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More negative when it matters less? Comparing party campaign behaviour in European and national elections

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ABSTRACT

Do parties campaign differently in different circumstances? Research seems to suggest that parties do indeed engage in harsh interparty attacks and fearmongering during ‘second-order’ elections, such as European elections/ elections to the European Parliament (EP), perhaps even to the same extent as during national elections. However, to the best of our knowledge, the differences in the campaign strategies used by parties in national and European elections have never been assessed systematically. In this article, we compare the content of election campaigns (negative tone, fear appeals, enthusiasm appeals) by 150+ parties across 28 countries that participated in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament and at least one national election between 2016 and 2020. Triangulating two independent expert surveys (EPEES_19 and NEGex) we show that, contrary to our expectations, parties do not use more negative campaigning during European elections. However, more extreme parties tend to use a more negative tone and fewer enthusiasm appeals during European than national elections.


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KEYWORDS Negative campaigning; fear; enthusiasm; expert survey; European elections; national elections

Introduction

Name calling, moral attacks, striking fear: almost all political campaigns in modern elections include some form of negative campaigning (Nai & Walter, 2015). Political communication scholars have carried out substantial

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research on negative campaigning in recent decades (for an overview, see Haselmayer, 2019; Lau *et al.*, 2007). Many studies show that negative campaigning can have harmful effects on democracies: it has been theorised to demobilise voters (Ansolabehere *et al.*, 1994) and create a more negative public mood overall, with lower political efficacy and trust (Brader, 2005), which can lead to a ‘spiral of cynicism’ (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), especially when combined with a negative emotional appeal.

Given the possible impact of negative campaigning on democracies, it is important to understand its workings: why and when do politicians ‘go negative’? This question has been asked, but most research has focused on a single country case, usually the US. While these studies, and the few comparative studies (e.g., Walter, 2014), provide important insights on the mechanics of negative campaigning, they leave a gap for more comparative research.

In this study, we aim to fill this gap by conducting comparative research on negative campaigning on a vertical level by comparing two levels of elections, namely, national and European. Doing so provides insights on how different electoral contexts influence politicians’ decisions to go negative on their opponents. The data used in this paper are a combination of two existing large-scale comparative expert surveys, one covering national elections between June 2016 and June 2022 (NEGex) and the other covering the 2019 elections for the European Parliament (EPEES_19). The datasets have identical variables measuring campaign content (negativity, fear, and enthusiasm appeals), which enabled this unique comparative study. By combining data on the overlapping elections from 26 European countries, we were able to test how contextual differences between elections influence campaign content, comparing supra-national vs. national and first- vs. second-order elections. Expert surveys on the campaign communication of political actors are particularly useful when comparative content analyses are not feasible or would limit the analysis to a specific communication channel (campaign ads, social media posts, etc.).

Overall, our study reveals that (i) campaigns do not seem to be harsher during European than national elections, with parties attacking significantly less often in EP elections than in national elections and using more enthusiastic rhetoric; at the same time (ii) and in line with our expectations, more extreme parties are more likely to rely on a negative tone during European than national elections; they are also less likely to use more positive and uplifting emotional appeals (enthusiasm) during EU than national elections.

The study was pre-registered (https://aspredicted.org/3W4_JN5). All data and codes are openly available for replication at the following OSF repository: <https://osf.io/whcbm/>

Hypotheses

To formulate expectations about differences in campaign negativity between national and European elections, it is first important to know in what ways national and European elections differ. Second, we need to link these differences in the contexts of the elections to knowledge about why politicians decide to go negative to be able to predict how the different contexts may lead to different campaign decisions. Attacking other parties is usually considered a conscious choice on the part of politicians (e.g., Lau & Pomper, 2004, p. 31; for a formal model see, e.g., Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995; for a critical assessment of the rational choice assumption, see Maier *et al.*, 2023). From this perspective, all campaign choices are made rationally to increase the likelihood of winning elections, and a cost–benefit analysis is carried out to assess whether attacking an opponent is beneficial in a specific context. The possible advantages of doing so are that negative ads are more effective in conveying campaign information (Bradley *et al.*, 2007) and more mobilising (Martin, 2004), and they can (relatively) enhance evaluations of the candidate supporting the attack ad (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Lau & Pomper, 2004). The major negative disadvantage is the backlash effect, namely, that voters’ dislike of negative campaign strategies generates negative feelings towards the attacker instead of the target (Mendoza *et al.*, 2024; Walter *et al.*, 2014). It can thus be assumed that different campaign strategies in different contexts are conscious choices; however, different contexts – in our case, national vs. European elections – might provide different incentives to go negative.

The European Union forms a supranational system level for the current 27 member states, in which around 450 million people live (for an introduction to the EU see, e.g., Cini & Borragán, 2022). Since 1979, the European Parliament (EP) has been directly elected by its citizens. Although EU citizens elect a parliament, the elections do not follow a common electoral system. In addition, some countries have different systems for national and EP elections. The influence of citizens on EU politics is considerably lower than their influence at the national level. Most importantly, EP elections have no real consequences for the composition of the government. The European Commission is the executive power of the EU and can be considered the government; however, its members and president are appointed by the EU member states and the European Council (which is formed of the heads of government of all EU member states), respectively, although these appointments require the approval of the European Parliament. Even if the influence of the elected EP on the Commission appears substantial at first glance, no government is formed through EP elections, unlike in national elections. Furthermore, the Commission does not need to have a permanent majority in the EP to carry out its work. The EP also faces high hurdles when it comes

to voting out the Commission. Therefore, the EU is often accused of having a 'democratic deficit' (e.g., Schmitter, 2000).

