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Negative campaigning in Western Europe: beyond the vote-seeking perspective

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Chapter 1:

Negative Campaigning in Western Europe: Similar or Different?

*This chapter is largely based on a manuscript of a journal article,
which is currently under review.*

Introduction

In recent years, election campaigns in Western Europe have changed rapidly (e.g. Farrell 2005; Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002; Mancini and Swanson 1996). Due to decreasing party loyalty among voters, the once stable electorate has become increasingly volatile (Drummond 2006). Where in the past political parties were able to win the elections by mobilizing their cleavage-based constituents, they are now confronted with undecided voters who make up their minds at a late stage of the campaign. As political parties grip on the electoral market has loosened, not only has the importance of election campaigns grown, but election campaigns have changed in character. According to many scholars campaigns have become more offensive, aiming not only to mobilize adherents, but also to convert undecided or even hostile voters (West 1995; Andeweg and Irwin 2009; Mair et al. 2004). As a consequence, election campaigns in Western Europe are undergoing a process of professionalization, by some referred to as 'Americanization' (Plasser and Plasser 2002; Scammell 1998). Political parties in Western Europe have turned to the United States context in search of new campaign techniques, strategies and tactics (Butler and Ranney 1992; Farrell 2005). One of these practices is *negative campaigning*.

The alleged rise in negative campaigning is a recurring theme in the media coverage and political commentary of recent election campaigns in Western Europe. Whenever a party or politician attacks his opponent, journalists and scholars speculate about an increase in negative campaigning and its consequences for democracy. This was for instance the case in the 2006 Dutch parliamentary election campaign, in which the Christian Democratic Party (CDA) waged a negative campaign against the Social Democratic (PvdA) party leader Wouter Bos, with quotes such as '*You are a flip flopper and dishonest.*'¹ Another example is the discussion in the media about the tone of the 2010 British parliamentary election campaign. Both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party attacked each other heavily during the campaign. As a case in point, Labour aired a harsh election broadcast warning voters that the budget cuts proposed by the Conservatives would hit families and cancer patients: '*The Conservatives would end your right to see a cancer specialist within two weeks of referral by your GP. The Tories don't want you to know what they would cut if they win on May 6th. There is only one way to protect your tax credit, your child trust fund and your right to see a cancer specialist within two weeks.*' A similarly harsh attack was waged by the Conservative Party, which used billboards with a photo of the Labour party leader Gordon Brown with subscripts

1 See newspaper articles such as Raoul du Pré and Philippe Remarque 'Rijmen met rechts', de Volkskrant, 2 September 2006; Philippe Remarque, 'Balkenende zoekt confrontatie met Bos', de Volkskrant 30 October 2006; Mark Kranenburg 'Balkenende bellen voor het slapen gaan', NRC Handelsblad, 8 December 2007.

such as ‘*I took billions from pensions, vote for me*’ and ‘*I doubled the national debt, vote for me*’.²

This raises the question of whether we are experiencing a growth in ‘American practices’ in Western Europe and whether this is an undesirable development. The latter question is understandable as numerous U.S. studies point out the possible corrosive effects of negative campaigning for democracy. Negative campaigning is said to lower turnout, decrease political efficacy, depress the public ‘mood’ and increase political cynicism (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995).³ My thesis does not deal with questions about the *consequences* of negative campaigning, nor does it address normative issues or aim to pass moral judgment on politicians who wage a negative campaign. Rather it focuses on descriptions and explanations of the phenomenon in three Western European democracies: The Netherlands, Germany and the UK.

Despite the reoccurring focus on the perceived increase in negative campaigning in Western Europe, research in the field of negative campaigning focuses primarily on the case of the United States and research that goes beyond this scope consists mostly of single country studies that cover one or two elections (e.g. Holtz-Bacha 2001; van Heerde-Hudson 2011; Elmelund -Præstekær 2008, 2009, 2010; Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Schweitzer 2010; Walter and Vliegthart 2010).⁴ This makes a comparative study of negative campaigning in Western Europe highly relevant for scholars, both in terms of scientific and social value.

This thesis provides one of the first comparative studies and the most extensive study conducted so far on negative campaigning in Western Europe. It contributes to the existing field of negative campaigning in several ways. First of all, it addresses the need for comparative work on negative campaigning. The current emphasis on the United States has led to a one-sided development of the theory on negative campaigning, namely the use of negative campaigning in a presidential two-party system. Comparative work will provide scholars with an enhanced understanding of the conditions that foster and shape negative campaigning. This study seeks to contribute by examining whether negative campaigning is a typical ‘American’ phenomenon or is also common practice in Western Europe. Furthermore, it adds to the field by investigating whether or not there are systematic differences across countries; indicating that characteristics of the political system and in particular the party system affect the level and nature of negative cam-

2 See newspaper articles such as ‘Tories’ Poster War on Brown’, 29 March 2010; ‘Negative Campaigning in Spotlight’, 30 April 2010.

3 See Lau et al. 2007 for an overview of the work on the effects of negative campaigning.

4 Notable exceptions are two papers that have not yet been published. The first is a working paper of Desposato (2008) that develops a game theory model on the basis of several Latin American countries. The second is a conference paper by Salmond (2011) that examines among other characteristics the tone of YouTube ads in the twelve most recent elections in twelve different countries.

paigning. Finally, this study contributes to the discussion among politicians, journalists and scholars on the ‘increasing’ use of negative campaigning in Western Europe and its possible detrimental effects on democracy, by examining the empirical evidence to see if such a rise exists.

This research examines the use of negative campaigning by 31 political parties in 23 parliamentary election campaigns in the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands between 1980 and 2006.⁵ The practice of this campaign strategy is not only studied across several countries, but also over an extensive time period. One of the strengths of this study is that it makes use of data collected for this specific study instead of combining several existing data sources (see for instance Carlson 2001), thereby increasing the validity of the study. An extensive process of data collection and systematic content analysis of all party election broadcasts of all national political parties represented in the Lower House of Parliament and the main televised election debates in these election campaigns forms the basis of this study. Furthermore, as the method of content analysis is based on Geer (2006) an indirect comparison with the United States is possible.

Before further outlining the full content of this thesis, this introductory chapter will introduce the central concept of this study, namely negative campaigning. It will discuss the theoretical reasons to expect a rise in the use of this campaign strategy in Western Europe and it introduces the main debates in the field. Furthermore, it will present a descriptive study on negative campaigning in Western Europe that serves as basis for the questions asked and examined in the following empirical chapters. The descriptive analyses in this introductory chapter set out to answer three research questions: is there a rise in negative campaigning in Western Europe? Do the levels and characteristics of negative campaigning in Western Europe differ from those in the United States? Are there systematic differences between countries and how can these possibly be explained?

