for strictly personal negative appeals, where differences between communication channels are insignificant. Conversely, if we focus on just on issue-based appeals, the issue model shows that there is a significant difference between Facebook pages and talk shows. Holding all else equal, the odds that an issue-based appeal is negative are 69% higher for talk shows than for Facebook.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

While we know much about negative campaigning in the American context, we know far less about incentives to go negative in other political contexts such as multiparty systems. The aim of this study was to identify determinants of negative campaigning in the context of multiparty competition, paying attention not just to contextual factors that relate to the party system and parties, but also to the content of campaign messages and the communication channels through which they are disseminated. Through a case study of the Netherlands, an archetypical multiparty context, the results in this study help identify several determinants of negative campaigning in the context of multiparty competition. Starting with contextual factors, my study shows that two American hypotheses travel beyond the two-party system. First, a party's incumbency status is a determinant of negative campaigning: opposition parties are more likely to go negative than their incumbent counterparts. Not only because incumbent parties have more to acclaim, but also because the potential backlash effect of negative campaigning is smaller for opposition parties than for incumbent parties. Second, the further a party is behind in the polls, the more likely it becomes that they will resort to negative campaigning. This can be attributed to the increasing amount of risk a party is willing to take if they are trailing behind in the polls.

When it comes to the content of campaign messages, rational parties strategically emphasize those issues on which they are advantaged during campaigns. In this study, I have shown that, in addition to contextual factors, issue ownership is also a determinant of negative campaigning. Parties acclaim more about the issues that they own, because it becomes riskier to do the same for issues that come close to other parties' territory. Therefore, parties are more likely to use negative campaigning when talking about issues that they do not own.

Finally, this study shows that the medium matters: There are significant differences

between communication channels in terms of the degree of negative appeals we find among them. Negative appeals are significantly more common in newspapers and talk shows than on Facebook, because the larger audiences these mediums draw make political parties' negative appeals much more efficacious. An interesting side note is that issue-based appeals are far more likely on talk shows than on Facebook, which raises new questions about the extent to which the informative quality of negative campaigning varies across communication channels.

This study makes several contributions to the literature. In the first place, it strengthens our level of confidence about contextual determinants of negative campaigning in a multiparty context, showing that the incumbency status of a party as well as its position in the polls are not only determinants of the use of negative appeals in party broadcasts (Walter et al., 2014), election debates or newspaper coverage (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010) but also in the case of Facebook posts and political talk shows. Furthermore, this study adds new understanding to the ways in which parties strategically emphasize the issues on which they are advantaged. The results show that parties predominantly decide to go negative on issues that they do not own, while reserving acclaims for the issues that they do own. In addition, an important contribution of this study is the comparison of several communication channels. The significant differences that can be found between them should alert scholars that studies of single communication channels may lead to a biased understanding of negative campaigning.

There are several limitations to this study. Two limitations pertain to the case study itself: Since I only observed one election, there are limits to the conclusions we can draw about candidate behavior. The rejection of my third hypothesis – which states that the more ideologically extreme a party becomes, the more likely it is to resort to negative campaigning – is a prime example of this. The question, then, is, if more or less of my hypotheses can be

confirmed if we examine more election cycles. Second, due to a focus on the Netherlands only, we should be cautious not to generalize findings to other European multiparty systems. Future comparative work could address both of these limitations.

Furthermore, feasibility has put several constraints on the scope of my analysis. First, since the relationship between negative campaigning and political issues is undertheorized, I have adopted an exploratory operationalization of issue ownership as a binary indicator. One might argue, however, that this is a drastic oversimplification. Nonetheless, my results show an undeniable pattern between political issues and the tone of campaign messages. An interesting question that lies ahead is how exactly the strategic emphasis of issues interacts with the tone of appeals. Second, the results in this study yield new questions about how parties differ in their campaign strategies. A particularly interesting question for future research is if there is a relationship between party types and media preferences. Particularly the radical right parties in this study were largely absent from the political talk shows and while *FVD* avidly used Facebook posts, the *PVV* remained fairly passive. This question can therefore best be paired with an analysis of a wider set of communication channels.

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