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

Walter, A.S.

Publication date
2012

Citation for published version (APA):
Walter, A. S. (2012). *Negative campaigning in Western Europe: beyond the vote-seeking perspective*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

When the Stakes are High: Party Competition and Negative Campaigning

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

Co-authored by Wouter van der Brug and Philip van Praag

Abstract

This paper examines the conditions under which different kinds of parties resort to negative campaigning in three Western European countries: the Netherlands, Britain and Germany in the period between 1980 and 2006 (1980-2006). Data was collected for 27 parties, participating in 23 elections, yielding a total of 129 cases. The study employs a cross-nested multilevel model to estimate the effects of party characteristics as well as the electoral context in which these parties operate. It contributes to the state of the art on negative campaigning in two ways. First, being the first comparative and across-time study on negative campaigning, it compares negative campaigning across 23 elections, which is more than in any other study so far. It therefore contributes to the development of a more general theory on this type of campaign strategy. Second, it is the first study outside the American context to empirically estimate the effect of the electoral context on the use of negative campaigning. The results show that party characteristics are much more important than the electoral context in explaining when parties go negative.

Keywords: Negative Campaigning, Elections, Party Characteristics, Election Characteristics, Western Europe

Introduction

Election campaigns in Western Europe are changing rapidly in character (e.g. Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002; Mancini and Swanson 1996). Due to decreasing party loyalty among voters once stable electorates have become increasingly volatile (Drummond 2006; Mair et al. 2004). As political parties lose their grip on the electoral market, the importance of election campaigns has increased (West, 1995: 23), and it has been suggested that parties are now more likely than before to decide to run an offensive campaign aimed at targeting political opponents (e.g., Mair et al. 2004). Such a strategy is better known as 'negative campaigning'. Negative campaigning is a strategy used to win voters by criticizing one's opponent (Geer 2006; Mancini and Swanson 1996). A party resorts to negative campaigning in an attempt to become voters' preferred party by diminishing positive feelings for opposing candidates or parties (Budesheim et al. 1996; Lau et al. 2007; Westen 2007). The opposite strategy would be one of positive campaigning where parties engage in acclamation or self-appraisal to appear more desirable than their opponents (Budge and Farlie 1983a; Benoit et al. 2003).

Recently, numerous studies have been conducted on how often negative campaigning occurs (e.g. Geer 2006; Benoit et al. 2003; Buell and Sigelman Jr. 2008), its effects on political trust, turnout and the political system (see e.g. Freedman and Goldstein 1999; Lau et al. 2007; Lemert et al. 1997) and the strategic choices involved (see e.g. Damore 2002; Hale et al. 1996; Haynes and Rhine 1998; Peterson and Djupe 2005; Ridout and Holland 2010). All these studies are single country studies and the majority focus on the United States (see for non U.S. work Holtz-Bacha 2001, van Heerde-Hudson 2011; Elmelund -Præstekær 2008, 2009, 2010; Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Schweitzer 2010; Doron and On 1983; Lau and Sigelman 2000; Sullivan 2009; Walter and Vliegenthart 2010)[26]. Theoretical contributions on the circumstances under which parties resort to negative campaign strategies, are mainly developed in the context of the American two-party system (e.g., Geer 2006). As a consequence of this, and because of the absence of comparative research, theories on negative campaigning are still somewhat limited in scope. Comparative work is needed to come to a more general understanding of this phenomenon.

This paper aims to provide such a cross-country and over time comparison, examining when different kinds of political parties decide to make use of negative campaigning in Western Europe, i.e., which party and election characteristics explain the use of

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26 Notable exceptions are two papers that have not yet been published. The first is a working paper of Desposato (2008) that develops a game theoretical 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 and focuses on the different institutional contexts in these countries.

negative campaigning in Western Europe. As our study consists of three countries we are unable to statistically test explanations for possible country differences in the level of negative campaigning. However, we are able to statistically examine differences between these countries in the causal mechanisms (within each of these three countries) that affect the extent to which parties go negative in their campaign. This study contributes to the field in several ways.

Firstly, by testing empirically to what extent several hypotheses developed in single-country studies operate in the same way across three rather different parliamentary democracies, this study adds to the development of a general theory on negative campaigning. Secondly, this study makes a theoretical contribution by exploring to what extent election characteristics might affect the decision to go negative. Election characteristics such as the closeness of the election or the level of electoral volatility have received considerably less attention as explanatory factors than party or candidate characteristics such as a party's competitive standing in the polls or government experience, in studies examining the use of negative campaigning. This comparative study of 23 election campaigns provides the opportunity to not only focus on the characteristics of the actors, but also on whether and how the electoral context influences the use of negative campaigning. Third, this study makes a contribution by presenting new data on negative campaigning by national political parties in the parliamentary election campaigns in three Western European countries (Germany, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands) between 1980 and 2006.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, an overview of the existing literature is presented; thereby connecting the well-known US studies with more recent European work. Second, hypotheses are developed regarding how party characteristics and contextual election characteristics might affect a party's choice to make use of negative campaigning. In a next step, the case selection, the data collection and analysis are discussed. Finally, the results of the empirical analysis are presented, conclusions are drawn and several avenues for future research are suggested.

