

New Perspectives on Negative Campaigning: Why Attack Politics Matters

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Hardback, 424 pp, ISBN: 9781785521287, ECPR Press

The use of negativity in political campaigning is a highly contentious subject, with challenges in defining the level of negativity, its relative usage over time, its causes and effects. The classic empirical study *Going Negative* by Ansolabehere and Iyengar is somewhat dated and based on a single nation study. The field has therefore needed a more updated and comparative study and Nai and Walter's study is timely. This is particularly the case as commentators appear to constantly bemoan the increased reliance on attack advertising, not only from the current campaigns of Trump, Clinton and Sanders in the US but globally across recent elections and referenda.

The issues surrounding the study of negativity are usefully outlined at the start of the book, setting the scene for three discrete sections which focus on the definitions and measurement of negativity, the causes of going negative and the effects. Each of these sections begins with a thorough literature review which maps the empirical findings, the shortcomings of these works and subsequent gaps in knowledge. The volume also benefits from including a fifty page combined bibliography which in itself is a useful resource for researchers seeking to build a literature review of the field.

The first section places the research on negativity into a methodological context across four chapters. The baseline for definitions and measurement is Benoit's functional theory, presented in chapter two of the volume, which states campaign communication is designed to maximise votes. From this perspective we gain the sense of how negative campaigning is deployed, and how it involves presenting a critical perspective of the abilities, qualities, character or record of an opposing candidate or party. The subsequent three chapters focus on the methodologies of systematic content analysis, using expert judgements to measure campaign tone and basing tone predictions on message consonance. These chapters are useful guides for researchers, in particular the latter two which empirically demonstrate the utility of more innovative approaches. Cumulatively the section offers a context as well as highlighting the importance of making informed methodological choices when designing studies in this field, a lesson that applies to most political communication research.

The second section develops an understanding of the causes behind adopting negative communication across eight chapters. The opening literature review challenges the orthodoxy that all campaigns are becoming increasingly negative, demonstrating the importance of context. The discussion then develops over case studies encompassing elections in Austria, Brazil, Germany, Switzerland and Turkey from which a range of broad and specific causal factors emerge. The nuances in going negative are shown to correlate with systemic factors as well as ideology and the political style, gender and even personality of candidates. While highlighting differences and similarities in campaign tone, the chapters reinforce Benoit's meta-analysis that strategic decisions tend to override other factors as parties and candidates, independent of the system, election level, ideology or character, all seek the ultimate prize of political power.

The third section focuses on effects across five chapters. Within this section the literature review perhaps offers the most holistic understanding, given the breadth and range of studies and contexts it encompasses. The four empirical chapters do however offer some interesting insights, if not moving understanding forward. The first chapter uses experiments among US voters and demonstrates negative advertisements tend to increase recall but reduce the likelihood of information seeking and elaboration. The third chapter contrasts this perspective using real-time evaluations from voters recorded during leader debates in Germany. Here de Nooy and Maier show that partisan preference determines argument evaluation demonstrating the power of a long-held perspective that if a voter agrees with the attacker and the attack there is no significant impact beyond confirming their preference. The lack of non-aligned voters in the study undermines its ability to offer further insights. The final chapter, comparing voter responses to referenda campaigns in Ireland, shows further individual variances with older and more political knowledgeable voters more likely to recall positive messages although the authors show variance according to topic. The second chapter seems somewhat incongruent presenting a comparative study of media reports in New Zealand, the UK and US which find negative communication, nor a perception of a campaign as negative, receive no greater coverage suggesting media-reliant voters do not gain higher awareness of negativity.

The empirical chapters show negativity to be a strategic choice which can increase due to some contexts, systemic and candidate factors. The negative turn orthodoxy is challenged; rather an ebb and flow character is highlighted across and between campaigns. In order to better understand the nuances the editors conclude by calling for further comparative research, although a note of caution here would be that broad aggregates gained from such a study might mask the very nuances that each study exposes.

Overall, the volume represents a highly comprehensive review of the field enhanced by case studies which offer specific insights into how negativity is deployed and with what effect. The volume also offers a useful roadmap for the study of negativity and ways to determine likely effects. The least coverage is given to the measurement of effects and specifically developing a thorough understanding of what messages affect which voters in what ways. The paucity perhaps is indicative of the complexity of effect/affect research. However this is an important gap in the field. To really get to grips with debates on negativity a complex model is required, perhaps one which rigorously measures levels of negativity alongside voter preferences and choices, but which can also control for the myriad systemic and contextual factors which govern the strategy and outcome of an election. The volume sets the scene for such a project, mapping empirical findings and setting out indications that can be tested in future studies. As such it represents an invaluable guide for the study of negative campaigning.

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Book review: *New Perspectives on Negative Campaigning: Why Attack Politics Matters* NaiAlessandroWalterAnnemarie (eds), *New Perspectives on Negative Campaigning: Why Attack Politics Matters*, England, Colchester: ECPR Press, 2015; 424 pp.: ISBN: 9781785521287Â£65.00 (hbk). April 2018. *Party Politics* 24(4):135406881876897. DOI: 10.1177/1354068818768976. AuthorsÂ Book Review: *Church and Politics Today: The Role of the Church of England in Contemporary Politics*. May 1986 Â Theology. J. E. Powell.Â The results are consistent with expectations: campaigning and canvassing matters most where campaigning and canvassing should matter most. Read more. Article. Editorial Reviews. Review. 'The study of negative campaigning has mostly been about American elections. Refreshingly, the essays in this book look at what happens in other countries.Â John G Geer, Vanderbilt University 'Negative campaigning, where politicians attack rivals, is a ubiquitous phenomenon, such as Trump belittling his Republican Party adversaries. Mud-slinging in the US is widely blamed for polarising party politics and demobilising citizens, yet the use of this strategy elsewhere, and its full consequences, remain unclear.Â Annemarie Walter is a Marie Curie Fellow in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham. She received her PhD in 2012 from the University of Amsterdam.