The differences between the institutional structures and processes of the EU and the nation states, which are often perceived as a lack of legitimacy on the part of the EU, have consequences for political competition. EP elections are often seen as so-called second-order elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980), because the impression is created that there is less at stake, as with local elections and elections to a parliament's second chamber. The second-order character of EP elections is reflected in lower voter turnout (e.g., Marquart *et al.*, 2020). In addition, EP elections have much lower visibility than national elections (e.g., de Vreese *et al.*, 2006; Schuck *et al.*, 2011). For instance, a comparative content analysis of the 2009 EP elections showed that, on average, only around one fifth of TV coverage in the weeks leading up to the elections focussed on the EU or on EP elections (Schuck *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, parties put less effort into running EP campaigns (e.g., Petithomme, 2012). Because comprehensive data on how parties organise their campaigns are notoriously difficult to obtain, this pattern can only be recognised for individual parties that disclose their expenditure. For example, the German Social Democrats spent €12.5 million on the 2004 European elections and €24 million on the 2005 federal elections. The gap for the 2009 elections was even more extreme (€9 million vs. €27 million) (Hertner, 2011).

Moreover, European election contests are often considered referenda on national politics. In line with voters who consider national issues more than European issues when deciding whom to vote for (e.g., Hix & Marsh, 2007), parties focus their campaigns on domestic issues and the performance of the national government (e.g., de Vreese, 2009). In sum, research indicates that political actors campaign differently in EP and national elections. The differences are often attributed to differing *levels of professionalism*, with such levels being lower in second-order elections (e.g., Tenscher, 2013) due specifically to their lower perceived importance.

Conceptually, however, the link between professionalism and negative campaigning is somewhat debatable. On the one hand, more professional campaigns should attack the political opponent(s) more often. Scholars agree that professionalism has two dimensions: campaign structures and campaign strategies (e.g., Tenscher *et al.*, 2016; Tenscher & Mykkänen, 2014). In terms of campaign structures, professionalism is reflected in a high level of financial, personnel, infrastructure, and communication resources (Gibson & Römmele, 2001; Strömbäck, 2009; Tenscher & Mykkänen, 2014). In terms of campaign strategies, professional campaigns are those that feature high levels of activities, including 'event and news management, narrowcasting, personalisation, free media or paid media activities' (Tenscher *et al.*, 2016, p. 98). Indeed, some studies explicitly mention the use of negative campaigning as an indicator of a professional campaign strategy

(Gattermann & Vliegenthart, 2019; Tenscher, 2007; Vliegenthart, 2012). With this in mind, we anticipate that negativity will be more frequently seen in more professional elections, that is, the national ones.

On the other hand, good reasons also exist to expect more attacks when resources are low. For instance, American research seems to suggest that candidates with fewer resources tend to attack more. Given the psychological effects of negative information (for a summary see, e.g., Soroka, 2014), criticism of the political opponent is considered a cost-effective way for actors with few resources to attract public attention as they 'need to get "more bang for the buck"' (Lau & Pomper, 2004, p. 32). Given the lower professionalisation of EP campaigns, we anticipate that political attacks will be *more* present than in national elections, which contradicts the rationale discussed above.

Beyond professionalism, however, other factors come into play conceptually to allow us to expect a difference in campaign tone between European and national elections. First, the high number of volatile voters in EP elections provides more motivation for going negative. Negative political ads are found to be more effective in conveying information to citizens, because they are noticed, processed, and remembered more than positive ads (Bradley *et al.*, 2007). Attack ads thus provide candidates who uses them more and better attention from voters, which is more important in European elections, where citizens are less sure of their votes and thus more sensitive to persuasion. Second, there is less to lose in European elections. Attacks can provoke a backlash against parties and reduce their standing in the eyes of voters (Walter *et al.*, 2014), which is something that parties naturally attempt to avoid from a strategic perspective because it could lead to reduced popular support during elections (e.g., Roese & Sande, 1993). However, greater or lesser success in European elections is not directly linked to one of the key goals of political parties, which is to participate in the exercise of power (i.e., to be part of the government). In this sense, a case could be made that parties see more aggressive tactics as less risky during European elections than during national ones because such attacks are less likely to provoke a backlash and threaten their main objective, which remains to gain power. Finally, parties might also use European elections as a platform to gain attention for the next, and more important, national elections: given the second-order nature of European elections, the topics discussed in relation to them are relevant at the national level and thus also to the next national elections.

To sum up, we anticipate that negativity will be higher in European elections than in national elections: in European elections, there are more volatile voters (more easily swayed by negativity); the parties have less to lose because success is only very indirectly related to their main goal of governing in the national arena; and campaigning in such lower-stakes elections could still capture the attention of the public. We thus formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: Parties are more likely to go negative on their rivals during EP elections than during national elections.