Party Characteristics and Negative Campaigning

In the field of negative campaigning considerable amounts of work has been devoted to understanding the strategic dilemmas surrounding the use of negative campaigning (e.g. Theilmann and Wilhite 1998; Hale et al. 1996; Sigelman and Buell 2003; Skaperdas and Grofman 1995). The risks of going negative are known as *backlash* or *boomerang effects*. Candidates or parties that try to reduce the positive feelings voters may have for an opponent, run the risk that these attacks will generate negative feelings towards the attacker instead of the target (Johnson-Cartee et al. 1991; Garamone 1984). In theory, it is expected that candidates or parties will make use of negative campaigning only when the expected benefits outweigh the potential risks.

The US literature points towards two candidate characteristics that affect the likelihood of candidates resorting to the use of negative campaigning. These can also be applied to a West European context where parties rather than candidates are the prime actors. First of all, the *government status* of the party affects their propensity to make use of negative campaigning. Parties that do not hold office are more likely to make use of this campaign strategy, as opposition parties have to make clear to voters why they should be in office and the governing parties should be out (Kahn and Kenney, 2004: 23; Hale et al. 1996: 331). Government parties have a natural advantage over opposition parties; they can promote themselves and their program through their official position and tasks (Swint 1998; Lau and Pomper 2004). Furthermore, due to their position, government parties generally receive more media coverage and therefore benefit from name recognition and an established reputation (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha 2006). Finally, compared to government parties opposition parties do not hold office and thus have less to lose and more to gain by going negative. The second factor is a *party's competitive standing in the polls*. Parties trailing behind in the polls are more inclined to go negative than front-runners (Benoit 1999; Damore 2002; Sigelman and Buell 2003; Skaperdas and Grofman 1995). Parties that are trailing behind in the polls are willing to take risks as they have no other viable alternative (e.g. Druckman et al. 2009). From the US literature we may thus derive the following two hypotheses:

Opposition Party Hypothesis (H1): Opposition parties are more likely to engage in negative campaigning than government parties

Losing Party Hypothesis (H2): Parties that are losing in the polls are more likely to go negative than parties that are gaining in the polls

More recently various scholars have studied negative campaigning in a European context (e.g. Holtz-Bacha 2001, van Heerde-Hudson 2011; Elmelund -Præstekær 2008, 2009, 2010; Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Reinemann and Maurer 2005). Several of these studies examine when parties make use of negative campaigning in a multiparty system (Elmelund-Præstekær 2008, 2010, Hansen and Pedersen 2008). These studies replicate the US-finding that opposition parties are more likely than government parties to go negative. However, the results are mixed when it comes to the effect of the party's competitive position in the polls. Elmelund-Præstekær (2008) shows that parties trailing behind are more likely to go negative, while Hansen and Pedersen (2008) only find partial support.

In addition, European scholars have pointed out that negative campaigning in Western Europe cannot be studied without taking into account that most countries in Western Europe are multiparty systems in which coalition governments govern (Laver and Schofied 1998; Hobolt and Karp 2009). 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, namely the large

number of potential opponents and the need to form a coalition. The larger number of competitors increases the uncertainty of acquiring the benefits of attack behaviour. 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). The benefits of negative campaigning in a multiparty system are divided, but the costs are born solely by the attacking party (Hansen and Pedersen 2008). While this decreases the likelihood of parties going negative in a multiparty context, it does not tell us anything about the party characteristics that affect this likelihood.

The need to form a coalition government after the elections equally affects the costs of negative campaigning. While parties in a two-party system only need to worry about possible backlash effects among the electorate, parties in a multiparty system also need to worry about different possible backlash effects: post-election coalition bargaining costs. Given that elections within multiparty systems are fought in the wake of coalition negotiations, negative campaigning may endanger a party's goal of obtaining office (e.g. Elmelund-Præstekær 2008, 2010). A campaign that is too aggressive, too rough and too negative may damage the opportunity to govern together, thus hurting parties' office-seeking objectives (e.g. Kaid and Holtz-Bacha 2006; Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Brants et al. 1982). The main difference between a two-party system and a multiparty system is that in a multiparty system parties have to make a trade-off between their goals. Parties can be assumed to be rational actors, guided by three overarching political objectives, namely office, policy and votes (Müller and Strøm 1999). In a two-party system such as the US, winning votes in the election campaign means getting into office and acquiring policy influence. In a multiparty system in which coalition governments are the rule, this is not necessarily the case, as winning the most votes does not automatically translate into government office or policy influence. This sensitive trade-off between the different strategic goals of a party complicates a party's choice of campaign strategy significantly. Due to the necessity of post-election coalition bargaining, negative campaigning constitutes a much riskier strategy for parties operating in a multiparty context.

