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

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Summing Up: Negative Campaigning in Western Europe

Introduction

In this dissertation I studied the use of negative campaigning by political parties in parliamentary election campaigns in three Western European countries between 1980 and 2006, the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands. Although numerous studies on negative campaigning already exist, academic work is still growing, and many topics remain untouched. One of the pitfalls of current research is that most work is based solely on the U.S. context, which is in many ways quite particular. It is characterized by a presidential two-party system in which vote-seeking goals coincide with office-seeking gains (see for instance Damore 2002; Hale et al. 1996; Haynes and Rhine 1998; Peterson and Djupe 2005; Ridout and Holland 2010). As a result of the fact that most research has been conducted within one single context, theories on negative campaigning remain limited in scope. Scholarly attention for negative campaigning in European countries is slowly growing, and now includes studies from parliamentary multiparty systems in which vote- and office-seeking goals may not coincide with each other, but rather be in conflict (see for instance Holtz-Bacha 2001, van Heerde-Hudson 2011; Elmelund -Præstekær 2008, 2009, 2010; Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Schweitzer 2010). This work pertains mostly to single country studies, and therefore it remains unclear to what extent the findings are country specific or can be generalized more broadly (notable exceptions see Salmond 2011; Desposato 2008). This dissertation thus contributes to recent work in the field, which seeks a more general understanding of negative campaigning in all its facets and presents comparative theoretical and empirical work beyond the U.S. context.

In addition to academic research, public attention for negative campaigning has also heightened over the last decade. Much like in the U.S. context, journalists in their coverage of election campaigns are giving extensive attention to attack politics. In recent years, debates have sprung up about the use of negative campaigning or the so-called 'Americanization' of election campaigns. Is it informative and useful for voters to decide which of many parties to vote for? Or is negative campaigning in multiparty systems rather damaging for a political culture of cooperation and coalition bargaining? The empirical work in this dissertation also adds to this body of work by demonstrating that there is not much evidence for a rise in negative campaigning in Western Europe and that only Britain resembles the U.S. level of negative campaigning. Negative campaigning seems to be less of a problem in countries in which multiple parties compete and coalition governments are the rule. Overall this dissertation aims to add to the academic and public debate on negative campaigning. As far as I am aware, it does so by providing the most extensive across country and over time study on negative campaigning until now. In the following, I will first summarize the main findings, before elaborating on their theoretical and political implications.

Summary of the Research Findings

In the introduction of this dissertation the concept 'negative campaigning' is introduced and the conceptual confusion between scholars, journalists, politicians, consultants and voters is illustrated. After explaining the decision to define negative campaigning as simply all attack behaviour on the opponent, I connected this dissertation to the main academic and public debates related to negative campaigning. On the basis of a systematic content analysis of 377 party election broadcasts and 19 debates I demonstrated in the introduction that there is no empirical evidence for a rise in negative campaigning in the period between 1980 and 2006 in the three countries that were studied. The rise of negative campaigning seems to be restricted to the United States. Neither are there reasons to suspect that the number of trait attacks, which is all critique on the traits of an opposing party or candidate, has increased regardless of the discussion of the so-called personalization of West European election campaigns during the last decades (e.g. Farrell 2005; Poguntke and Webb 2005). Although no increasing trend seems to exist, the results show that there is significant variation in negative campaigning across time and across countries. The findings indeed indicate a difference in the level of negative campaigning between two-party and multiparty systems. The overall level of negative campaigning is considerably lower in the latter. The level of negative campaigning measured for British parliamentary election campaigns resembles most closely Geer's (2006) levels of negativity measured for U.S. presidential campaigns. These levels are considerably higher than the ones gauged in Dutch and German parliamentary election campaigns.

