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

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Are election campaigns in Western Europe becoming more negative? Under which circumstances do political parties decide to attack? Are there differences in negative campaigning between the British two-three party system and the Dutch and German multiparty systems, which have a political culture of bargaining and coalition cooperation? Whom do political parties target when there is more than one opponent to choose from?

As political parties in Western Europe lose their grip on the electoral market, the importance of election campaigns has increased, and it has been suggested that parties are now more likely than before to run an offensive campaign aimed at targeting political opponents. Although numerous studies on negative campaigning already exist, most academic 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 incentives coincide with office-seeking gains. This comparative study provides an empirical analysis of 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.

This dissertation demonstrates that there is not much evidence for a rise in negative campaigning in Western Europe and that only Britain resembles the U.S. in its level of negative campaigning. The results of this study strongly suggest that vote-seeking as well as office-seeking incentives are important in explaining negative campaigning in Western Europe. This dissertation thus contributes to a more general understanding of negative campaigning in its many facets and presents comparative theoretical and empirical work beyond the U.S. context.