Walter and Van der Brug (forthcoming) argue that whether parties engage in negative campaigning in a multiparty system depends partially on their coalition potential. Parties with low coalition potential have little to lose from negative campaigning as their chances of being part of the government are slim to none from the beginning.[27] Such parties will be more willing to take the risks involved than parties with high coalition potential. They test whether several indicators of a party's coalition potential derived from the coalition formation literature are related to a party's decision to make use of negative campaigning.

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27   In this study we regard coalition potential as a characteristic of the attacking party and not as a relational characteristic between the attacking party and its opponents. This is in line with the current coalition formation theory that tries to explain coalition formation on the basis of party characteristics, such as the pivotal player (Van Deemen 1991) and the center player (Axelrod 1970).

The first indicator is government experience, i.e. the extent to which parties have already participated in previous government coalitions (Lijphart 1999; Sartori 2005/1976; Warwick 1996). Previous government experience matters for coalition potential because it demonstrates that parties are able to govern and may have built a reputation for being a good coalition partner (Warwick 1996). The costs of attempting to form a coalition with these parties are perceived to be lower compared to parties with no government experience and thus they have a high degree of coalition potential, which in turn increases the possible coalition bargaining costs of negative campaigning.

The second factor is the distance to the median party, the median position on the left/right dimension constitutes the dominant bargaining position and a party's coalition potential decreases as it moves further away from this dominant position (Bartolini 1998; Laver and Schofield 1998). More radical parties are often considered unacceptable as coalition partners. Parties closer to the median party can form government coalitions with both left- as well as right leaning parties; parties on the outskirts have less coalition options. We thus expect the likelihood of negative campaigning to increase as the distance between a party and the median party increases.[28]

Government Experience Hypothesis (H3): Parties that have more government experience are less likely to go negative than parties that have less or no government experience

Median Party Hypothesis (H4): Parties that are closely positioned to the median party position within the system are less likely to go negative than parties that are positioned far away from the median party

We will test our hypotheses in Britain, Germany and the Netherlands. We expect the first two hypotheses, which were developed in a two-party context, to hold everywhere. Hypotheses 3 and 4 are developed particularly for multi-party systems where governments are normally formed by coalitions. We expect these hypotheses to be confirmed in The Netherlands and Germany, but not in Britain.

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28   In chapter2 we demonstrate that in the Dutch case new parties are more likely to go negative than parties that are already represented in Parliament (see also Elmelund-Præstekær 2010). In this comparative study, we cannot include that variable because there are no new parties in Britain in the period that we study. This causes serious problems when estimating the model comparatively within each of the contexts. New parties were therefore not included in the analyses in this paper. In chapter 2 we also tested the effect of party size. The effect of party size turned out to be not significant and highly collinear with the degree of prior government experience, which is why they do not test the effects of these variables in the same model. Since prior government experience is closer to the theoretical concept of 'coalition potential', we decided to focus on this variable and to exclude party size from the models tested in this study.

Election Characteristics and Negative Campaigning

In the decision making process on whether to go negative, political parties are likely to be affected by characteristics of the election campaign in which they compete. In order to estimate the effects of the electoral context, one needs to have variation across many elections. So far, this has only been done in the US context. We therefore need to 'translate' the theoretical notions from the US literature in such a way that they can be applied in the context of European multiparty systems.

The electoral context affects the calculus political parties make with respect to negative campaigning (Damore, 2002: 672). Scholars have argued that parties are more willing to use negative campaigning while jeopardizing a potential backlash effect when the race is competitive (e.g. Swint 1998; Lau and Pomper 2004). Mair (1997: 157-158) points towards two factors needed for electoral competition, i.e. the availability of an electoral market and rewards associated with electoral gains. The extent of interparty competition and the competitiveness of parties is at least in part a function of the relative size of the electoral market. However, it is not just the sheer size of the electoral market which is relevant, but also the degree to which competition itself matters: enough rewards must be associated with gains in electoral support.[29] What does this mean for research on negative campaigning?

First of all, we expect the likelihood of parties going negative to grow as the size of the electoral market increases, i.e. when more voters are undecided between two or more parties. A second factor is how much is at stake in the election (Haynes and Rhine, 1998: 700). The electoral rewards are particularly high in close races when both candidates have a chance of winning. US-based research shows that in these close races the overall negativity from both candidates increases (e.g. Buell and Sigelman 2008; Druckman et al. 2010; Lau and Pomper 2004; Theilmann and Wilhite 1998; Franz et al. 2008; Kahn and Kennedy 2004; Damore 2002).

