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When They Go Low, We Gloat

How Trait and State Schadenfreude Moderate the Perception and Effect of Negative Political Messages

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Abstract: We investigate whether Schadenfreude – finding pleasure in others' misfortune – moderates the perception and effects of negative political messages ("negative campaigning"). We present the results of three experiments, two conducted in the United States with samples of 1,722 and 1,408 respondents surveyed via MTurk, and the other conducted in The Netherlands with a sample of 143 undergraduate students. In all studies respondents were exposed to a positive or negative message on a given issue and asked afterward to evaluate the message (message perception) and the target of the message (effect of the message). Studies 1 and 2 tested for the moderating effect of "trait" Schadenfreude – that is, to what extent respondents are likely to experience Schadenfreude in their everyday life, whereas Study 3 tested for the effects of "state" Schadenfreude via a stimulus intended to elicit it as a reaction. Results show that (1) Schadenfreude moderates the perception of the negative messages; people with low trait Schadenfreude react strongly (and negatively) to attacks; (2) state Schadenfreude does not have as strong an effect as trait Schadenfreude; (3) Schadenfreude only marginally moderates the direct effect of the negative message on the evaluation of the target politician.

Keywords: political communication, Schadenfreude, negative messages, party and candidate evaluation, experiment

Negative campaigning is to electoral democracy as tourism is to Venice: ubiquitous, often loud and vulgar, and – some argue – nefarious for its fragile and venerable foundations. Indeed, a large body of research shows that negative campaigning – that is, attacking the opponents instead of promoting one's own program or ideas (Lau & Pomper, 2004; Nai & Walter, 2015) – has the potential of depressing political efficacy, hampering participation, and broadly fostering a gloomier public mood (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Thorson et al., 2000; Yoon et al., 2005; but see Geer, 2006). However, and perhaps surprisingly, much less clear is the extent to which negative campaigning "works," from an electoral perspective. To date, research on the effectiveness of negative campaigning in degrading evaluations of the target is largely inconclusive (Lau et al., 2007). Whether negative messages can as intended harm the target or, instead, end up unintentionally harming the sponsor of the message is a question that remains unanswered. The "backlash effect" against the sponsor (Roese & Sande, 1993) may take place if voters perceive the attack as ungrounded, inappropriate, or quite simply too dreadful for their taste. Given that voters usually *do* find negative campaigns inappropriate and generally not really to their taste (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011), this risk is more than theoretical.

A recent body of research suggests that the effects of negative messages are a function of individual differences, and that personal characteristics – such as the Big 5

personality traits (Weinschenk & Panagopoulos, 2014) or tolerance to negativity (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011) – moderate the reception and treatment of political messages. In this article, we contribute to this growing research agenda and investigate the extent to which trait Schadenfreude – that is, the tendency to experience pleasure when witnessing others' misfortune (Feather & Nairn, 2005; James et al., 2014) – can play such a moderation role for the perception and effectiveness of negative messages. As we will show in the following, we are able to contribute to the existing body of research on negative political campaigning by introducing a new moderator – the concept of Schadenfreude to the field of mediated political communication.

Negative Campaigning and Individual Differences

Some people are more tolerant than others when they are exposed to negative political messages:

For some people, "anything goes" when it comes to negative campaigning. These people believe that candidates should be free to attack their opponents in whatever way they choose. For other people, certain types of negative messages "cross the line" and insult their sensibilities regarding public decency and fairness (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011, p. 309).

Against this backdrop, scholars found numerous moderators for negative political messages. Weinschenk and Panagopoulos (2014) found that people scoring low on *agreeableness* seem to be less likely to be persuaded by negative political messages. Using partisanship as moderator, Mutz (2015) found partisans in general to be more prone to negativity and conservatives in particular to react stronger to incivility (see also Muddiman & Stroud, 2017 for a discussion on “partisan incivility”). Fridkin and Kenney (2011) established a very specific moderator, namely, “tolerance toward negativity” and found incivility to be especially powerful, that is, persuasive for citizens low in tolerance for negative messages. Similar to tolerance toward negativity, Mutz (2015) found “conflict avoidance” to be particularly important when processing and reacting to negative messages. While these are valuable contributions to the question of whether negative political messages are acceptable, valuable, persuasive, and shed light on the inconclusive body of research on negativity effects, all of these moderators refer to (a) personality in a very broad manner, (b) cognitive evaluations of arguments (and politicians) from an “information processing” perspective (is that a “good” and “valid” argument), or (c) social norms of what is and what is not acceptable in political conflict and (mediated) political communication.

However, negative campaigning does not appeal only to recipients’ moral convictions and cognitive evaluations of arguments but also heavily to *emotional* reactions (Brader, 2005; Valentino et al., 2011). After all, attacking a political campaign does not only work through cognitive processes, but potentially triggers anger, anxiety, outrage, or disgust – which are as important as cognitive processes and social or moral convictions about normative “good” or “bad” political behavior, if not more important (e.g., Marcus et al., 2000).