In chapter 2 I examined the use of negative campaigning in the multiparty system par excellence, namely the Dutch case. First of all, I argued theoretically why a party's decision to go negative is in a multiparty system different from a two party system. In a multiparty system the backlash effects pose a higher risk. Moreover, office-seeking incentives of parties should be taken into account next to vote-seeking incentives. In a two party system these incentives coincide. However, in a multiparty system the need to form a coalition government makes negative campaigning a more risky strategy to employ and therefore this strategy is most likely to be used by parties with a low coalition potential. The empirical results on the basis of party election broadcasts indeed show that there is considerable inter-party variation in the use of negative campaigning and that office-seeking considerations should be taken into account when studying this phenomenon in a multiparty system. Parties positioned further away from the median party are indeed more likely to attack and mixed evidence is found for new parties and years of government experience.

Not only the need of coalition government formation, but also the multitude of parties competing for votes distinguishes a multiparty system from a two party system. In chapter 3 I examined on the basis of party election broadcasts which parties are the most likely targets of negative campaigning in the Dutch multiparty system. The choice

of target is a rather neglected question in the literature that predominantly stems from the U.S. In the U.S. context there are a handful of studies that examine the choice of target. They do so in rare three candidate races or in the context of the primaries of the presidential elections (see Skaperdas and Grofman 1995; Haynes and Rhine 1998; Ridout and Holland 2010). The latter is a case of intraparty competition and the choice of target in a multiparty system is a case of interparty competition, as not all possible targets belong to the same party. I argue that not only vote-seeking, but also office-seeking considerations matter for the choice whom to attack in a multiparty system. Parties will take into account which parties are electorally the most beneficial to attack, but also think about which parties they wish to maintain a good relationship with in case of possible government participation after the elections. The findings show that large parties, ideologically proximate parties, parties close to the median party position and government parties are the most likely targets of negative campaigning in the Dutch multiparty system. This suggests that both vote and office-seeking considerations might play a role in this decision, but the first seem to be of more importance.

In chapter 4 I did not only examine the effects of party characteristics, but also the effects of the electoral context on the use of negative campaigning in Western Europe. The decision to go negative might not only be affected by party characteristics, but also characteristics of the election campaign in which parties compete, such as the level of electoral volatility, the closeness of the election and the formation of pre-electoral alliances. I examined this on the basis of party election broadcasts. The results show that party characteristics are much more important than the electoral context in explaining when parties go negative in Western Europe. The study also shows that the party characteristics derived from studies examining negative campaigning in a multiparty system such as government experience and median party distance help to explain negative campaigning in all three countries under study, including the British two party system. However, for all the party characteristics estimated, the effects in Britain were significantly different from the effects in Germany and the Netherlands, thereby suggesting that the context of the party system indeed matters for the use of negative campaigning by the parties competing in the elections.

The last empirical study examines whether candidate characteristics affect the use of negative campaigning by looking at one candidate's characteristic in particular, namely the party leader's gender. A considerable bulk of research in the field of negative campaigning is devoted to how the candidate's gender affects the use and content of negative campaigning. I examined on the basis of party election broadcasts whether this is also the case in the increasingly personalized election campaigns in these three parliamentary democracies. Although some scholars claim that election campaigns are becoming increasingly personalized (e.g. Mughan 2000; Farrell 2005; Poguntke and Webb 2005), no effects were found of a party leader's gender on the use of negative campaigning. Female party leaders do not differ from their male counterparts in the degree to which they make use of negative campaigning nor on the content of the attacks. There is one notable excep-

tion, however, namely Margaret Thatcher. Her campaigns were more negative than the ones run by male party leaders in the U.K. However, regarding her reputation as a strong leader with tough rhetoric and nickname 'Iron Lady', this does not come as a surprise. I therefore concluded that the difference is not a gender effect, but a 'Thatcher effect'.

Implications of the Research Findings

This dissertation offers an important step forward in unravelling several particular research questions on negative campaigning. However, what do these findings mean when I move beyond these specific research questions and look at the overall academic and public debate on negative campaigning or even broader discussions in politics or political science, such as the 'rise' in negative campaigning, negative campaigning in a non U.S. context, the personalization of politics and the 'Americanization' of election campaigns. What are the implications of our findings?