However, it would still be very surprising if *all* parties campaign more negatively in EP than in national elections. More precisely, we expect that extreme parties are more likely to go negative than parties located more towards the centre of the political spectrum because they have more to disagree on with the other parties (Walter *et al.*, 2014). This is especially the case in multi-party systems, because moderate parties might have to refrain from attacking other (moderate) parties due to coalition opportunities, but as the chance that extreme parties will be in government is smaller, they are less limited in how negatively they can behave. This tendency towards greater negativity among extreme parties overlaps with the challenger effect: extreme parties are often also challengers, and opposition parties are more likely to go negative than incumbent parties (e.g., Benoit, 2007), which, being in government, would suffer more from a backlash effect. In contrast, challengers have less to lose and everything to win by going negative. Furthermore, they must persuade most voters to change their party preferences, since most voters supported the incumbent party, and attacking the incumbent party is an almost necessary step in persuading voters to change allegiance. Lastly, challengers are also in greater need of attention and visibility because incumbent parties gain more media attention (Hopmann *et al.*, 2011).

In the context of European elections, the effect of extreme parties' greater negativity might be even stronger. This expectation fits with second-order election theory, which proposes that extreme parties have a favourable position in second-order elections. It also fits with the context of second-order elections: citizens use these as opportunities to criticise incumbent parties, and extreme parties can thus align with this critical sentiment and attack the incumbent parties more easily without provoking a backlash. Previous research also shows that Eurosceptic parties, which are often also more extreme, are more negative in their campaigns than Europhilic parties and this strategy that is related to electoral success in EP elections (Nai *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, extreme parties have an additional target in EP elections. In national elections, extreme parties behave like other opposition parties and focus their attacks on the government. In EP elections, extreme parties, on the one hand, maintain their criticism of the national government – because, according to second-order election theory, national issues are at the centre of the debate in European elections and the government is responsible for the state of the nation – while, on the other, they are often critical of Europe (e.g., Nai *et al.*, 2022), albeit for different reasons (e.g., De Vries & Edwards, 2009). Thus, the EU becomes an additional target for them. In EP elections, extreme parties therefore have several objects that they can

attack, which, in sum, increases the degree of their negativity over that shown in national elections. All these points suggest that:

H2: The difference between the parties' campaigns in European and national elections is stronger for more extreme parties than for non-extreme parties.

Methodology

Data

In order to investigate whether parties adopt different campaign strategies in national and European elections, we triangulate evidence from two existing expert surveys that have been used in previous studies to retrace the content of party campaigns during the 2019 EP elections (EPEES_19; e.g., Nai *et al.*, 2022) and the content of party campaigns in national elections worldwide between 2016 and 2022 (NEGex; e.g., Maier & Nai, 2022; Nai, 2020). The two datasets used exactly the same procedure to collect data about the content of party election campaigns in terms of expert selection and recruitment and measurement of key variables (e.g., tone of the campaign); in both cases, a pool of selected experts was contacted in the direct aftermath of each election and asked to fill in a standardised survey. In both cases, the experts were scholars with proven expertise (via either their publications or self-descriptions on their institutional pages) in elections, political behaviour, and political communication in the country for which they were asked to provide ratings. For the original EPEES_19 dataset, 363 experts provided their ratings, that is, an average of 14.0 experts per country. For the NEGex dataset and the 38 national elections included in the comparison with the European elections (see below), 789 experts provided their ratings, that is, an average of 28.0 experts per election. Table A1 (Appendix; see also <https://osf.io/whcbm/>) lists all the elections included in the analysis and the number of expert ratings collected for each.

In the EPEES_19 dataset, 28.5 per cent of the experts were female (28.8 per cent in the NEGex data), and 94 per cent held a PhD (91.2 per cent in NEGex). The average EPEES_19 expert was relatively centrist, scoring 4.0 on a 0–10 left–right scale (3.6 in NEGex), very familiar with the election they were asked to rate (7.6 on a 0–10 scale; 8.0 in NEGex), and considered answering the survey questions to be an averagely easy task (5.0 on a 0–10 scale; 6.0 in NEGex).

Measuring the content of election campaigns via expert ratings, as described below, might a priori seem somewhat strange, as the literature traditionally relies on measures coming from systematic content analysis, both manual and automated (e.g., Adams & McCorkindale, 2013). Yet, using experts comes with substantive advantages, particularly in a comparative setting such as that studied here. Expert surveys are usually cheap, fast,

and able to provide standardised measurements for phenomena that are traditionally more arduous to measure in a large-scale comparative context, marred by differences in culture and language, such as discursive elements of political competition. When it comes to party positions, experts tend to agree quite consistently with each other (Hooghe *et al.*, 2010; Whitefield *et al.*, 2007) and to reflect the perceptions of citizens (Bakker *et al.*, 2015). Yet, expert surveys are not free from methodological hurdles (Budge, 2000; McDonald *et al.*, 2007), most notably when it comes to the ideological neutrality of experts themselves (Curini, 2010, 2021; Wright & Tomlinson, 2018). Specifically, a case could be made that experts, being motivated reasoners like all of us, might be more critical when providing ratings for candidates and parties that do not align with their own ideological positions. This is a very important critique, and we address it upfront by leveraging adjusted measurements of key variables (see below).

Triangulation between the two data sources yields a selection of 152 parties, across 26 European countries,¹ for which a datapoint in terms of campaign content (negative tone, fear appeals, enthusiasm appeals; see below) exists for both the 2019 European election and a national election campaign between 2016 and 2019. Table A2 in the Appendix lists all the parties and indicates the year in which the national elections took place. Where there were multiple national elections in the 2016–2022 period (e.g., two elections were held in Austria, in 2017 and 2019, respectively), the measures of campaign content take the average value.