The structure of this introductory chapter is as follows: first of all the concept of ‘negative campaigning’ is clarified and the context that is said to have generated an increase in negative campaigning in Western Europe is described, followed by a theoretical explanation of why systematic differences in level and characteristics of negative campaigning between countries can be expected. Second, the case selection and data collection will be explained before presenting the empirical results. Finally, we will discuss the implications of the findings, the questions that arise and the avenues of further research pursued in this thesis.

5 Chapter two and three that examine negative campaigning in the Dutch multiparty system contain models that also include data for the most recent 2010 Dutch election. These data are not used in the current chapter as we do not have data for the most recent British and German elections. Including these data in cross country comparative analyses would lead to incomparability of the results.

Defining Negative Campaigning

Defining negative campaigning is a difficult exercise as different definitions are used among different groups of people and also within the academic community (Swint, 1998: 49; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991: 9). As a result, journalists, politicians, political consultants, voters and scholars often fail to understand each other when discussing negative campaigning. According to Surlin and Gordon (1977) the majority of voters see negative campaigning as any attack towards the opponent. This is one of the definitions of negative campaigning, namely any criticism directed at one's opponent is an attack (e.g. Surlin and Gordon 1977; Lau and Pomper 2004; Geer 2006). The opposite of negative campaigning is positive campaigning, which is constituted by self-praise and promotion. This directional definition of negative campaigning is different from the way the term 'negative campaigning' is often used in public debate, namely when criticism or attacks on the opponent are considered to be 'unfair' (Kahn and Kenney 1999). Such a definition however, immediately raises the tricky question of what makes an attack 'unfair'? Voters are inclined to see attacks on a candidate's personal characteristics as less legitimate than an attack on his policies (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1989; Shapiro and Rieger 1992). However, research also shows that even after a campaign has finished, voters do not agree on whether or not it was a negative campaign (Sigelman and Kugler 2003). Their assessment of negativity is biased by (among other factors) their support for their own candidate (Brooks 1997).

According to Swint (1998), consultants, politicians and campaign workers have a different perspective on what constitutes negative campaigning than most voters. The majority of them considers a campaign message to be negative only if it contains information that is untruthful, deceptive or irrelevant to the campaign, regardless of whether these are issue or trait attacks (Swint 1998). As Swint (1998: 50) argues, political consultants recoil in horror at the suggestion that voters consider any criticism of the opponent a form of 'negative campaigning'. Consultants and candidates usually argue that criticizing the opponent is a justifiable and legitimate campaign practice and they do not want this to be labelled as 'negative'. Some scholars in the field of negative campaigning agree with the definition of the concept employed by the practitioners in the field. This evaluative definition does not consider all criticism directed at an opponent as being negative, but only those critiques that can be considered unfair, illegitimate and dishonest and deal with trivial issues (e.g. Jamieson 1992; Mayer 1996).

In this thesis I follow Surlin and Gordon's definition (1977), which describes negative campaigning as consisting of any criticism directed at one's opponent. This directional definition is employed by most scholars conducting quantitative studies of negative campaigning. This definition has a number of benefits. Firstly, it avoids subjective judgments, such as to whether a campaign is misleading, manipulative or illegitimate. The evaluative definition leaves the assessment of what is negative in the eye of the beholder, and this in turn is dependent on current political norms (Mark 2006). Consequently, such a definition jeopardizes validity and reliability when measuring

negative campaigning. Secondly, the directional definition does not blur the distinction between negative and positive campaigning, as the evaluative definition does. Dishonesty and triviality are not exclusive to negative campaigning, as one can easily imagine positive campaign strategies that stretch the 'truth' (e.g. Geer 2006; Jamieson 1992). In this dissertation negative campaigning is regarded as all criticism towards the opponent, as this comparative study is in need of a concept of negative campaigning that is independent of place and time. Furthermore, as we do not enter into the ethical discussion of whether or not attack behaviour is legitimate, the directional definition of negative campaigning is sufficient for our purposes. We distinguish between two types of negative campaigning, namely trait and issue attacks. Issue attacks refer to criticizing the plans or policies of an opposing party or candidate. Trait attacks refer to criticizing the traits of an opposing party or candidate, i.e. his integrity or competence.

Even though consultants, campaign managers and scholars do not always agree about the definition of negative campaigning, they do agree that it can be understood as a strategy to win voters (Kavanagh 1995; Mancini and Swanson 1996). Negative campaigning is aimed at diminishing the positive feelings voters might have for an opponent, thereby winning the undecided or even hostile voter, in contrast to positive campaigning that is thought only to strengthen the loyalty of a party's supporters (Skaperdas and Grofman 1995; Doron and On, 1983).

Positive and negative campaigning can be connected to two theoretical approaches in the party competition literature: The saliency and valence approach (Budge and Farlie 1983b) and the confrontational approach (Laver and Hunt 1992). According to the saliency and valence approach parties emphasize issues on which they have an issue advantage and their opponents are less well regarded. This selective emphasis of issues leads to issue ownership. The alternative to this approach is the confrontational approach to policy and involves parties declaring competing positions on the same issue. In the way in which we define negative and positive campaigning, positive campaigning consists of the types of appeals parties make to their voters, which are implied by the saliency and valence approach. Negative campaigning in this conceptualization links up more clearly with a confrontational approach (See Damore 2002; Elmelund-Præstæker 2010). Which of these two strategies prevails, is an empirical question.

The 'rise' of negative campaigning

In this introductory chapter, I will present in a rather descriptive manner some first empirical results, which mainly pertain to the question of whether there is a rise in negative campaigning. What might be expected on the basis of the relevant literature? Several scholars (e.g. Benoit 1999; Geer 2006; Abbe et al. 2001) argue that with the alteration of the electoral market and professionalization of election campaigns, the level of negative campaigning in U.S. presidential and congressional election campaigns, has risen

considerably over time.⁶ The growth of negative campaigning in the United States is strengthened by the common belief among practitioners and even the harshest critics of negative campaigning, that it is a campaign practice that works. Despite the fact that substantive evidence is lacking, negative campaigning is regarded as key to electoral success and a candidate that wants to win the elections cannot refrain from attacking its opponent (Lau and Pomper 2004: 2; Lau and Sigelman, 2000: 13). Furthermore, as most political consultants agree that the best way to respond to an attack is to counterattack, the practice of negative campaigning seems to be self-perpetuating (Swint 1998; Iyengar and McGrady 2007). Similar to U.S. candidates political parties in Western Europe are dealing with increased electoral volatility. Among other reactions, political parties in Western Europe can respond to the unstable electoral market by redefining their relationships with their competitors. As a result, parties may decide to run a more offensive campaign and concentrate on targeting their opponents (Mair et al. 2004). We formulate the following hypothesis:

Negativity Hypothesis (H1): The level of negative campaigning has increased in Western Europe between 1980 and 2006.