A rise in negative campaigning?
First of all, this study shows that there does not appear to be much reason for concern about an alleged rise of negative campaigning in Western Europe. Parties in Western Europe are not more likely to go negative nowadays than they were approximately 25 years ago. In addition, I did not find an increase in trait attacks, even though some scholars (e.g. Mughan 2000; Farrell 2005; Poguntke and Webb 2005) argue that campaigns in Western Europe are undergoing a process of personalization or presidentialization. So, the perception of a rise in negativity could be based on the idea that trait attacks, rather than other forms of criticism of opponents, would have increased over the past decades. Again, this study did not generate any supporting evidence. Consequently, the results of this study pose a challenge to claims of journalists, politicians and even some scholars (see for instance Praag 2005, 2007; Van Praag and Brants 2008; Hodess et al. 2000; Schweitzer 2010; Scammell and Semetko 1995) that negative campaigning is increasing in these countries. The growth of attack behaviour seems to be confined to the U.S., although even there this claim is contested (see Buell and Sigelman 2009; Lau and Pomper 2004).

Does this study allow for the conclusion that the perception of a rise in negative campaigning among journalists, politicians and voters simply wrong? Perhaps not. The fact that I did not see a rise in negative campaigning for this research period does not necessarily mean that the perception of growth of this campaign practice is incorrect. First of all, we must consider the limitations of this study. One of this study's restrictions is its focus on 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. Furthermore, the party election broadcast format has remained remarkably similar across time, is used in all these three Western European countries and comes closest to the political

ads most commonly subject of U.S. work on negative campaigning. Nevertheless, studying negative campaigning on the basis of party election broadcasts has its limitations.

These election broadcasts are primarily produced prior to the campaign and thus they do not reflect the campaign dynamics. In addition, the televised election debates reflect just a sole moment in the campaign. Therefore, this study does not register any dynamics during the campaign. In addition, it is not unlikely that political parties in Western Europe choose different outlets for their attack behaviour. Political advertising on television, radio, internet or print ads, is considered a useful campaign practice which allows for targeting of specific subgroups of the electorate. Not only do candidates or parties control the content of the ad, they also control when and where it is aired (Iyengar and McGrady 2007). However, the latter two benefits only ascribe to paid advertising, while I studied party election broadcasts aired during free government allocated broadcasting time. Western European parties deal with limited financial sources when it comes to political advertising and they have limited opportunities to purchase advertising time or space. Furthermore, attacks through non-party controlled sources might be regarded as more credible in the eyes of the voter. As a result, it can be beneficial to use a different outlet than party election broadcasts when attacking the opponent in these studied countries. Parties might be more inclined to attack their opponent at appearances in television/radio shows, party conferences and other campaign events where the free or uncontrolled media is present. While there was no increase in the attack behaviour of party leaders in televised election debates, I cannot exclude the possibility that differences in the perception of the attack behaviour of parties are the result of looking at different sources. Walter and Vliegenthart (2010) argue that Dutch voters might have perceived negative campaigning differently in the 2006 election campaign, depending on the communication channel they used to derive their information. They show that newspaper articles are four times more likely to contain trait attacks than party election broadcasts. So, it is possible that there was an increase in negativity in the news, which was not picked up by this study.

While I consider the strong quantitative focus of this research as one of its strengths, it can also be considered a weakness and can be the source for this difference in perception. In this across time and country study on negative campaigning I have focused on counting all critique on opponents. For reasons of reliability and validity, I did not focus on the harshness of the critique. As a result, I cannot rule out the possibility that studying the collected data with a more qualitative approach and an evaluative measurement of negative campaigning would lead to different findings. The perception that negative campaigning is on the rise might be based on an increasing harshness of attacks and not an increased amount of attacks.

There may be other reasons as well for the difference between our findings and the perception among voters, journalists, and politicians that negative campaigning would have risen. It might well be the case that the perception of an increase in negative campaigning is not based on the behaviour of political parties, but on the way that the media cover election campaigns. Journalists and editors determine what makes it into

news. Bad news and conflict are just far more newsworthy than good news and civility (Iyengar and McGrady 2007; Kriesi 2011; Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2003; Galtung and Ruge 1965) Therefore, the free or uncontrolled media might be more inclined to report negative campaigning over positive campaigning. In addition, news on specific individuals is more newsworthy than news on institutions (e.g. Galtung and Ruge 1965; Kriesi 2011). As a result, the free media might especially take an interest in attacks at specific politicians and/or about characteristics than attacks targeted at parties and/or about policy. The importance of conflict and personalization are said to have increased during the recent decades, as 'media logic' increasingly determines how politics in general and election campaigns in particular are covered nowadays (Swanson and Mancini 1996; Mazzoleni 1987, Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Brants and Van Praag 2005). The perceived rise of negative campaigning might stem from a different coverage of election campaigns. Thus, the media might be to source of this perception and not the political parties.