Is it possible to translate the notions of 'electoral competition' and a 'close race' to a European multi-party system? In a two-party system with close elections, a small number of votes could just sway the balance for a political party and the electoral gains associated with winning are high. However, the notion of close elections is not directly applicable to a multiparty system. In a multiparty system winning has a different meaning, due to the fact that more than two parties are competing and that none of the parties can realistically expect to gain a majority. Becoming the largest party of the country,

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29   An exceptional context in which there was ample competition is Switzerland. In Switzerland there was little point in fighting with one another for extra votes as in Switzerland all four major parties permanently shared government office (Mair 1997: 158). In our study such a situation is absent.

does not even guarantee access to government.[30] We would like to argue that in a multi-party system electoral competition is heightened and the use of negative campaigning increases when the electoral campaign shows increasing signs of bipolar competition. This is for instance the case, when the electoral competition in a multiparty system develops into a clear battle between the (leaders of the) two largest parties. When the gap between the two largest parties in the polls is small, the race between these two competing parties and the question of which party will become the largest, will often dominate the campaign. One could argue that in such a setting the competition in a multiparty election campaign increases and therefore also the likelihood that parties will go negative.

Another contextual characteristic that strengthens the importance of the election for political parties is when the continuation of the present government is at stake. When coalition government parties express their wish to continue to govern together after the elections, we expect bipolar competition to develop in a multiparty system, namely a race between the government parties on the one hand and opposition parties on the other. The creation of such pre-electoral coalitions increases competition as the stakes of the campaign become clearer, so that gains in winning electoral support increase the likelihood of a coalition gaining the majority needed to govern. In addition, the formation of these pre-electoral coalitions means that political parties in a multiparty system do not have to fear post-election coalition bargaining costs when using negative campaigning.[31] Due to the creation of these pre-electoral coalitions, parties which attack a party from 'the other side' do not endanger the relationship with potential coalition partners and this makes a party's use of negative campaigning more likely. The stakes increase even more when the government coalition wants to continue but seems to be losing in the polls, rendering it unable to realize the majority needed to stay in office. When the continuation of the present coalition government is at stake in an election and especially when it seems that this coalition is losing, parties will be more willing to go negative in the campaign. This leads to the formulation of the following four hypotheses on contextual election characteristics and the use of negative campaigning:

Electoral Market Hypothesis (H5): When the relative size of the electoral market is larger, parties are more likely to make use of negative campaigning than when the relative size of the electoral market is smaller

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30   An example is the Dutch elections of 1982 in which Labour (PvdA) gained 3 seats and became the largest party in Parliament (47 seats). However, Labour did not manage to reach an agreement with the Christian Democrats and was left out of the subsequent government.

31   We are aware that pre-electoral coalitions can also be formed that do not reflect the government opposition divide that exists prior to the elections. However, in the two particular multiparty systems we study this is very seldom the case and therefore this option is not tested separately.

Closeness Hypothesis (H6): The closer the elections the more parties are likely to make use of negative campaigning

Continuation Coalition Government Hypothesis (H7): In elections in which the present coalition government wants to continue, parties are more likely to make use of negative campaigning than in elections in which the present coalition government does not

Losing Coalition Government Hypothesis (H8): In elections in which the present coalition government wants to continue, but is losing in the polls, parties are more likely to make use of negative campaigning than in elections in which the present coalition government wants to continue, but is gaining in the polls

Case Selection, Data and Coding Procedure

This paper examines negative campaigning in 23 parliamentary election campaigns in three Western European countries between 1980 and 2006. The countries examined are Britain, Germany and the Netherlands. All three countries are developed democracies with parliamentary systems. Therefore, unlike in the US, election campaigns in these countries are party-centred. However, the countries differ in party system. Britain has a two-party system in which coalition governments are exceptional. Germany has a multiparty system with five relevant parties where coalition governments are the usual practice. The Netherlands has an electoral system with a high degree of proportionality. As a consequence, there are around 10 parties usually represented in parliament and coalition governments are the rule. Unlike in Germany pre-election coalitions are exceptional. This study focuses on a rather recent time period, as negative campaigning is thought to be a recent development in Western Europe and it is at around this time that parties started to invest in the professionalization of election campaigns (Farrell and Webb 2000). The election campaigns are relatively short in these countries in comparison to U.S. presidential campaigns and last approximately four weeks (Crewe and Gosschalk 1995; Brants et al. 1982). The data collection is restricted to national political parties that were 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. We incorporate the party in our analysis from the moment it has received parliamentary representation. Parties that are the result of mergers between existing parties are part of the analysis from the moment that the parties they originated from received parliamentary representation.

We measure the degree of negative campaigning on the basis of party election broadcasts. 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. 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, this is in combination with the short length of the election campaigns the reason that we refrain from studying the dynamics during the election campaign. In order to ensure comparability between the West European countries, we include only party election broadcasts that are aired during allocated free broadcasting time (Holtz-Bacha and Kaid 2006). In total 359 party election broadcasts were collected on tape or as transcript from various public and private archives (see Table A.1., A.2. and A.3.). The transcripts of these party election broadcasts served as a basis for the content analysis. As we lack complete records on how many times each particular party election broadcast was aired and where exactly and what the audience size of all party election broadcasts were, we are unable to perform frequency-weighted or rate weighted analysis (Prior 2001). However, we do know that all these party election broadcasts were broadcast on national television. Since we do not estimate campaign effects, it is not consequential for the purpose of our study that audience statistics are unavailable.