The on-going debate on attack behaviour and its desirability for democracy not only focuses on the overall tone of the campaign but also on its content. Perhaps the single biggest concern about negative campaigning is the use of trait or character attacks (Swint 1998; Geer 2006). Trait attacks are more often considered illegitimate than issue attacks (Swint 1998; Lau and Pomper 2004; Benoit et al. 2003; Geer 2006). Critics are concerned that the focus on politicians' traits comes at the cost of discussing the issues at stake in the particular election. Rational voting behaviour is regarded as crucial for democracy, yet in order to vote rationally voters must first be provided with information about different parties' stands on the campaign issues (Johnston and Kaid 2002; Geer 2006). U.S. politics is candidate centred and this becomes especially apparent in election campaigns in which they focus more on the candidate himself, than the candidate as a representative of the political party (Newman 1994; Dalton et al. 2000). As a result, U.S. campaigns are associated with trait attacks. As attack behaviour is perceived to be on the rise, so are trait attacks. Especially since the decline of party identification led to an even greater focus on politicians in the U.S. (Dalton et al. 2000; Newman 1994). However, strong evidence for a rise in trait attacks in American election campaigns is lacking. Geer (2006: 145) concludes that the personalization of politics has not worked

6 Notable exceptions are Buell and Sigelman (2009) and Lau and Pomper (2004). Buell and Sigelman (2009) claim that U.S. presidential election campaigns have not become more negative since 1960. In addition, Lau and Pomper (2004) do not see a systematic trend in negative campaigning in U.S. Senate election campaigns since 1992-2000.

its way into presidential advertising. Benoit (1999) and West (2005) even state that there has been a persistent trend towards more reliance on policy attacks than character attacks in campaign ads.

Parliamentary democracies in Western Europe are currently witnessing a process of increased presidentialization or personalization (Holtz-Bacha and Kaid 2006; Mughan 2000; Farrell 2005; Poguntke and Webb 2005). This increased focus on party leaders in parliamentary systems, is the result of decreasing party loyalty and the changing role of the media (McAllistar 1996; McAllistar 2007; Banducci and Karp 2000; Dalton et al. 2000). The modernization of political communication seems to have contributed to increasing personalization and parties themselves increasingly choose to tailor their campaigns to the media's demands and project themselves through the personalities of their leaders (Dalton et al. 2000; Mughan 2000). These current developments make it likely that Western Europe will not only witness an increase in negative campaigning, but also a specific increase in attacks on the opponent's traits. We would like to introduce a theoretical distinction between trait attacks in general and trait attacks targeted at a politician. Where in the U.S. trait attacks are almost automatically linked to targeting a candidate, this is not the case in Western Europe. Next to individual politicians, parties are also attacked on their traits. To illustrate, voters displayed in a Liberal Democrat ad of the 2005 election campaign said: *'I feel Labour has lied, and they've gone against their promises' (...)* *'I don't think Tony Blair or Michael Howard can be trusted'*. The first quote is constituted of two trait attacks on the trustworthiness of the Labour Party and the second quote contains two trait attacks on the trustworthiness of Labour party leader Tony Blair and Conservative party leader Michael Howard. Consequently, trait attacks can be defined in several ways. First of all, one can take all trait attacks together regardless of whether they are aimed at parties or individual politicians. Second, one can consider trait attacks as solely attacks on traits of individual politicians. We expect an increase in both types of trait attacks, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Personalization Hypothesis (H2): The level of trait attacks has increased in Western Europe between 1980 and 2006.

Though we strive to measure the rise of negative campaigning in Western Europe, it must be mentioned that one should not regard negative campaigning as a new phenomenon. The tactic of attacking the opponent is as old as politics itself. As Schattschneider (1960: 2) states *'At the root of all politics is the universal language of conflict'*. Conflict is thus inherent to the nature of politics. After all, how can voters vote if they are unaware of what parties and/or candidates stand for? It is necessary for the differences between parties to be explained, and therefore a certain level of negative campaigning will always be present in election campaigns. However it might be that recent developments have made parties' need to distinguish themselves from their opponents increasingly more necessary. As a result, the use of negative campaigning might have risen to unknown heights and/or altered the nature of these attacks.

Party System and Negative Campaigning

Under the influence of the professionalization of election campaigns, negative campaigning is thought to have become a common practice in Western Europe. However, we do not expect that the level and characteristics of negative campaigning will be similar across Western European countries or similar to the United States. From the campaign literature we know that four general characteristics of the political system affect the characteristics of election campaigns; the institutional structure, the electoral system, the party system and the media system (Bowler and Farrell 1992; Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002; Farrell 2005). Various political system characteristics can therefore affect the practice of negative campaigning. The limited number of countries in our study prevents a statistical analysis of the influence of these characteristics on negative campaigning. However, we have a strong theoretical basis for expecting the type of party system to affect the likelihood of negative campaigning, which is why we elaborate on this aspect here. At the same time, we do not claim that other characteristics are of no or lesser importance for understanding the phenomenon of negative campaigning across countries.