Finally, it also remains possible that the rise of negative campaigning is still forthcoming. Franklin (1992) shows that although Western European countries are experiencing a weakening in the relationship between the voter's social position and party preference, this process of particularization does not happen in each country at the same pace. Negative campaigning might be a similar phenomenon, where the U.S. is a forerunner of what is yet to come.

Personalization of politics?

The findings of this dissertation add to the discussion on personalization of politics and its consequences for information provision to voters. Scholars have argued that election campaigns would focus more on candidates and style and image than on the substantive content of issues (e.g. Mughan 2000; Farrell 2005; Poguntke and Webb 2005; Johnston and Kaid 2002; Geer 2006). As a consequence, voters would not be informed about issue positions of parties, so that they would lack information that is essential to make a reasoned electoral decision. This so-called 'personalization of politics' is not set in stone, however. The empirical evidence concerning the 'personalization of politics' thesis is, at best mixed (see e.g. Kriesi 2011; Karvonen 2009; Adam and Maier 2010; Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2009). Regardless the thin empirical evidence for the personalization thesis, it plays an important role in the campaign literature and could be regarded as a development possibly strengthening or causing a rise in trait attacks (see for instance McAllistar 2007; Farrell 2005; Mughan 2000). The findings in my thesis show that the number of trait attacks has not increased. Therefore, if indeed such a personalization of election campaigns is taking place, it has not yet generated attack behaviour. Moreover, the absence of a rise of trait attacks in this study could also be regarded as evidence against the personalization thesis. Concerns about how campaigns have become less issue oriented over the last decades, equally do not find much support from this study, because the bulk of attack behaviour is issue oriented. Negative campaigning seems to be mainly used to make clear to the voter how a party differs from the opponent policy wise. In U.S. studies

(see Geer 2006; Benoit 1999; West 2005) similar conclusions are drawn. The majority of attacks are issue attacks and there is no increase in personal attacks.

Americanization?

This study adds to the field of political communication in general as it tells us more about the extent to which election campaigns in Western Europe are 'Americanizing'. The alleged 'Americanisation' of Western European election campaigns has sparked a heated debate in the campaign literature on the consequences of modernizing campaign practices, such as political consultancy, targeted spending, direct mail, focus groups and negative campaigning. Scholars agree to some degree that election campaigns are 'globalizing' and becoming increasingly more similar, but disagree about the extent and nature of the U.S. influence (Scammell 1998; Plasser 2000; Mancini and Swanson 1996). The main question is whether European election campaigns have professionalized and become modernised in their own right (see for instance Scammell 1998), or that they have become more Americanized (see for instance Semetko 1991 et al.). 'Americanization' can happen through observing American election campaigns and/or trans human trade in political consultants and party executives (Baines et al. 2001). U.S. election campaigns are considered the international standard among political consultants and political parties (Scammell 1998; Blumler et al. 1996; Kavanagh 1995). Proponents of the 'Americanization' concept claim that there is a directional convergence and diffusion process going on between European and U.S. election campaigns. Proponents of the notion that Western European campaigns have modernized in their own right speak of a so-called shopping model approach. The latter suggests that Western European countries have adopted the most useful U.S. campaign techniques with modifications that take into account the national context while maintaining country- and culture-specific campaign styles and philosophies (Baines et al. 2001; Plasser 2000). As a result, the American campaign practices are most likely to be incorporated in these countries where electoral conditions are most similar (Scammell 1998).