The coding method is based on a procedure developed by Geer (2006). The unit of analysis is a natural speaking unit, the appeal, which is any mention of self-praise or criticism of the opponent. It was decided not to code at the level of election broadcasts because these broadcasts often contain both positive as well as negative campaign messages (Benoit et al. 2003: 14; Geer, 2006: 36). The same applies to sentences, which often contain more than one appeal. Negative campaigning is measured by coding any appeal as either negative (criticism of an opponent) or positive (self-praise of the party or politician). Negative and positive campaign messages were coded only in those cases where there were explicit and visible instances of criticism of the opponent (negative) or self-praise (positive).

The content analysis was conducted by native speaking (post)graduate students. Geer's coding method (2006) proved to be reliable within and across countries. The inter-coder reliability was measured based on the coding of a random sample of appeals. The most difficult coding category was to determine the unit of analysis, i.e. what constitutes an appeal or not and whether a text segment consists of one or multiple appeals. The inter-coder reliability (Krippendorf's Alpha) is 0.66 for selecting the unit of analysis. For the tone (negative versus positive) Krippendorf's Alpha was 0.97.[32] In total 8931 appeals from the party election broadcasts were selected by the coders.

The hypotheses tested in this paper pertain to characteristics of parties and of the election context they compete in. Because of the hierarchical structure of the data we apply multi-level analysis, which takes into account the nested structure of data. However, in this particular paper the method of analysis is less straightforward as the structure

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[32] The intercoderreliability Krippendorf's Alpha inside the three countries for the unit of analysis and tone was respectively, 0.77 and 0.92 for the Netherlands. For Germany this was 0.71 and 0.97 and for Britain it was 0.68 and 0.94.

of the data is not purely hierarchical. First of all, different parties are present in one election, but parties also compete in different elections. Second, the data contains party characteristics that vary across elections, such as government or opposition status, government experience and distance to the median party (party x election level), but the observations of the Labour Party in the 1992 election campaign are not independent of the Labour Party in the 1997 campaign (party level). Moreover, we have variation at the level of elections that are invariant across parties (election level). Therefore, we estimate a cross-classified linear multilevel model with the percentage negative campaigning of a party in an election campaign as dependent variable. The dependent variable is measured by the number of negative appeals as a percentage of the total number of appeals in the election broadcasts of each party in each election. We aggregated our data to the level of each party in each particular election because we did not have hypotheses at the lower levels (appeals or election broadcasts). The data consists of 129 cases at the party x election level, 27 different parties (party level) and 23 different elections (election level). Two country dummies will be added to the model to control for country level differences in negative campaigning.

Operationalization of Independent Variables

This section provides an overview of the operationalization of the independent variables. First, we will discuss the independent variables that will be estimated at the party x election level.

The first independent variable at this level is *Opposition Party*, which is a dummy variable indicating whether a party is part of the government at the time of the election campaign or is part of the opposition (1=Opposition; 0=Government). The variable *Loss in Polls* measures the difference (i.e. loss or gain) between the vote share a party would receive according to polls prior to the election and the vote share a party obtained during the previous elections in percentages. As the changes in vote percentages, i.e. the losses or gains between the concurrent polls and the previous elections, will be larger in magnitude for larger parties, we divided the changes by the size of the party in the previous election.[33] As the resulting variable is heavily positively skewed, we trans-

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33 For the concept of losing in the polls different points of reference can be chosen, namely the position in the previous polls, the previous election results or the position of a competing party (Kleinnijenhuis and Takens 2011). As explained in the data section, our research focus is not the dynamic during the election campaign and the party election broadcast foremost reflects a party strategy at the beginning of the campaign. In addition, the results of previous elections are at stake at these elections and therefore an important reference point for campaign managers. For these three reasons we decided to use the previous election results as our point of reference in this study.

form the variable by taking the log. However, before we are able to do this we make the variable positive by adding the maximum percentage of vote share lost to all the values. Unfortunately, we lack information about the exact airing of the different party election broadcasts, so we could not examine the effect of parties' standing in the polls in a dynamic fashion. The polling data used stems from Ipsos MORI, ZDF Politbarometer and TNS NIPO. The variable *Median Party Distance* is operationalized as the absolute distance between a party's left/right placement and the left/right placement of the median party within the system. Although the political space may be multi-dimensional, most scholars agree that the left/right ideological dimension is the key conflict dimension in most advanced industrial democracies (Pierce 1999; Gabel and Huber 2000). For this variable we made use of voters' placements of parties on the left right scale in Dutch Parliamentary Election Surveys (DPES), British Election Survey (BES) and the German National Election Studies (ZA Wahl). The variable *Government Experience* captures the number of years a party was part of a government coalition since 1945 divided by the total number of years since 1945. For parties established after 1945 government experience is measured by the number of years a party was part of a government coalition divided by the number of years since the party was founded. The source for this variable was Woldendorp et al. (2000).