Most studies examining the use of negative campaigning assume that candidates or parties are rational actors that engage in a cost benefit analysis before deciding whether to make use of negative campaigning (e.g. Lau and Pomper 2004; Riker 1996). When the expected benefits outweigh the (potential) costs, parties will decide to make use of negative campaigning in an election campaign. However, these decisions are not made in a political vacuum, the cost benefit analysis that parties make is not only affected by the features of the particular election they compete in (such as closeness of the race, type of election) but also the characteristics of the political system. This latter aspect has been neglected due to the absence of comparative work. Several non-U.S. single country studies on negative campaigning (e.g. Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Elmelund-Præstekær 2008, 2010) suggest that practicing negative campaigning in a multiparty system is different than in a two-party system, thereby indicating the importance of this political system characteristic for the study of negative campaigning across countries.⁷ The party system is especially important if one aims to understand negative campaigning in Western Europe as most continental European countries have a party system characterized by multiple

7 Salmond (2011) suggests that it is the electoral system and not the party system that causes these differences in the level of negative campaigning across countries. We acknowledge that these two system characteristics are related, however the causal order between the electoral system and the party system is debatable (e.g. Benoit 2007). In addition, there are exceptions on Duverger's law, such as one of the countries studied, i.e. the Netherlands. The Netherlands has always been a multiparty system regardless of its electoral system (Andeweg and Irwin 2009). However, we argue that although the party system might be caused by the electoral system, it is in practice the number of parties and the need of coalition government that matters for the level of negative campaigning.

parties and coalition governments (Hobolt and Karp 2010). The party system in which parties operate affects the cost benefit structure of making use of negative campaigning. In a two party system attacking parties solely fear so-called backlash or boomerang effects. Negative campaigning can cause negative feelings towards the attacker instead of the targeted party or candidate (Johnson-Cartee et al. 1991; Garamone 1984). Besides the potential risk of losing voters negative campaigning can certainly help a party to win a race. In a two party system negative campaigning is beneficial when voters turn away from the opponent, thereby making the attacking party the largest player in the field. Although desirable it is not a necessity to win those voters to gain the upper hand in an election, a party already wins if the opponent's voters decide not to go to the ballot box.

In a multiparty system parties face a different cost-benefit structure when deciding whether to go negative, this is the result of two main differences between a two party system and a multiparty system. First of all, multiparty competition provides a party with many more potential opponents. This larger number of competitors affects the expected benefits of negative campaigning. It increases the uncertainty of acquiring the benefits of attack behaviour as voters have a much broader range of parties to choose from. Voters that turn away from their party as a result of negative campaigning are not necessarily won by the attacking party as they might decide to vote for another party (Elmelund-Præstekær 2008). As a result, an unintended consequence of negative campaigning might be that it contributes to the success of another party than one's own.

The second difference is the need to form a coalition government after the elections and this affects the costs of negative campaigning. Parties that make use of negative campaigning not only face electoral backlash effects, but also potential coalition bargaining costs in a multiparty system (e.g. Brants et al. 1982; Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Elmelund-Præstekær 2010). A campaign which is too aggressive, rough and negative, may damage the opportunity to govern together (e.g. Brants et al. 1982; Sjöblom 1968; Holtz-Bacha and Kaid, 2006: 6). Therefore, negative campaigning within multiparty competition brings out a trade-off between the different goals that parties pursue. Within a two party system parties can concentrate on vote-seeking behaviour as a majority of votes enables them to achieve office and implement policy. In contrast, parties operating within a multiparty system have to carefully balance their vote-, office- and policy-seeking objectives as obtaining the most parliamentary seats does not automatically translate into government office or policy influence (Strøm and Müller 1999). Consequently, due to the absence of a clear connection between winning votes and obtaining office in a multiparty system attack behaviour might not always be beneficial.

Overall, parties in a multiparty system thus face a different cost-benefit structure than parties in a two party system. As a result of the different cost-benefit structure we expect that parties in a two party system will be more inclined to make use of negative campaigning than parties in a multiparty system.

Party System Hypothesis (H3): The level of negative campaigning is higher in a two-party system than in a multiparty system

Case Selection, Data and Coding Procedure

For this study we measured negative campaigning on the basis of content analysis of campaign material of political parties in 23 British, Dutch and German parliamentary election campaigns between 1980 and 2006. This time period is selected as negative campaigning is considered to be a recent development in Western Europe and it is around this time that parties started to invest in the professionalization of election campaigns (Farrell and Webb 2000; Mair et al. 2004). Furthermore, we have chosen to study multiple elections in three countries instead of single elections in a larger number of countries. The multiple time periods are needed to be able to speak of a change in the use of negative campaigning.⁸ The Western European countries that we compare with each other and with the United States are the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands. These Western European countries are all established parliamentary democracies with election campaigns that have become more candidate-focused, but in their fundamentals remain party coated. In addition, their election campaigns are increasingly led by campaign professionals (Farrell 2005). Among these countries we find substantial variation between the party systems, and we expect this to be among the main factors affecting the use and characteristics of negative campaigning. The Netherlands and Germany have a multiparty system and Great Britain a two party system. We examine the parliamentary elections, which are the first-order elections for these West European countries. First order elections are elections in the main political arena of the country (Reif 1985). In the U.S. the presidential elections are the first order elections and it is especially these election campaigns that serve as a source of inspiration for political parties in Western Europe (more so than the congressional election campaigns). We restrict the data collection to campaign material from national political parties represented in the Lower House of Parliament in each of these countries within this time period. As a result, regional political parties, such as the Scottish National Party (SNP), Plaid Cymru and Sinn Féin, are not included.

Western European parliamentary election campaigns are relatively short in comparison to U.S. presidential campaigns and last approximately four weeks (Crewe and Gosschalk 1995; Brants, et al. 1982). We determine the degree of negative campaigning on the basis of party election broadcasts and televised election debates. Party election broadcasts are completely controlled and officially approved by the party leadership and therefore provide a reliable source to measure party or candidate behaviour. In addition, U.S. research on negative campaigning is primarily based on television ads and we wish to make a valid comparison with Geer's data (Geer 2006). We acknowledge that negative campaigning is not restricted to television ads and that ads may not have such a promi-

8 A longer period would preferably have been studied, however, pre-1980 campaign material is not available for all three countries in a systematic way.

ment role in all Western European election campaigns as in the United States, as political parties in Western Europe often deal with more restrictive rules when it comes to purchasing advertising time and have fewer funds to buy them (Holtz-Bacha and Kaid 2006; Van Praag, 2005). Therefore we complement the party election broadcasts with televised election debates. In countries in which party election broadcasts play a minor role, election debates have a more prominent place in the election campaigns. Although election debates are a semi controlled source, as the moderator steers the discussion with his questions, the party leader is still present and in control of what he says and therefore they serve as a good indicator of party and/or candidate behaviour. Nevertheless, as politicians are directly confronted with their opponent the overall level of negative campaigning can be expected to be higher in election debates than party election broadcast ads.