Schadenfreude and Negativity

Given the importance of emotional reactions to negative campaigning, it seems obvious that we should also include “emotional” moderators in the study of negative campaigning. In this article we test one of these emotional moderators, related to the positive perception of negative messages – Schadenfreude. To be sure, Schadenfreude is by far not the only emotional reaction that should factor into the reception of (negative) political messages. However, given that it exists, by definition, as a reaction to a negative event for others (Feather & Nairn, 2005; James et al., 2014), it appears as a perfect candidate to moderate the reception of negative political messages – framed in a way so that the opponents are put in a negative light.

More precisely, we postulate that individuals high in Schadenfreude exhibit a greater tolerance for negativity and, in turn, evaluate negative messages more positively and follow the evaluations of a negative message. No direct evidence supports this assumption, even if others suggest that Schadenfreude could be associated with a negativity bias (Morewedge, 2009). Yet, Schadenfreude is strongly and positively associated with the three “dark” components of individual personality (Dark Triad; Porter et al., 2014), antisocial behaviors and sensational interests (James et al., 2014), sadism (Schumpe & Lafrenière, 2016), and a higher propensity to support intergroup violence (Cikara, 2015). This, overall, suggests that high Schadenfreude should be negatively associated with disdain toward the use of a more aggressive rhetoric and attack politics in general.

Individuals high in Schadenfreude should be less likely to discard negative messages and instead evaluate them more positively. They are wired to draw positive emotional experiences from negativity, when negativity befalls to others – as is the case when a politician is (deservingly) attacked by another. As a direct consequence, individuals high in Schadenfreude should be more likely to process negative messages; in this sense, the effectiveness of negative messages should be higher for respondents high in Schadenfreude, especially if they believe that they are amusing. In line with studies suggesting to examine the effectiveness of negative messages in conjunction with their evaluations (Sigelman & Kugler, 2003), we postulate in a nutshell that higher levels of Schadenfreude result in negative messages being perceived as more favorable, funny, and amusing, and negative messages are more effective to alter evaluations of the target of the attacks for respondents high in Schadenfreude.

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): High Schadenfreude leads to negative messages being perceived as more amusing.

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): The effect of negative messages on evaluation of the target is stronger for respondents high in Schadenfreude.

At this point, we are only concerned with Schadenfreude as a stable, personality-like factor that might influence the perception and effects of negativity. This is not what most people have in mind when talking about Schadenfreude. Rather, they speak of the joyful *reaction* toward a misfortune of others, namely, state Schadenfreude.

Trait and State Schadenfreude

The distinction between (emotional) states and more stable traits goes back to Roman philosopher Cicero making the

distinction between state and trait anxiety. The former refers to an emotional reaction to a specific stimulus in a specific situation, the latter refers to a stable tendency across situations and time to experience a certain emotion. To measure the trait component of a variable, for example an emotion, you can either ask the participant to report how often they experience a certain emotion “in general” (see, e.g., the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory; Spielberger, 1983), calculate the amount of trait (vs. state) variance in longitudinal data (latent state trait analysis, see, e.g., Schneider et al., 2014), or confront people with different emotion-inducing situations and measure their reactions to test cross-situational stability of a certain concept. All of these approaches share the idea of aggregating behavior or experiences over various situations and across time and thus come to an evaluation of a stable component – the trait. By contrast, an emotional state is the reaction to a specific stimulus triggering this emotion – in our case, Schadenfreude.

Both the stable trait-like emotion component and the state affect can alter our perception of certain situations. First, and almost trivial to note is that trait anxiety as well as trait aggression predict the state component of the emotion, that is, the higher my trait anxiety is, the stronger I react with fear to stressful situations and perceive situations as possibly threatening (e.g., Tang & Gibson, 2005). However, it is not only the state reaction that is influenced by the trait: For example, pain perceptions are both influenced by trait anxiety and state anxiety.

Similar to these approaches, we want to test both trait Schadenfreude, that is, the general predisposition to react positively when something negative happens to somebody and induced Schadenfreude, that is, the reaction to a Schadenfreude situation or stimulus, to moderate the perception *and* the effects of negative campaign messages. Similar to a person with high trait anxiety reacting differently to anxiety-laden stimuli (e.g., a dark room, a horror movie), we expect participants with high or low levels of state Schadenfreude to react differently to negative political messages.

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): Participants exposed to a Schadenfreude-inducing situation will perceive a negative campaign message as more amusing.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): Exposure to a Schadenfreude-inducing situation will moderate the effect of a negative message on the target of that message.