We now discuss the independent variables at the election level. The variable *Size Electoral Market* is measured by looking at the seat shifts between elections and calculated on the basis of the Pederson Index (Pedersen 1983). This measure of volatility ranges from 0 to 100, where 0 signifies that no parties lost or gained seats, while 100 means that all the seats went to a new set of parties. Shifts in seats are calculated instead of shifts in votes as the former are most important to parties. In line with the variable Loss in Polls our reference point is the previous election (See footnote 33). So, we assume that parties use the previous election results as a frame of reference. The variable *Closeness of the Elections* is measured as the difference in the relative vote share of the two largest parties involved in the campaign. The previously discussed polling data is also used as a basis here. The variable *Continuation Government* is a dummy indicating whether the present government wants to continue to govern (1=Yes; 0=No). The variable is constructed on the basis of information presented by Andeweg and Irwin (2009), Debus (2007), Niedermayer (2001), Eckhard (2001), Anderson and Woyke (1998) and Helms (2004). The variable *Coalition Loss* is a dummy indicating whether the present government has a majority based on their standing in the polls preceding the election campaigns (1=Yes; 0=No). The interaction variable *Continuation Government *Coalition Loss* is an interaction of the variable Coalition Loss and the variable Continuation Government. More details about the independent variables are included in Table A.6.

Results

To assess whether multilevel analysis is indeed the most appropriate statistical technique to use for testing our hypotheses, we computed intraclass- correlations. We find significant proportions of variance in the baseline model controlling for country effects at the contextual level, namely 7 percent for elections and 66 percent for parties. Significant variance at the contextual level remains after estimating the level 1 determinants, see Table 4.1. Thus, considerable differences between parties and elections can be found in the level of negative campaigning, as a result the estimation of a cross-classified hierarchical model is appropriate. The finding that there is much more variance at the contextual level between parties than between elections indicates that party characteristics are more important for explaining the use of negative campaigning than election characteristics.

Since we study three countries, we can only theorize qualitatively about the reasons behind the observed country differences. The base model shows that the level of negative campaigning is higher in the United Kingdom than in the Netherlands, the latter is our reference category in this model. Furthermore, the results show us that the level of negative campaigning is lower in Germany than in the Netherlands. However, these observed country differences are not significant and remain insignificant after controlling for party characteristics, with the exception of Britain in Model 2 when the effect of opposition parties is specified. The fact that we find negative campaigning to be the highest in the British two-party system is in line with the notion that due to the practice of coalition government negative campaigning is less compatible with a multiparty system. Nevertheless, we would also expect Germany to have a higher level of negative campaigning than the Netherlands as Germany to some extent resembles a two-party system as a result of the formation of pre-electoral alliances (Mair 2008). However, if we look at the kind of parties that compete in these countries during election time, this finding might be explained by the fact that due to the high electoral threshold Germany has fewer radical parties than the Netherlands.

We will first discuss the findings at the first level (party x election). Model 1 presents the main effects of party characteristics and model 2 to 5 show model 1 plus an interaction with a party characteristic and the United Kingdom. These interactions tell us whether the effect of the respective party characteristic is different in the two-party system United Kingdom in comparison to the multiparty systems the Netherlands and Germany. We also checked for such interactions with the dummy variable for Germany, but none of these was statistically significant. This means that the causal patterns in Germany are not significantly different from those in the Netherlands. Yet all interactions with the United Kingdom are significant. A first important conclusion is therefore that the patterns leading to negative campaigning differ between the British two party system on the one hand and the German and Dutch multi-party systems on the other.

In line with our expectations (H1) we find that challenger parties are more likely to go negative. However, Model 2 indicates that this does not apply in Britain, as here the government party is the most likely party to go negative. This finding is in accordance

with the work of Scammell and Langer (2006: 78) who note that the Conservative Party as an incumbent party favoured negative campaigning. Thus in the UK it seems that we have found a party effect, the Conservative party makes use of negative campaigning regardless of whether it is in opposition or government. For the hypothesis on Loss in Polls (H2) we find mixed evidence. Model 3 shows us that only for the United Kingdom we find a positive effect, meaning that only in the British system it seems to matter whether parties are losing in the polls. We do not find such an effect for the parties competing in the Dutch and German multiparty system. Hansen and Pedersen (2008) do not find much evidence for this hypothesis in Denmark either, while Elmelund-Præstekær (2008) did find such an effect in Denmark. So, it appears uncertain whether loss in the polls makes parties in multi-party systems more likely to go negative, but at the very least, our study shows that it is more important in the British context.