In order to ensure comparability between the West European countries, we include only party election broadcasts that are aired during allocated free broadcasting time. In the United Kingdom, the purchase of commercial airtime is prohibited, while in Germany and the Netherlands airtime is available and can be bought. In Germany, it has been possible to purchase airtime on commercial television since 1989 and in the Netherlands on both commercial as well as public television since 1998 (Holtz-Bacha 2000; Holtz-Bacha and Kaid 2006). While purchasing air time is allowed in the Netherlands, it is still not a widespread practice (Van Praag 2007). This being said, in all three countries free broadcasting time is granted on public television channels and in the United Kingdom also on the commercial channels (Holtz-Bacha and Kaid, 2006: 10). In these three countries there are no legal restrictions on the content of the political advertisement, the only requirement is that they fit the provided broadcast time. As the main bulk of the party election broadcasts are taped before the election campaign, the data source reflects in general the party strategy at the beginning of the campaign. In total 377 party election broadcasts were collected on tape or as transcripts from various public and private archives (see Table A.1., A.2. and A.3.).

Televised election debates are traditionally part of the German and Dutch campaign culture, but not of the British. Until the recent 2010 British elections, no televised election debate was ever held, as parties were always unable to agree on the terms under which it would be conducted (Mitchell 2000; Tait 1998). In Germany, there were televised election debates in which the main representatives from all parties represented in the Bundestag participated, between 1969 and 1987. These debates are known as the Elephant rounds and were held three days before the elections (Maurer and Reinemann 2003). For some time after 1987 these election debates took place after the elections and therefore they are not included in our study. Since 2002, debates between the two main political party leaders have also been held. In the Netherlands, televised election debates have been aired on the public broadcast channels since 1963 and on the commercial broadcast channels since 1994. Although various election debates always take place, two main debates occur during every election campaign; the public election debate between the main party leaders on the evening before Election Day and the election debate between the main party

leaders on the commercial channel. In total 19 televised election debates were collected on tape or as transcripts from various public and private archives (see Table A.4. and A.5.). Negative campaigning in the debates is measured by looking at:

- The number of negative (any criticism against the opposition) appeals made in comparison to the total number of appeals. The latter is the sum of positive and negative appeals, where positive appeals consist of any self-praise of the party or politician
- The content of positive and negative appeals (are they issue or trait attacks)
- The target of the appeals (positive appeals are always directed at the politician or its party, negative appeals can be directed at the status quo, the government, the opposition, a specific opposing political party, a specific opposing politician, a cluster of opposing political parties or politicians)

The coding scheme will be illustrated by a quote from Hans Janmaat party leader of the Dutch right-wing extremist party Centre Democrats in his party election broadcast of 1989. *‘The Christian Democrats are only interested in money and power. For that Lubbers (CDA party leader- author) will sell his own mother to the devil. He will start by privatizing state companies and immerse the Netherlands in an uncertain Europe’ (...)* *‘We fight for our own society. We want to rescue the Netherlands. We want to point out to our youth the dangers of mixed racial marriages.’* The first three sentences of this quote are coded as negative campaigning, in which the party CDA is attacked twice on its integrity, the party leader Lubbers is attacked on his integrity and then the party leader is attacked twice on his proposed policies with respect to the economy and the European Union (five negative appeals). The three following sentences are coded as positive campaigning; they would be coded as three appeals of self-praise of the Centre Democrats on immigration policy.

The transcripts of campaign broadcasts serve as the basis for analysis.⁹ The unit of analysis is a natural speaking unit, i.e. the appeal, which is any mention of self-praise or criticism of the opponent. The complete ad is not the unit of analysis as ads often contain both positive as well as negative campaign messages (Benoit et al. 2003; Geer, 2006). The same applies to sentences, which often contain more than one appeal. The coding method is based on the procedure developed by Geer (2006). Negative campaigning is measured by looking at only explicit and visible manifestations, i.e. manifestations the voter can see are taken into account. One of the main advantages of Geer’s method (2006) is that it is applicable beyond ads and can also be used to examine negative campaigning in election debates. In addition, using Geer’s method enables us to make comparisons with his data on the United States.

The content analysis is executed by a group of native speaking (post) graduate students. Geer’s coding method (2006) proved to be reliable both within and across

9 From all the televised party election broadcasts and debates transcripts were made if they did not yet exist.

countries. The most difficult coding category was to determine the unit of analysis, i.e. what does or does not constitute an appeal and whether a text segment consists of one or multiple appeals. The inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff's Alpha) was 0.66 for selecting the unit of analysis. For the tone (negative versus positive), kind of appeal (issue or trait) and its target (status quo, government, party, cluster of parties, politician, cluster of politicians) Krippendorff's Alpha was 0.97, 0.69 and 0.82 respectively.¹⁰ In total 15988 appeals were generated, 8931 appeals from the party election broadcasts and 7057 appeals from election debates. Geer's data (2006) from his book *'In Defense of Negativity'* will be used to compare our data with the United States. He coded a total of 795 ads for the period 1960-2000 which resulted in 5414 appeals; we only make use of the data from the period 1980-2000 which is based on 514 spots.

As we lack complete records on how many times each party election broadcast was aired, where exactly and what the audience size of all election debates and party election broadcasts was, we are unable to perform frequency-weighted or rate weighted analysis (Prior 2001). However, we do know that all these party election broadcasts and election debates were aired. Instead the data is weighted in two separate steps. First of all, as the number of appeals varies greatly across parties in an election campaign (partly due to the different number of ads produced by the parties) and we want to prevent a party with more appeals influencing the overall campaign image more than a party with less appeals, we weigh the party election combinations equally. Second, we acknowledge that not all parties affect the overall campaign image equally, namely large parties are more important for the overall image than small parties. As a result, we have weighted the data in the second step on the basis of party size measured on the basis of the election results.¹¹ To estimate whether there are country differences in the level of negative campaigning and whether there is an increasing trend over time, we run several logistic regression models with heteroskedastic errors. As the appeals are not independent from the party and the election, we cluster on the party election combinations. Three dichotomous dependent variables are estimated in the models.

10 The intercoderreliability (Krippendorff's Alpha) inside the three countries for the unit of analysis, tone, kind of appeal and target was respectively, 0.77, 0.92, 0.83 and 0.92 for the Netherlands.

For Germany the intercoderreliability was for the same categories in the same order 0.71, 0.97, 0.81 and 0.94. For Britain the intercoderreliability was 0.68, 0.94, 0.68 and 0.76.