Measuring campaign content

In both the EPEES_19 and NEGex datasets, experts were asked to rate, for each party, the ‘tone’ of their campaign on a scale ranging from –10 (very negative) to +10 (very positive), which we recoded into a 0–10 measure of ‘negative tone’. Additionally, we asked the experts to rate on a 0–10 scale the extent to which parties used ‘fear appeals’ (e.g., Brader, 2005; Crigler *et al.*, 2006), that is, rhetoric ‘intended to awaken and fuel the anxieties of the public by delivering worrisome messages and imagery focused on problems and threats’ (quoted from the EPEES_19 and NEGex questionnaires), as well as their use of ‘feel-good appeals’, that is, messages ‘intended to convey hope, enthusiasm and even pride in the public by delivering messages associated with success and good times’ (quoted from the questionnaires). Negative tone and fear appeals reflect harsher, more confrontational forms of campaign content; enthusiasm appeals, inversely, reflect a more uplifting, positive tone. The three variables are indeed strongly correlated. Negative tone and fear appeals are positively correlated, $r(189) = 0.91$, $p < .001$, whereas negative tone and enthusiasm appeals are negatively correlated, $r(188) = -0.86$, $p < .001$, as are fear and enthusiasm appeals, $r(188) = -0.82$, $p < .001$; these

trends are for EU elections, but they exist in a very similar way for national elections. As negative tone, fear appeals, and enthusiasm appeals refer to conceptually distinct phenomena, we run separate analyses for each.

As mentioned earlier, the use of expert ratings to measure political phenomena has been criticised in the past, most notably for the potential presence of ideological biases in expert judgments (Curini, 2010, 2021; Wright & Tomlinson, 2018). Given that academia is notoriously skewed towards the liberal left (e.g., Carl, 2015; Gross, 2013; Maranto & Woessner, 2012), such critiques cannot simply be ignored. More specifically, what cannot be excluded is that experts provide evaluations and judgments that stem, in part, from motivated reasoning mechanisms – that is, judgements that are cognitively biased against information at odds with their personal ideological profile. Very concretely, the risk is that experts tend to rate more harshly parties that are ideologically distant from them, which, in our case, could lead to such parties being assigned higher scores for negativity and fearmongering.

How can we account – and correct – for such a possible bias? Following Walter and Van der Eijk (2019), we computed adjusted measures of campaign content that are ‘net’ of such ideological effects. The computation procedure is relatively straightforward and consists of three easy steps: (i) for each party, the ideological distance between the party and the average expert is calculated;² this new variable indicates how ideologically ‘distant’ or ‘close’ the average expert is to each specific party; (ii) for each party, their score on the campaign dimension (e.g., negative tone) is then regressed on the variable computed in the previous step (ideological distance between the party and the average expert); (iii) the *regression residual* of this regression, which simply indicates the part of y (in the example, campaign tone) that is *not* explained by x (the ideological distance between the party and the average expert), is directly saved as the adjusted variable (in the example, the adjusted measure of campaign tone). In doing so:

regression can be used to eliminate partisan bias because it allows two components to be distinguished in the biased perception of [...] the dependent variable. One component is the regression prediction, which is accounted for by partisan preferences. The other component is the residual, which is independent of such preferences and can, thus, be regarded as the perception from which partisan biases have been eliminated (Walter & Van der Eijk, 2019, p. 372).

We replicate all analyses using these adjusted measures instead of the original ones.

Covariates

We take into account two important covariates. First, the ideology of parties is measured via the information found on their Wikipedia pages, following a

procedure discussed in Nai (2020). Recent evidence suggests that Wikipedia is a precise and reliable source for party ideological classification (Herrmann & Döring, 2023), and our variables do indeed correlate strongly with independent information, for example, that presented in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; Polk *et al.*, 2017), Benoit and Laver (2007), and the Manifesto Project Dataset (MPD; Volkens *et al.*, 2016); see Nai (2020) for more details about measurement. The variable varies between 1 ('far left') and 7 ('far right'). From this variable, we created a binary variable that measures party extremity (the two most extreme scores on both sides, that is, values 1, 2, 6, and 7 on the ideology variable).

Furthermore, the models control for an important additional covariate, which has been shown to strongly drive down campaign negative tone, namely, party incumbency status (e.g., Nai, 2020). Therefore, our models control for incumbency status in national elections, i.e., whether the party was a member of the national government during the 2019 European election. Furthermore, we control for the country's electoral system (proportional representation vs. majoritarian) and the geographical region of the country (Northern, Southern, Eastern, or Western Europe).

Results

Are campaigns during European and national elections similar in terms of their use of a negative tone and fear appeals? The first clear result is that parties tend to campaign very similarly across these two types of elections. For any given party, the usage of negativity, fear appeals, and enthusiasm appeals in European elections correlates very strongly with their campaign behaviour during national elections (average across national elections, if multiple): $r(150) = 0.79$, $p < .001$ (negative tone), $r(150) = 0.79$, $p < .001$ (fear appeals), and $r(149) = 0.73$, $p < .001$ (enthusiasm appeals). The similarity between the two types of elections also appears clearly when visualised as scatterplots (Figure 1). Note that the diagonal lines, in all panels, are not regression lines but simply $x = y$ dissecting lines; that is, they split the Cartesian space in terms of whether the campaign dimension (e.g., negative tone, top-left panel) was more present during EU than national elections (above the line) or the opposite (below the line).