Next, we estimated the relationships suggested in European work (Walter and Van der Brug, forthcoming; Elmelund-Præstekær 2010; Hansen and Pedersen 2008). The results demonstrate that indicators of coalition potential indeed play an important role in explaining negative campaigning in Western Europe. We do find that parties with less government experience are more likely to go negative (H3). As expected, Model 4 shows that this is not the case in the British two party system where until recently coalition governments were absent. For Britain we find that parties with more government experience are more likely to attack, in this particular case the Conservative Party. In addition, we find that median party distance matters. The further away parties are positioned from the median party, the more likely they are to make use of negative campaigning (H4). Model 5 shows that this is the case in Germany and the Netherlands, but not Britain. In Britain we find that the more close parties are positioned to the median party the more likely they are to make use of negative campaigning.

Finally, we estimate the election effects. However, as we only have 23 cases we cannot estimate all the election effects together. Therefore, Table 4.2 displays 5 separate models that constitute of the simple party characteristics model (Model 1) and a context effect. Model 6 to 10 show that none of the five contextual variables have a significant effect. We do not find evidence for the notion that the use of negative campaigning increases when more voters can be won as the relative size of the electoral market increases or when there is more at stake, i.e. close elections, the coalition government wishes to continue to govern and has no majority in the polls. We therefore reject H5 through H8. Election context does not seem to matter in these three parliamentary democracies when it comes to the use of negative campaigning. In principle the number of elections included in the analyses (23 elections) is sufficient to conduct a multilevel analysis. Moreover, we have seen that there is significant variance at the election level. Yet, we have also noted that most of the level 2 variance lies at the party level and not at the election level, which makes it not so surprising that the effects at the election level are not significant.

Table 4.1: The Effects of Party Characteristics on Negative Campaigning in Western Europe

	Base Model	Model 1 Party Characteristics	Model2 Britain Challenger Status	Model 3 Britain Loss in Polls	Model 4 Britain Gov. Experience	Model 5 Britain Median Party Distance
Intercept	**28.569** **(5.095)**	**16.396** **(4.947)**	6.694 (4.751)	**20.878** **(5.093)**	**17.780** **(4.870)**	12.945 (4.995)
Opposition Party		**6.297** **(0.397)**	**13.920** **(0.474)**	**6.804** **(0.396)**	**5.426** **(0.421)**	**7.697** **(0.451)**
Loss in Polls		**3.233** **(0.375)**	**2.894** **(0.360)**	-0.092 (0.462)	**3.265** **(0.374)**	**3.039** **(0.375)**
Government Experience		**-4.512** **(1.690)**	**-3.446** **(1.622)**	-2.695 (1.683)	**-9.957** **(2.109)**	-0.598 (1.790)
Median Party Distance		**0.961** **(0.399)**	**3.004** **(0.390)**	**0.903** **(0.396)**	0.702 (0.402)	**2.008** **(0.429)**
Opposition Party* United Kingdom			**-19.603** **(0.727)**			
Loss in Polls* United Kingdom				**8.846** **(0.732)**		
Government Experience* United Kingdom					**13.785** **(3.202)**	
Median Party Distance* United Kingdom						**-7.117** **(1.098)**
United Kingdom	11.558 (10.964)	12.486 (10.311)	29.926 (9.913)	-5.264 (10.718)	9.533 (10.154)	19.229 (10.412)
Germany	-14.145 (9.469)	-11.394 (8.915)	-9.964 (8.550)	-11.517 (9.175)	-9.781 (8.766)	-12.418 (8.958)
σ^2 Party x Election	**130.654** **(2.011)**	**123.848** **(1.906)**	**114.074** **(1.756)**	**121.711** **(1.873)**	**123.606** **(1.903)**	**123.228** **(1.897)**
σ^2 Party	**342.909** **(95.053)**	**301.235** **(83.438)**	**278.523** **(77.380)**	**320.894** **(8.883)**	**291.674** **(81.042)**	**304.215** **(84.245)**
σ^2 Election	**50.776** **(16.220)**	**46.535** **(12.322)**	**41.404** **(13.209)**	**47.741** **(15.274)**	**43.920** **(14.015)**	**46.814** **(14.998)**
Deviance (-2LL)	**65714.676**	**65257.794**	**64559.388**	**65113.114**	**65239.323**	**65215.878**

Note: 8494 appeals, Level 1: Parties in elections N=129 Level 2: Parties N=27/Elections N=23. Standard errors within parentheses. Bold figures means significant at the 0.05 level. For the country dummies the reference category is the Netherlands.