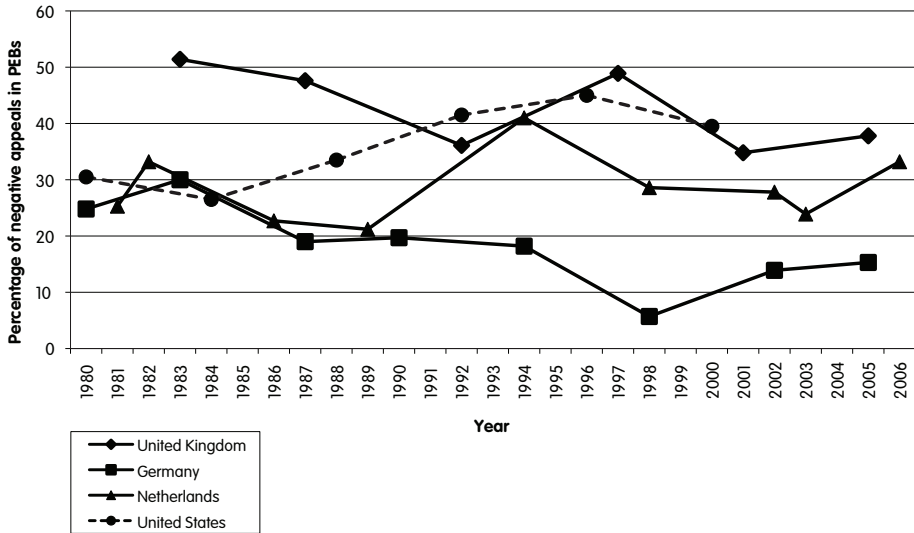
11 We have not weighted the data on the basis of party size in a linear manner, but have taken the square root of the party size. This ensures that larger parties weight more heavily on the results than smaller ones, but that the results are not fully dominated by the larger parties. There is also an argument from inferential statistics to weight parties in this manner. Smaller parties have fewer members of parliament (MP's). Since the standard error of estimates is a function of the square root of the sample size, we also weigh the parties by the square root of the proportion of number of MP's, so that our sample follows the sampling distribution when we interpret the sample to reflect the composition of the parliament.

First of all Tone (0=Positive; 1=Negative), Trait Attack (0=No; 1=Yes) and Trait Attacks Targeted At Politicians (0=No; 1=Yes). The independent variables incorporated are first of all country dummies. For these country dummies the Netherlands is the reference category. In addition, we incorporate interactions between the country dummies and the time variable.

Results

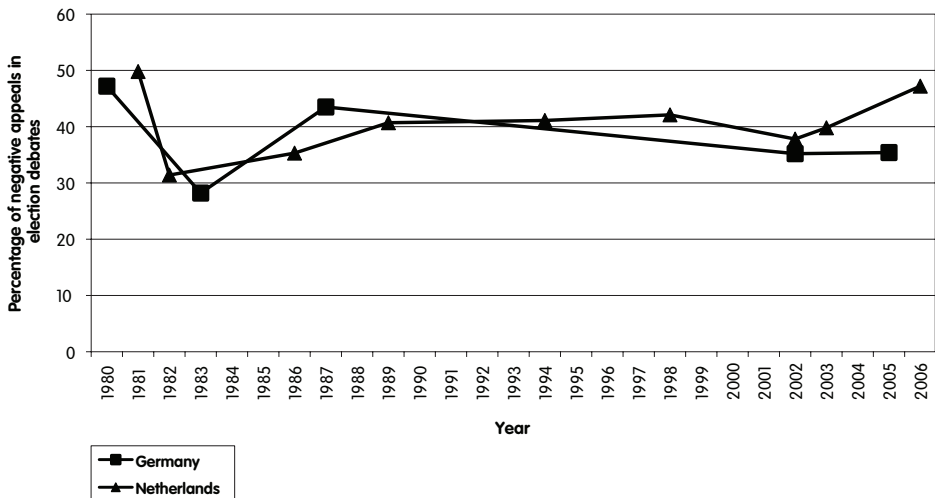
We turn to the empirical results to answer our research questions stepwise. First of all, are we witnessing a rise in negative campaigning in Western Europe? Based on the party election broadcasts (see Figure 1.1) there is no reason to believe that negative campaigning is on the rise for any of the three Western European countries. This finding is supported by the measurements of Germany and the Netherlands on the basis of televised election debates (see Figure 1.2). The overall level of negative campaigning in election debates is higher than in party election broadcasts, which is not surprising as conflict is more likely when political opponents are directly confronted with one another (Walter and Vliegthart 2010). However, the overall volatility in negative campaigning in election debates, is considerably lower than in party election broadcasts. The results of logit models 1 and 2 presented in Table 1.1 support this finding. They show that there are no significant positive trends, only a significant negative trend for the United Kingdom. On the basis of party election broadcasts, the overall level of negative campaigning for the UK seems to have decreased over our research period. Thus, on the basis of this study of the parliamentary elections in the period 1980-2006, the perception that the use of negative campaigning is increasing in Western Europe, cannot be upheld. Similar to West (2005: 68) we argue that there are natural variations in the cycle of negativity, but that there are no grounds for speaking about an upward trend. The *Negativity Hypothesis* (H1) is rejected. The findings are in accordance with findings of several single European country studies that all argue there is evidence of volatility in negativity, but no absolute increase in the number of negative appeals (Holtz-Bacha 2001; Van Heerde-Hudson 2011; Elmelund-Præstekær 2009; Esaiasson and Hkansson 2002). If there is a rise in negative campaigning at all (e.g. Buell and Sigelman 2009; Lau and Pomper 2004) then this seems to be a peculiar American phenomenon.

Figure 1.1: Amount of Negative Campaigning in Parliamentary Election Campaigns 1980-2006 (Party Election Broadcasts)



Note: Appeals are weighted on the basis of party size. N=8931 (NL=3504, UK=3102, GE=2325). See for the United States Geer (2006).