Overall, parties that use a more negative tone or fear appeals in national elections tend to do the same during EU elections. This finding seems especially true for far-right extreme parties, such as the neo-fascist Golden Dawn party (XA, Greece), Hungary's Fidesz, the UK's UKIP, Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD), The Netherlands' Party for Freedom (PVV), and Slovakia's ultraright party Kotleba. Examples of parties showcasing a substantively different strategy in the two types of elections, illustrated in the figure by parties that are positioned far from the central diagonal, are rare. The

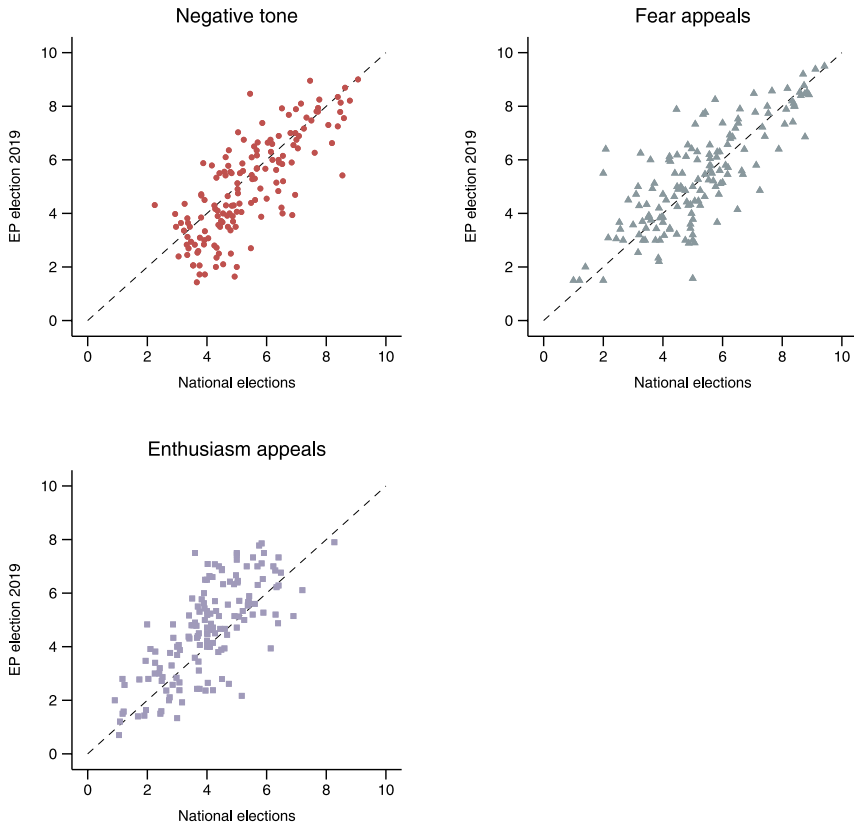


Figure 1. Campaign dimensions in European and national elections.

$N = 152$ (parties). Where multiple national elections were held (e.g., in Austria), the score for campaign tone is the average across all elections. Note: The dashed dissecting diagonal line is *not a linear fit*; instead, it simply reflects the situation in which the campaign dimension is the same across the two types of elections. Parties above (below) the dashed line score higher (lower) during EU elections than during national elections on the campaign component (e.g., negative tone).

Social Democrats in The Netherlands (SP) made more intense use of a negative tone during EU than national elections, and this seems to be the case also for La Republique en Marche (REM), the party of France's President Emmanuel Macron. Inversely, the Liberal Party in Denmark (V) and the Democratic Party in Slovenia (SDS) used substantively more fear appeals during national elections than in the 2019 EP election.

The fact that a substantial part of the observations, particularly (in [Figure 1](#)), for campaign tone, seem to be located *below* the diagonal dissecting line suggests that parties tend to use harsher campaigns during national, rather than European, elections. A paired-sample t-test confirms this impression; while the average negative tone of parties during national elections is 5.4 out of 10 ($SD = 0.1$), the average is just above 5.0 ($SD = 0.2$) for EU elections.

The difference, while not extremely strong, is statistically significant, $t(151) = 3.88, p < .001$. Importantly, this finding goes against our first expectation (H1), according to which parties tend to go *more* negative during EU elections. Moreover, no significant difference seems to exist between the two types of elections when it comes to the use of fear appeals, $t(151) = -1.20, p = .230$.

Additionally, we find that during EP election campaigns parties tend to use more enthusiasm appeals than they do during national elections, $t(151) = -6.03, p < .001$. Hence, we reject H1, that campaigns are more likely to go negative on their rivals during European than national elections; indeed, the opposite seems to be the case.

Before turning to the second hypothesis (H2), it is worth considering that the use of negative tone, fear appeals, and enthusiasm appeals is, by and large, driven by very similar sets of determinants in EU and national elections. This evidence is what appears from [Figure 2](#), which reports the results of multilevel regressions where we regressed the content of election campaigning in EU and national elections, separately, over a series of characteristics of the parties and countries under investigation. As the figure shows, for instance, more extreme parties tend to make stronger use of negativity and fear appeals and weaker use of enthusiasm appeals in both EU and national elections, as do parties towards the right of the spectrum. Inversely, parties that are part of the national government make stronger use of enthusiasm appeals in both types of elections and weaker use of negative and fear appeals (in both types of elections). Other factors, such as differences in electoral systems, which could provide an incentive to campaign differently, cannot explain the differences between the campaign communication of parties in national and European elections. The full results with non-standardised variables are presented in Tables A3 to A5 (Appendix). Figure A1, also in the Appendix, estimated the same models but using standardised dependent variables.