Negative campaigning is in general regarded a U.S. campaign practice. The findings of this study contradict the notion of 'Americanization' of Western European election campaigns, as I see no convergence in the rise of negative campaigning as witnessed in the U.S. (Geer 2006; Benoit 1999). More evidence is present for the shopping model approach. As this study argues that parties in a multiparty system deal with a different cost benefit structure when deciding to go negative than in a two party system. Not only are there more potential costs, the benefits of going negative are less certain. Therefore parties will think twice before implementing this campaign practice. The country showing most resemblance with the U.S in its use of negative campaigning is the United Kingdom, which is electorally the most similar as it is also a two-party system. In general parties in Western European election campaigns also still deal with limited campaign budgets and restrictions on the purchase of airtime. This diminishes the role of paid advertising that is traditionally associated with negative campaigning. Not only do they have

fewer options then to target their specific audience with negative messages, they also do not have the resources to test attack ads before launching them. The contextual differences and our findings suggest a selective implementation of negative campaigning by political parties and their consultants in Western Europe. Although this campaign practice is regarded the key to electoral success among U.S. consultants, this is not instantly copied (Lau and Pomper 2004: 2; Lau and Sigelman, 2000: 13). I cannot exclude the possibility, however, that, while campaigns are becoming increasingly more important and are increasingly more professionalized in Western Europe, this will change in the future.

Party competition

Specifically, this dissertation adds to the work on party competition in general and advances the study of negative campaigning in particular. It has demonstrated the applicability of theories of negative campaigning beyond the U.S. context. Characteristics that affect negative campaigning of American candidates, such as incumbency status and competitive position in the polls, are also important predictors of negative campaigning by political parties in Western Europe. However, I did not find evidence for effects of specific candidate characteristics as found in U.S. studies (e.g. Kahn and Kenney 2004; Krebs and Hollian 2007; Lau and Pomper 2004). The study shows that for studying negative campaigning in Western Europe, one should take the characteristics of parties and the party system they operate in into account. This is understandable, as parties are the prime actors in European parliamentary democracies. The party system and its characteristics affect the manner in which parties compete for votes. These factors even seem to matter more than election characteristics when explaining the use of negative campaigning. By examining negative campaigning comparatively outside the U.S. context, this dissertation above all extends the theory by distinguishing explicitly between vote and office-seeking incentives that play a role in the decision making process of going negative. In the American literature the vote-seeking perspective predominates because getting into office is directly related to winning elections. However, vote-seeking and office-seeking incentives often conflict in a multiparty system and make the use of negative campaigning a complex decision. The results of this study strongly suggest that both vote as office-seeking incentives are of importance when explaining negative campaigning in Western Europe. To conclude, the study of negative campaigning should be of interest to anyone who studies party competition.

An agenda for future research

The study of negative campaigning is a rather new field itself. Since the work of Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) that stimulated scholarly interest for this phenomenon, much work has been done. This study contributes to this young field and its results suggest a number of avenues for future research, namely negative campaigning in the free media,

voter effects studies in multiparty settings, work on negative campaigning and the political elite and studies that methodologically model the dependence of attack behaviour. In the first place, future research could investigate negative campaigning in the free media. This could shine more light on the suggestion that the media are to blame for the perception of a rise in negative campaigning. Such work should attempt to distinguish between parties' actual behaviour and the coverage of this actual behaviour by journalists. One should be aware that negative campaigning is something different than the overall tone of media coverage, the first being attack behaviour by parties and the later the tone of the coverage of events by journalists. This kind of research is particularly important for a better understanding of negative campaign behaviour in countries in which paid advertising is limited and free media is quite important for parties in election campaigns, due to restrictions or limited election budgets.

Another avenue would be to study effects of negative campaigning on voters in a multiparty setting. Again most work in this area stems from the U.S (see Lau et al. 2007). I do not have reasons to suspect that voters are much different in multiparty systems than in the U.S. two party system, with the exception that they might have a different view of what constitutes negative campaigning or a different perception of what is acceptable. As attack behaviour might conflict with the political culture of consensus that often comes with the practice of coalition governments in a multiparty system. Furthermore, because of the large number of parties, multiparty systems offer voters more choices than the U.S. two party system. More research is necessary for understanding when negative campaigning is successful in a multiparty system. Such research could focus on questions such as when do voters turn against the attacked party or the attacking party, and when do these voters switch to the attacking party or third parties?