Likewise, when Schadenfreude is induced by a funny video, we expect that attack messages will not be perceived as negative, but as more effective. Thus, we expect that participants who find the misfortune of others “funny” or

“amusing” will also be more open toward negative political messages, in other words, we believe that:

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): Induced (state) Schadenfreude will moderate the perception of a negative message as amusing.

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): Induced (state) Schadenfreude will moderate the effect of the negative message on the evaluation of the target.

We test these expectations via three studies, two conducted in the United States with samples of 1,722 (Study 2) and 1,408 (Study 3) respondents surveyed via MTurk, and the other conducted in The Netherlands with a sample of 143 undergraduate students. Sample sizes in Studies 2 and 3 are large enough to detect even small effect sizes ($d < .2$), which is smaller than the mean unadjusted effect size found for affect toward the target ($d = .29$) in the meta-analysis by Lau et al. (2007). The Dutch sample is only big enough to detect large effect sizes of $d > .55$. In all studies, respondents were exposed to a positive or negative message on a given issue and asked afterward to evaluate the message (message perception) and the target of the message (effect of the message). All studies received ethical approval. The experimental protocol involved slight deception (the use of mock campaign messages); all participants were informed at the end of the survey that the messages were created for the needs of this study. All data and replication materials are openly accessible from the OSF project linked with this article (see https://osf.io/w5spx/?view_only=302af47d561d48fe9a5e0b82f8cb5706). The OSF project also stores all appendices.

Method

Study 1. The Netherlands, Trait Schadenfreude

Sample

A convenience sample of undergraduate students in communication science at the University of Amsterdam completed an online survey between March and April 2018. Participation was rewarded with a modest sum paid in “research credits” (0.18). Student samples are not representative of the whole population, and thus results should not be generalized beyond the boundaries of the sample. We used an attention check to increase the quality of the sample; the questionnaire contained a “screener” (Oppenheimer et al., 2009), set up as a digressive question within which a specific instruction to follow was hidden (select the option “other” and write a keyword in the

allocated space). Respondents that failed the screener ($N = 51$) were excluded from our analyses, which were then run on a subsample of 143 respondents.

In the final sample, 77.6% of respondents were female (reflecting the composition of students in communication science at the University of Amsterdam) and 35.7% were Dutch nationals. Although 74.8% declared that English was not their main language, the overwhelming majority of participants had an excellent command of English. On average, respondents were somewhat interested in politics and slightly unbalanced toward the left ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.93$ on a 0–10 scale).

Experimental Protocol

The study followed a simple 1×3 design. We first showed respondents an introductory statement about gun violence in the United States and told them that some members of the US Congress were pushing for a new piece of legislation to close loopholes (e.g., requiring licenses and background checks for all gun distributors, prohibiting sale of guns or ammunitions to unstable people, etc.). We then randomly exposed respondents to one of three different treatments, all taking the form of a mock tweet from Bernie Sanders. The first group (control) was exposed to a “positive” tweet, where Sanders praises the new legislation and suggests that a bipartisan consensus is the only way forward. The second group was exposed to a tweet where Bernie Sanders attacks Paul Ryan firmly but in a rather civil manner (e.g., by saying that Ryan cares more about money from lobbies than about the lives of Americans dying because of gun violence). Finally, the third group was exposed to a tweet where Bernie Sanders attacks Paul Ryan harshly and in a rather uncivil way, by using expletives and a very emotional tone. The treatments were created with an image editing software to imitate the layout of Twitter in order to increase their realism.

Manipulation checks were successful (see Figure C1 and related t tests in the OSF project, Appendix C). Respondents correctly identified the first and second treatment (the civil and uncivil attacks, respectively, against Ryan) as more negative than the positive control tweet, and as harsher than the positive tweet.

Dependent Variables

After being exposed to the treatment, we asked respondents to evaluate a series of public figures including the two main actors in the exchange: Paul Ryan (target of the two attack messages); the other figures, added to provide context, were Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Angela Merkel, all presented in a random order. We used the “feeling thermometer” developed by the ANES research group

(Wilcox et al., 1989). Responses range on a scale from 0 to 100 where low scores signal an unfavorable opinion and high scores a favorable or “warm” opinion. Bernie Sanders scored the higher in warmth ($M = 66.9$, $SD = 22.2$), followed by Merkel ($M = 58.6$, $SD = 20.6$) and Clinton ($M = 48.7$, $SD = 24.3$). Paul Ryan scored relatively low on average warmth ($M = 26.3$, $SD = 20.1$), although his score was three times as high as Trump’s, who had a very low average warmth score of 9.0 out of 100 ($SD = 14.5$).