By and large, what influences campaign content in EU elections seems to do the same in national elections. The question is whether these determinants – and one in particular, namely, parties' levels of extremism – exert a *stronger* effect in EU than in national elections. This is what we expect (H2) and is discussed below.

Our second hypothesis postulates that it is, in particular, more *extreme* parties that tend to use harsher campaigns during European elections, and we find convincing evidence pointing in this direction. First, extreme parties tend to go more negative during national than EU elections, $t(90) = 5.01, p < .001$. More importantly, extreme parties are significantly more likely to use fear appeals during EU than national elections, $t(55) = -1.75, p = .086$. While the magnitude of the effect should not be overestimated (Cohen's $d = 0.16$), its direction is rather clear.

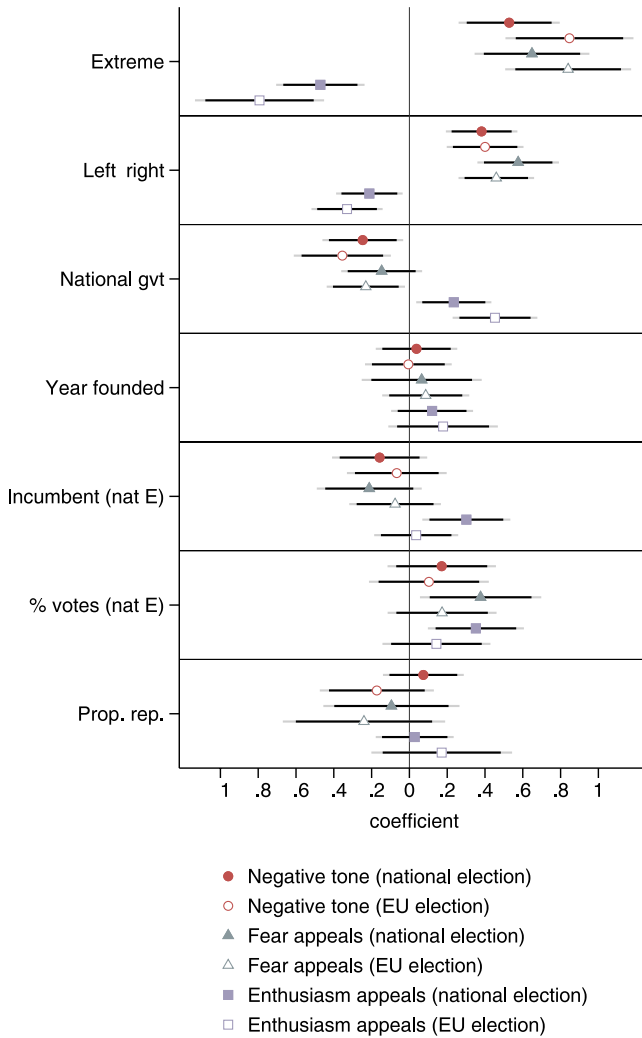


Figure 2. Drivers of campaign dimensions.

Note: Coefficient plot with 90% (inner range) and 95% (outer range, in light grey) confidence intervals, with robust standard errors. All independent variables are standardised for comparability ($M = 0, SD = 1$). Models are multilevel linear regressions, with parties nested into countries. Models controlled by country region. The full results with unstandardised variables are in Tables A3 to A5 (Appendix).

These effects are, however, only from bivariate models and could thus suffer from the presence of confounding factors. A series of multivariate regressions confirms the presence of effects in the direction of our expectations. [Figure 3](#) presents coefficient plots from regressions that estimate the difference in campaign content (negative tone, fear appeals, enthusiasm appeals) between EU and national elections. We have computed such