Another promising avenue for future research would be to study the role of political elite on the decision to go negative and the consequences of negative campaigning for elite behaviour. Present research has examined the perceptions on negative campaigning and its use among candidates and their consultants (e.g. Swint 1997; Francia and Herrnson 2007). Apart from these studies there has not been much attention for the political elite, the main focus has always been the voter (see for an overview of voter effect studies Lau et al. 2007). Nevertheless, the study on the use of negative campaigning is strongly based on assumptions about the goals that candidates and parties pursue, i.e. vote-seeking versus office-seeking (see Strøm and Müller 1999). In a multiparty system a trade-off between these goals has to be made when deciding to go negative. More knowledge on what exactly parties' incentives are and how they arrive at the decision to attack their opponent in a multiparty system, would contribute to the theory on the use of negative campaigning and party competition in general. Furthermore, in a multiparty system where coalition formation takes place after the elections, negative campaigning is arguably not without consequences for parties. Research should be done to validate these claims which are currently based on exemplary evidence (See for instance Van Praag 1991). Are parties less likely to govern together after attacking each

other severely in the campaign? And if they do so, does it endanger the stability of the coalitions formed, as relationships might remain disrupted. This was for instance suggested with the fall of the Dutch coalition government Balkenende IV which was due to defragmentation of the political landscape a marriage of convenience between the Christian Democratic Party (CDA) and Labour Party (PvdA) with a minor third party Christian Union (CU) after a hard fought campaign between the first two parties. The harsh attacks from the Christian Democratic Party (CDA) on the Labour Party leader (PvdA) Wouter Bos did not help the relationship between Wouter Bos and CDA party leader Jan Peter Balkenende and his spin doctor Jack de Vries who was also part of this cabinet.[42] Further research could for instance include in-depth interviews or an experimental vignette study with politicians and campaign managers in these multiparty systems.

The study of negative campaigning can benefit from methodological approaches that model the dependence in attack behaviour. First of all, attack behaviour of candidates or parties is not independent of the context they operate in. As suggested in this dissertation, there might be election and political system effects. Future studies should consider modelling negative campaigning hierarchically as done in chapter 3, but then incorporate also the country level next to the party x election, election and party level and include a substantial number of cases at the highest level. Second, attacks are often treated as independent observations. However, attack behaviour of a party or candidate is often a response to actions of an opponent. It may also follow from self-enforcing dynamics within a campaign. To understand these dynamics, the study on negative campaigning could benefit from times series models that include daily information about the sequence of events during a campaign and how parties respond to attacks in the media.

Finally, most studies in the field employ attacks, the attacker or the attacked as the unit of analysis, and treat the observations as independent. This does not adequately reflect reality. How parties act depends in large on how parties are tied into a larger web of political parties, which is certainly the case in a multiparty system. Parties are part of a larger network of parties with whom they have relationships of which the nature (positive or negative) can change over time. With exception of the few statistical studies modelling the choice of target in a dyadic model, the relationships between parties are often disregarded (exceptions are Ridout and Holland 2010 or chapter 2 in this study). These dyadic models connect the attacker with the attacking party. However, a multiparty system might not ask for a dyadic structure but a multi-relational work. The field of negative campaigning could benefit from the multidisciplinary approach of social network analysis. This method assumes that ties between actors are positive and is currently developing ways to incorporate conflict, contention or dissent in their models

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42   Reijns, Michel,'*CDA en PvdA hebben het even met elkaar gehad*', ANP, 2 March 2010; De hoofdrolspelers Balkenende en Bos, Leeuwarder Courant, 22 February 2010; Nieuwboer, Dirk Jacob, '*Jack en Wouter, dat gaat niet*', De Pers, 30 May 2008.

(See for instance Shwed and Bearman 2010; Bruggeman et al. 2011). All the suggested methodological approaches demand larger data collections on negative campaigning. This study has made a beginning with studying negative campaigning by 31 parties in 23 election campaigns in 3 countries.