Figure 1.2: Amount of Negative Campaigning in Parliamentary Election Campaigns 1980-2006 (Election Debates)



Note: Appeals are weighted on the basis of party size. N= 7057 (NL=4401, GE=2656)

Table 1.1: Country Differences and Trends over Time in Negative Campaigning 1980-2006

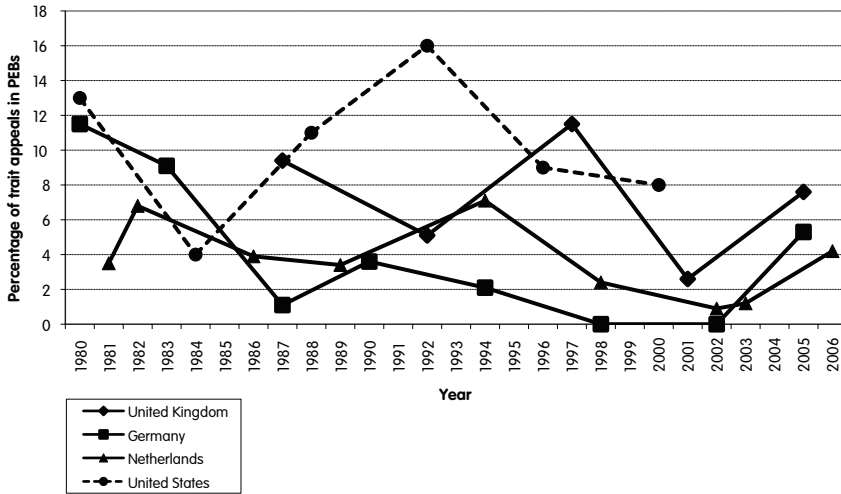
	Model 1 Negative Appeals (PEB)	Model 2 Negative Appeals (Debates)	Model 3 Trait Attacks (PEB)	Model 4 Trait Attacks (Debates)	Model 5 Trait Attacks Aimed At Politicians (Debates)
Germany	- .352° (.337)	28.128 (46.206)	-.324 (.502)	50.808 (40.059)	84.801 (41.36)
United Kingdom	1.193** (.277)	-	.196 (.428)	-	-
Germany*Time	-.035 (.019)	-.058 (.018)	-.075° (.045)	-.032 (0.017)	-.032° (.018)
United Kingdom*Time	-.034* (.014)	-	-.005 (.026)	-	-
The Netherlands*Time	.003 (.016)	.008 (.141)	-.021 (.019)	-.007 (.107)	.010 (.011)
Constant	-1.059 (.234)**	-17.142 (28.181)	-2.850 (.310)	10.964 (21.273)	-21.924 (21.602)
Wald X²	92.11**	.49	6.48	17.60	22.66**
McFadden's R²	.054	.001	0.011	0.033	.0379
Correctly Classified	70.96%	62.62%	94.89%	88.10%	90.46%
N	8931	7054	8931	7057	7057

Note: PEB = Party Election Broadcasts. Table entries are logistic regression coefficients with White heteroskedastic standard errors in parentheses. For models 1 and 3 standard errors are adjusted for 141 clusters. For models 2, 4 and 5 standard errors are adjusted for 61 clusters. For the country dummies the Netherlands is the reference category. ** significant at $p < .01$; * significant at $p < .05$ ° significant at $p < .10$ (two-tailed).

Recent electoral developments in Western Europe not only made us expect a rise in negative campaigning, but also a rise in trait attacks in particular. Figure 1.3 and 1.4 show the percentage of negative trait appeals towards parties and politicians measured in West European Parliamentary Election campaigns. Both figures not only show that negative trait appeals are only a negligible part of all the appeals made, but a clear increasing trend is not identifiable. Model 3 and 4 in Table 1.1 show that there are no significant linear trends to be found, both in the party election broadcasts as well as televised election debates. The only finding bordering on significance that can be discovered is for Germany in party election broadcasts and this is a negative effect. In addition, no signs of a linear trend are found when one looks solely at trait attacks towards individual politicians. These findings are not displayed graphically as these attacks are rare in general and particularly in party election broadcasts. In British election campaigns the percentage of trait attacks on politicians varies between 1 and 3 per cent of the total number of appeals, in German election campaigns it varies between 1 and 4 per cent of the appeals and in the Netherlands between 1 and 3 per cent of the appeals. Model 5 again only shows a borderline significant negative effect for Germany. Regardless of the increased focus on the party leader during

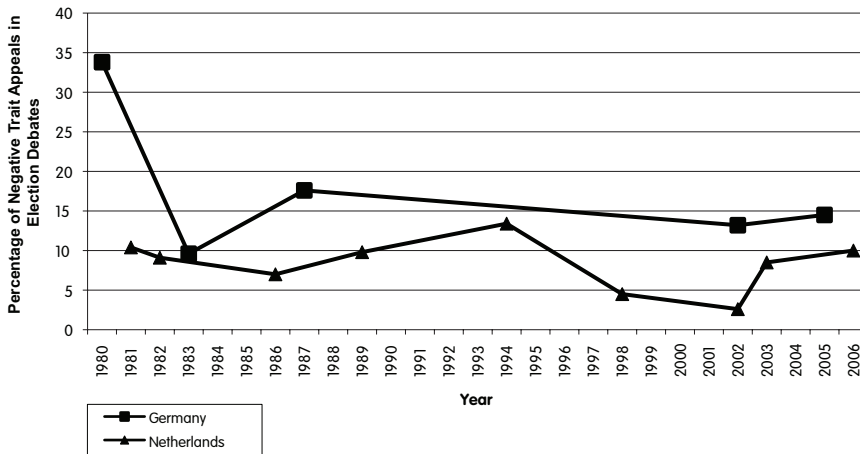
current parliamentary election campaigns, no evidence for a rise in trait attacks during the period 1980-2006 can be found. Thus, the *Personalization Hypothesis* (H2) is rejected.

Figure 1.3: Amount of Trait Attacks in Parliamentary Election Campaigns 1980-2006 (Party Election Broadcasts)



Note: Appeals are weighted on the basis of party size. $N=8931$ ($NL=3504$, $UK=3102$, $GE=2325$). See for the United States Geer (2006).

Figure 1.4: Amount of Trait Attacks in Parliamentary Election Campaigns 1980-2006 (Election Debates)



Note: Appeals are weighted on the basis of party size. $N=7057$ ($NL=4401$, $GE=2656$)

Although we did not find evidence for an increasing trend over time, we have already seen that there are indeed country differences. Model 1 in Table 1.1 shows that for party election broadcasts there is a significant positive difference between the Netherlands and United Kingdom and a negative border significant difference with Germany. For party election broadcasts the average level of negative campaigning is 43 per cent for British election campaigns, 29 for Dutch election campaigns and 18 for German election campaigns. According to Geer (2006) the average level of negative campaigning in U.S. presidential campaigns is 36 per cent. The British parliamentary election campaigns resemble the U.S. presidential election campaigns the most when it comes to the overall level of negativity. The mean level of negative campaigning only differs three per cent when one compares German and Dutch election debates, respectively 38 and 41 per cent. For trait attacks Table 1.1 does not show any country differences. The party election broadcasts show that the overall level of trait attacks is rather low; with 4 per cent, the Netherlands and Germany have the lowest level, followed by the United Kingdom with 7 per cent. The level of British election campaigns is again most similar to the United States that according to Geer (2006) has an average level of 10 per cent of trait attacks in the election campaigns. When looking at the level of trait attacks in German and Dutch election debates one sees a 9 per cent significant difference, respectively 17 versus 8 per cent. Similar results are found when trait attacks are interpreted as solely character attacks on politicians. To what extent did we find some exemplary evidence for the hypothesis about the influence of the party system on negative campaigning? We have seen that the highest levels of negative campaigning can be found in two party systems, the level of negative campaigning is considerably higher in the United States and United Kingdom than the Netherlands and Germany. The mean level of negative campaigning for the multiparty systems is 19 per cent in contrast to 40 per cent for the two party systems in party election broadcasts. Thus, we do indeed find some support for the *Party System Hypothesis (H3)*.