Table 4.2: The Effects of Party and Election Characteristics on Negative Campaigning in Western Europe

	Model 1 Just Party Characteristics	Model6 Model 1 + Size Electoral Market	Model 7 Model 1 + Closeness	Model 8 Model 1 + Continuation Government	Model 9 Model 1 + Coalition Loss	Model 10 Model 1 + Interaction
Intercept	**16.396** (4.947)	**22.204** (5.733)	**16.058** (5.043)	**16.424** (5.201)	**17.469** (5.087)	**18.109** (5.526)
Opposition Party	**6.297** (0.397)	**6.284** (0.397)	**6.298** (0.397)	**6.297** (0.397)	**6.295** (0.397)	**6.295** (0.397)
Loss in Polls	**3.233** (0.375)	**3.215** (0.375)	**3.237** (0.375)	**3.233** (0.375)	**3.232** (0.375)	**3.228** (0.375)
Government Experience	**-4.512** (1.690)	**-4.625** (1.689)	**-4.489** (1.691)	**-4.512** (1.690)	**-4.489** (1.689)	**-4.503** (1.690)
Median Party Distance	**0.961** (0.399)	**0.944** (0.399)	**0.961** (0.399)	**0.961** (0.399)	**0.965** (0.399)	**0.961** (0.399)
Size Electoral Market		-0.350 (0.182)				
Closeness Election			0.085 (0.252)			
Continuation Government				-0.085 (4.853)		-0.628 (5.586)
Coalition Loss					-2.436 (2.862)	-5.037 (5.816)
Continuation Government* Coalition Loss						-0.628 (5.586)
United Kingdom	12.486 (10.311)	10.345 (10.273)	11.497 (10.715)	12.544 (10.807)	12.220 (10.290)	11.976 (10.811)
Germany	-11.394 (8.915)	-14.044 (8.925)	-11.983 (9.078)	-11.338 (9.480)	-11.269 (8.891)	-11.626 (9.443)
σ^2 Party x Election	**123.848** (1.906)	**123.847** (1.906)	**123.848** (1.906)	**123.848** (1.906)	**123.848** (1.906)	**123.847** (1.906)
σ^2 Party	**301.235** (83.438)	**300.957** (83.226)	**300.960** (83.416)	**301.115** (83.447)	**300.911** (83.454)	**300.876** (83.476)
σ^2 Election	**46.535** (12.322)	**39.488** (12.666)	**46.266** (14.788)	**46.536** (14.888)	**44.954** (14.358)	**44.391** (14.168)
Deviance (-2LL)	65257.794	65254.384	65257.684	65257.801	65257.080	6525.816

Note: 8494 appeals , Level 1: Parties in elections N=129 Level 2: Parties N=27/Elections N=23. Standard errors within parentheses. Bold figures means significant at the 0.05 level. For the country dummies the reference category is the Netherlands.

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper has advanced our knowledge on negative campaigning in Western Europe in several ways. First of all, it has contributed to the state of art as it is the first comparative study on negative campaigning that compares a sufficiently large number of elections to test the effects of electoral contexts. We were thus able to test the extent to which the theories developed in single case studies, primarily from the U.S., are applicable beyond their context (e.g. Lau and Pomper 2004; Kennedy and Kahn 2004). In line with U.S. work we find that opposition parties are more likely to go negative. The evidence for loss in the polls is mixed since we only find such an effect in the British two-party system. In addition, the results support the notion that for studying negative campaigning in Western Europe, we should take indicators of coalition potential into account (Walter and Van der Brug, forthcoming). We have found that these factors exerted the theoretically expected effects in two multiparty systems, the Netherlands and Germany, but that they even play a role in the British two-party system. In the Netherlands and Germany we find that parties positioned further away from the median party and parties with less government experience are more likely to go negative, which is in line with the notion that parties with less coalition potential attack more. In the case of Britain we saw that parties close to the median party and parties with more government experience are more likely to attack. For all, the party characteristics estimated we find different effects in Britain, thereby suggesting that the context of the party system indeed matters for the use of negative campaigning by the parties competing in the elections. Since there are similarities as well as important differences between countries in the processes leading to negative campaigning, more comparative work in the field is much needed.

Secondly, it is the first study paying attention to the effects of election characteristics on negative campaigning in Western Europe and brings about new theory on how the election context might affect the use of negative campaigning in Western Europe. However, we do not find evidence that the relative size of the electoral market, closeness of the race, the desire to stay in office of government parties while they are losing in the polls which are all factors that strengthen the competition affect the use of negative campaigning.

Finally, it is the first paper studying negative campaigning that estimates party and election characteristics simultaneously using a multilevel model. The use of this cross-classified linear multilevel model tells us that most of the variance in negative campaigning lies at the party level instead of the election level, indicating that party characteristics matter more than election characteristics when it comes to explaining negative campaigning. It is all about parties explaining negative campaigning in Western Europe. In addition, the findings suggest that the differences between countries in the overall level of negative campaigning might be partly due to the different parties that the different party systems bring about and how different party systems affect the cost benefit analysis of going negative.

Future research should thus take into account the nature of the parties competing in the election and examine which stable party characteristics affect the use of negative campaigning. In addition, our study contained relatively limited variance between elections. More research needs to be done across a larger number of countries, in order to obtain more variance at this level. Since the present study on three countries already provides important insights into the differences across countries, comparative research across more contexts is a promising prospect for future work in the field.