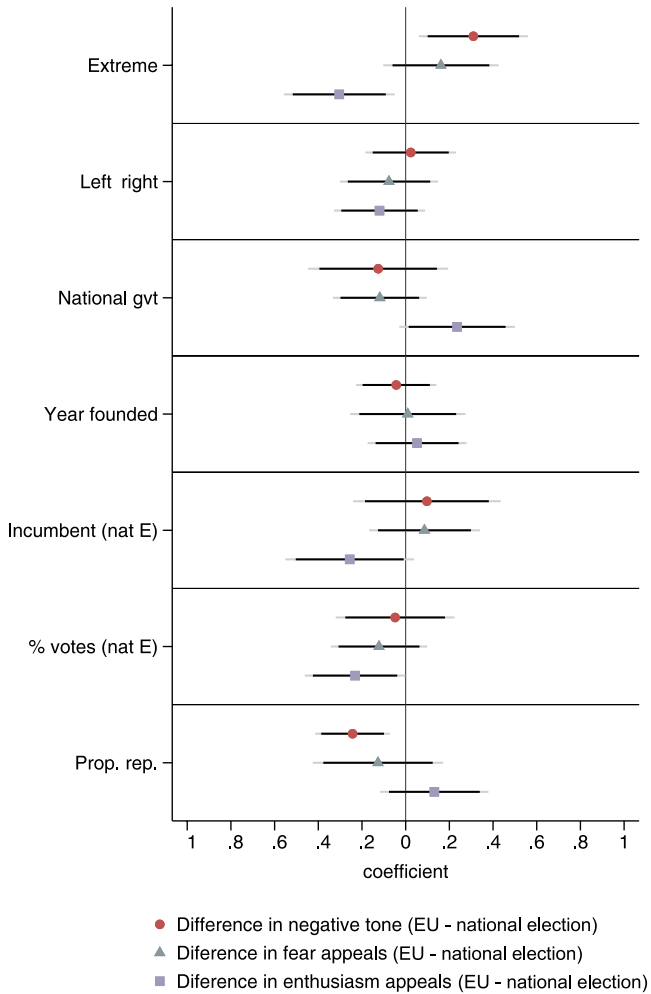


Figure 3. Drivers of differences between European and national elections.

Note: Coefficient plot with 90% (inner range) and 95% (outer range, in light grey) confidence intervals with robust standard errors. All independent variables are standardised for comparability ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$). Models are multilevel linear regressions, with parties nested into countries. Models controlled by region. Positive coefficients indicate that the campaign dimension (e.g., negative tone) was more present in EU than in national elections; negative coefficients indicate the opposite. The full results with unstandardised variables are presented in Table A6 (Appendix).

comparative variables by subtracting the latter from the former; hence, positive scores indicate that the campaign content was more present during EU than national elections (e.g., campaigns were more negative).

We regressed these comparative variables on party extremity (binary variable) plus a series of covariates: party ideology, whether the party was a member of the government during the EU elections, the year the party was

founded, whether the party was the incumbent during the national elections, the percentage of votes the party received during the national elections (which we use as a proxy of party size), the electoral system of the country (proportional representation vs. majoritarian electoral system), and the geographical region of the country (Northern, Southern, or Eastern Europe; reference category: Western Europe). Figure 3 plots the results of three hierarchical multivariate regressions in which candidates are nested within countries. Because the plot uses standardised variables ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$), the magnitude of all effects can be compared across variables. Coefficients to the right of the vertical line (0) indicate that the variable is associated with a stronger presence of the campaign content (e.g., negative tone) during EU elections; coefficients to the left of the vertical line indicate that the variable is associated with a stronger presence of that campaign content during national elections. Confidence intervals at the 95 per cent (outer bound) and 90 per cent (inner bound) levels are reported in the plot. The full results with non-standardised variables are presented in Table A5 (Appendix). Figure A2, also in the Appendix, estimated the same models but using standardised dependent variables.

As the figure shows, extreme parties are associated with a more negative tone during EU elections. If the effect for fear appeals is not statistically significant, parties make less use of enthusiasm appeals during EU elections, providing an *a contrario* confirmation of our general expectation: more extreme parties tend to campaign more harshly during EU than national elections.

These results resist a series of robustness checks based on models with alternative specifications. First, the models resist the addition of additional contextual controls, such as the level of unemployment in the country, gross domestic product (GDP), share of immigration, turnout during the 2019 EP elections, and year in which the country joined the EU (Table A7, Appendix). Second, a series of models that excludes all national elections that happened in 2020 – a year that can certainly be considered as an outlier in many ways, due to the preponderance of the COVID-19 pandemic – shows globally similar (if weaker) results (Table A8). Third, models that control for the number of experts that provided ratings for campaign content for each party and exclude cases in which fewer than three expert ratings were collected again show robust results (Table A9). Fourth, the results are also robust in models that exclude parties' left-right position as a covariate (Table A10), which could interact in an unwanted way with our main predictor (ideological extremity). However, this does not seem to be the case: models with and without parties' left-right positioning as a covariate yield very comparable results for our key variable. Table A11 presents results for alternative models that use left-right as a categorical variable, with a centrist position the reference category. Results are more nuanced, and show that negativity is stronger in EU elections in particular for more

left-wing parties, whereas parties towards both extremes use less enthusiasm appeals; note that these additional models are weakened by lower N at the extremities of this categorical ideological scale. Fifth, and this is a particularly important set of robustness checks, we ran models using the 'adjusted' variables for campaign content described in the methodological section, which filter out the effect of ideological differences between experts and the parties they are evaluating. To be able to compare the variables, which are regression residuals, we standardised them ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$). The results using these adjusted variables are perfectly in line with the main results discussed above (see Table A12): more extreme parties use a more negative tone and fewer enthusiasm appeals during EU than national elections; we can confidently exclude that the trends shown here result from ideological biases in experts. Finally, the models in Table A13 estimate, all things being equal, the effects of parties' general positions towards European integration (from 0 'very negative' to 10 'very positive', also estimated by experts) on campaign content instead of party extremeness. The results show that more positive attitudes towards EU integration are associated with less harsh campaigns (lower negative tone, fewer fear appeals, and more enthusiasm appeals) during EU than national elections. Given that more extreme parties tend to be substantially less favourable towards EU integration, $r(144) = -0.66$, $p < .001$, this result is not surprising. It does indicate, however, that it is not simply pure ideological positioning that matters; rather, more extreme issue positions, in this case, towards the EU, matter as well.