Some First Conclusions

This introductory chapter examining negative campaigning outside the U.S. covering 31 political parties in 23 election campaigns in three countries over a period of approximately 25 years has presented us with some important first insights. Thereby contributing to more knowledge on the level and characteristics of negative campaigning in Western Europe.

First of all, we do not find empirical evidence for a rise in negative campaigning in Western Europe, thereby validating several other single European country studies that suggest that there is little empirical foundation for this belief. This suggests that to the extent that negative campaigning is on the rise in the U.S., this is solely an American phenomenon. U.S. scholars should therefore look for specific country characteristics that fuel this

development in the U.S. Whilst the results do show us variation across time, there is no increasing trend in negative campaigning.

Secondly, no evidence has been found for a rise in trait attacks. Although the general campaign literature argues that election campaigns are becoming more personalized, in Western Europe we do not see this development reflected in an increase in negative campaigning. Thereby, this study contributes to the discussion on the personalization of election campaigns. Our findings show that there is no reason to believe that election campaigns are becoming less substantial, issues remain the main focus of attack behaviour in parliamentary campaigns in Western Europe.

Thirdly, we found that the volatility of negative campaigning in televised election debates is considerably lower than in party election broadcasts. In addition, the level of negative campaigning is considerably higher in televised election debates than in party election broadcasts, which we attribute to the direct confrontation with the opponent. As a result, in line with other studies (such as Walter and Vliegthart 2010) we conclude that it matters which (media) messages are studied when it comes to negative campaigning. We think that the party election broadcasts are probably more suitable for the study of negative campaigning as they are often produced before the campaign and thus reflect the overall campaign strategy. Election debates are more likely to reflect the internal campaign dynamics of that specific moment and how parties have adjusted their campaign strategy. Furthermore, it is also not unlikely that in election debates the overall level of negative campaigning is simply higher because the moderator stimulates direct confrontation as it is considered good for market shares (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2003).

Finally, our study has not only shown that there is considerable variation between elections, but that its overall level also varies across countries. Furthermore, we found exemplary evidence for the notion that the party system constrains the use of negative campaigning. We found lower levels of negative campaigning in multiparty systems in comparison to a two party system, thereby confirming a notion mentioned in the campaign literature (e.g. Farrell 2005). An overall higher level of negative campaigning might just be a by-product of the adversarial politics that comes with a two party system.

Outline of the Thesis

The findings of this introductory chapter are interesting in their own right, but also raise new questions. Although we did not find a rise in negativity, we did find variation across elections and across countries in the level of negative campaigning. What accounts for this variation? Which characteristics of elections, parties or party leaders explain the use of negative campaigning? Furthermore, we found support for the notion that the party system affects the use of negative campaigning. What are the differences between negative campaigning in a multiparty system and a two party system? Are the characteristics explaining negative campaigning the same in different party systems? These

are questions arising from this mainly descriptive introductory chapter on negative campaigning in Western Europe, and which will be answered in the following chapters of this dissertation. However, this introductory chapter not only outlines avenues for further research, it also closes some doors. This study has shown that trait attacks only constitute a very small part of the sum of attack behaviour and therefore, we will focus on explaining negative campaigning in the broadest sense (all criticism directed at the opponent) in the subsequent chapters rather than only on trait attacks. Furthermore, we will focus on party election broadcasts as we find them more suitable for our study on negative campaigning than election debates. Not only as election debates tend to highlight more the internal dynamics, also because the UK did not have election debates till the 2010 campaign. Furthermore, party election debates have remained consistent across time and therefore are better comparable than televised election debates. The election debates have undergone multiple changes, such as in the debate format, the presence of an audience and the role of the moderator.

In addition to this introductory chapter, this dissertation consists of four empirical chapters. This dissertation is a collection of several articles that can be read independently and therefore the content of parts of the chapters may overlap to some degree. However, each chapter presents different empirical results and focuses on different research questions. In Chapter 2 we examine inter-party variation in negative campaigning in the Netherlands in the period 1981-2010. Which party characteristics contribute to the use of negative campaigning in this multiparty system? We extend the theoretical argument on why negative campaigning in a multiparty system is different than in a two party system and test these theoretical hypotheses by means of analyses on the Dutch case, the multiparty system par excellence. Chapter 3 asks which opposing parties are the most likely targets of negative campaigning in a multiparty system. This chapter again adds to our knowledge on negative campaigning in a multiparty context, by examining an even more underdeveloped part of this campaign strategy, i.e. the choice of target. The multitude of competing parties in a multiparty system makes this a highly relevant question that has not been studied before. At the same time as developing new theory on the choice of target in a multiplayer context, we test these expectations on the basis of the Dutch case. This is done by employing a dyadic logistic regression model. Chapter 4 moves away from these single country studies and examines the level of negative campaigning comparatively. It examines the conditions under which different kinds of parties resort to negative campaigning in three Western European countries, thereby testing both the effect of party characteristics as well as election characteristics. Both the comparative aspect and the focus on election characteristics in this study, are new developments in the field. We employ a linear multilevel model to statistically test the explanatory power of our posited theory. Chapter 5 is our last empirical and comparative chapter. It focuses on the effect of party leader characteristics on negative campaigning; specifically the effect of gender. Does gender condition the use of negative campaigning in Western Europe? Due to the personalization of election campaigns party leader effects

on campaign strategy have become more likely and the candidate characteristic that strongly affects negative campaigning in the U.S. is gender. We have therefore taken gender as a key characteristic of party leaders, in order to examine whether party leader characteristics also play a role in the decision to go negative in these three Western European parliamentary democracies, in which parties are still the main actor. Finally, we summarize the key findings of this dissertation, discuss their implications and reflect on certain shortcomings of the study and potential avenues for further research.