Conclusion and discussion

Mutual harsh attacks by opposing politicians are substantial parts of modern electoral campaigns, to the point that we can hardly imagine any political confrontation without any forms of critiques and attacks. Negative campaigning is an influential phenomenon in contemporary societies and may affect the democratic process, both at the individual level (e.g., increased disaffection with politics and even increased support for affective polarisation and political violence; Martin & Nai, 2024; Nai & Young, 2024) and the contextual level (e.g., reduced deliberation and constraints on cooperation between political parties in the post-electoral phase). It is therefore important to understand the underpinnings of negative campaigning. Unfortunately, research in this area has mostly focused on single-country cases, in particular, the US, with only limited comparative research (but see, e.g., Maier & Nai, 2022; Valli & Nai, 2022; Walter, 2014). As a consequence, the role of structural and contextual constraints in the decision to go negative during election campaigns remains poorly understood.

Our study added to the general understanding of the structural drivers of negative campaigning by investigating the influence of the electoral context aiming, more specifically, at identifying whether different patterns of political aggressiveness exist between first- and second-order elections. We analysed the most recent national election campaign and the 2019 EP election campaign of 152 European parties, leveraging a triangulation between two expert surveys about the content of election campaigns in a comparative fashion. Expert surveys are particularly useful when comparative content analyses are not feasible or would narrow the analysis to a specific communication channel. The results of this analysis yielded two important findings. First, unexpectedly, campaigns do not seem to be harsher during European than national elections overall: parties attack significantly less often in EP elections (than in national elections) and use more enthusiastic rhetoric when campaigning for European elections; however, there are no differences in the use of fear appeals. Second, and this time in line with our expectations, more extreme parties are more likely to rely on a negative tone during European than national elections; they are also less likely to use more positive and uplifting emotional appeals (enthusiasm) during EU than national elections. All in all, and having withstood several robustness checks, our results show that more extreme parties campaign more harshly during EU elections.

This study is, of course, not without limitations. First, the results of this article naturally apply only within the European context and should not be generalised outside this case. Moreover, the scope of our investigation once more neglects to include cases outside of the well-investigated West, although this is simply the result of our case selection, that is, a comparison of national elections and the 2019 EP election. Further research that goes beyond this geographical focus and, ideally, includes data from Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic (WEIRD) countries is envisioned, leveraging the global scale of the NEGex dataset. Second, the fact that the comparison is drawn at a single point in time – around the 2019 EP election – makes it hard to exclude the potential effect of any exogenous factors that might have affected the behaviour of parties across the board. The data for national elections (NEGex) cover elections between June 2016 and June 2022, thus including a (limited) number of electoral contests that took place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the strong rally-around-the-flag effect driven by national crises such as the pandemic (Bækgaard *et al.*, 2020; Schraff, 2021), it is not unlikely that parties were somewhat less confrontational (e.g., against the incumbent) than they would have been in pre-pandemic times. The opposite can, of course, also be argued, with parties being provided with new ammunition to criticise incumbents depending on their (poor) management of the crisis. Similarly, the timing of European and national elections could be relevant. If a European election

is held shortly after a national election, the larger and governing parties are in a so-called honeymoon period, where the winning results of the previous election reflect well on them and lead to higher votes in the EP election (Hix & Marsh, 2007; Reif & Schmitt, 1980). After this period, the previously described effect of challenger success gains from this honeymoon effect (Schulte-Cloos, 2018). A similar effect is found in the other direction, whereby European elections also influence the results of national elections. If specific parties are more successful in the European election and the national election is held shortly after that election, a spill-over effect occurs where these parties are also more successful in the national election (Schulte-Cloos, 2018), likely affecting the strategic decision to go negative. Unfortunately, we do not have quite enough cases to test for these additional expectations in full, but further research, ideally including more national elections and at least another round of EU elections, should consider timing effects as well. Finally, expert surveys are sometimes, understandably, met with scepticism. We hope that the robustness and reliability checks discussed above provide enough evidence about the advantages and soundness of this approach in our case.

These limitations notwithstanding, our study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, empirically, it adds a new dimension of comparative research to the literature on negative campaigning, where the *level* of an election, specifically, is taken into account, and the election context is more general. To date, the reasons that second-order elections might be different comprise a black box that we have opened with the help of a unique dataset. Our findings show that election level does have an impact on campaigning, at least, for some parties. Second, theoretically, the study consolidates existing evidence about the differential usage of aggressive rhetoric by more extreme parties. Extreme parties are more likely to go negative in all types of campaigns, and even more so during European elections, in line with research signalling they are more likely to benefit electorally from going negative (Nai *et al.*, 2022). Third, conceptually, the study hints at an expanded palette of considerations that parties take into account when deciding whether to attack their rivals or not that is related to the scope and level of the election. Thus, research investigating the (strategic) campaign behaviour of parties, most notably in a comparative fashion, should strive to account for this factor as well.

Notes

1. Belgium is not included in the comparison, as no data for this country exist in the NEGex dataset. Nor is Cyprus, as there is no overlap between the parties included in the EPEES_19 dataset and those included in the NEGex dataset for this country.

2. The original measures of party ideological position (scale of 1–7) and expert ideological position (self-rating on a scale of 0–10) have been recoded into a scale of 0–1 for comparability; the absolute value of the difference between the two recoded variables gives an indication of the ideological distance between the candidate and the average expert (scale of 0–1, where 1 indicates maximum distance).

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