Schadenfreude

As done in previous research, we measured trait Schadenfreude by showing respondents hypothetical situations (or “vignettes”) where a person faces an unfortunate set of circumstances, and by asking respondents to evaluate how they feel about the situation (Leach et al., 2003; James et al., 2014) and how they reacted to it (van Dijk et al., 2008). Of course, we were not able to assess to what extent these hypothetical situations were “representative” of what respondents would feel when facing those situations (or similar) in real life (Greenier, 2018). On the other hand, the use of multiple hypothetical situations allows for a standardized measure beyond real individual experiences and is more in line with Schadenfreude as a trait (vs. a state). We used three different scenarios slightly adapted from James et al. (2014, p. 213):

Scenario A. “There is a wealthy business person driving the latest model sports car tailgating you while you are riding your bike home. After a while, they overtake you, zooming past you and through the traffic lights up ahead. You see the flash of a speed camera, indicating they have been caught for speeding and will be getting a big fine.”

Scenario B. “A student in your class is a know-it-all and constantly gloating about their abilities and success. You find out they recently got a very bad grade.”

Scenario C. “You are competing in an important game in a team competition, where only the winner gets to move on to the next stage. Suddenly, the best player on the other team falls and sprains their ankle.”

After each scenario respondents rated the extent to which they felt amused, satisfied, pleased, relieved, and sad (from 1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*) about the situation described. We also asked respondents their agreement (from 1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*) with four reactions they had when reading it: “I enjoyed what happened to that person”; “I’m satisfied with what happened

to that person”; “I couldn’t resist a little smile”; and “I actually had to laugh a bit” (adapted from van Dijk et al., 2008).

We combined all items for the three scenarios (27 items in total, reversing the scores for feeling “sad”) into a general additive scale of Schadenfreude ($\alpha = .88$, $M = 3.0$, $SD = 0.8$).

Study 2. United States, Trait Schadenfreude

Sample

An initial opt-in sample of 1,800 US citizens completed a survey via the online platform Amazon MTurk in late August 2018. Participation was rewarded with US\$ 0.75. In recent years several studies have suggested that the quality of the data collected via this service is more than acceptable. MTurkers are more attentive to instructions than are respondents in student samples (Hauser & Schwarz, 2016). MTurk samples tend to be desirably more diverse (Casler et al., 2013) and more representative of the US population (Berinsky et al., 2012) than other types of samples.

As in Study 1, the questionnaire included an attention check. Respondents that failed the attention check ($N = 78$) were excluded from our analyses. The final sample comprised 1,722 respondents, 50.6% of the respondents were female, and the average age was 38.8 years ($SD = 12.1$). The sample was mostly composed of White/Caucasian respondents (83.1%), followed by Black/African American respondents (7.8%). A majority of 50.8% of respondents declared being “somewhat interested” in politics, and only 2.1% declared “no interest at all.” The sample was somewhat unbalanced toward the left. The average self-reported left-right position was 4.4 ($SD = 3.0$) on a 0–10 scale, and 41.1% of respondents identified as Democrat (27.1% Republican, 26.9% independent, 3.1% no preference, 1.7% other).

Experimental Procedure

The study followed a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ experimental setting. Respondents were exposed to a mock statement from a political figure on one of two specific issues, respectively, healthcare or illegal immigration in the United States. The political figure delivering the message was identified as either a (nondescript) leading member of the Republican Party or of the Democratic Party. The message delivered could either be framed as a positive message, where the politician defends the record of their party on the issue, or as a negative message, where the politician attacks the record of their rivals on the issue. This creates a setting where respondents could be exposed to one of eight randomly assigned treatments (two issues, two sponsors of the message, two types of message framing).

Manipulation checks were successful (see Figure C2 and related t tests in Appendix C in the OSF project). Respondents correctly identified the negative treatments as substantially more negative than the positive treatments; the negative statements were also systematically assessed as harsher than their positive counterparts.

Dependent Variables

After exposure to one of the eight stimuli, we asked respondents to what extent, in their opinion, each of the two main parties is competent at handling the issue at stake (respectively, healthcare or immigration to the United States, depending on the message they were exposed to). Answers ranged from 0 = *very incompetent* to 10 = *very competent*. On average, respondents evaluated the Democrats as more competent on both issues compared with Republicans – respectively, 5.1 ($SD = 2.9$) versus 3.6 ($SD = 3.2$) on healthcare, and 5.0 ($SD = 3.0$) versus 3.3 ($SD = 3.0$) on immigration – potentially reflecting the composition of the sample slightly tilted toward the left.

Schadenfreude

As with Study 1, we measured Schadenfreude by confronting respondents to hypothetical vignettes where a person faces an unfortunate set of circumstances. Scenarios A (sports car) and C (team competition) were the same as in Study 1. Study 2, however, used a revised Scenario B (know-it-all student), adapted to the more general nature of the US sample:

Scenario B. “Your neighbor is a know-it-all and constantly gloating about their abilities, wealth, and success. You find out they recently got fired.”

After each scenario, respondents rated the extent to which they felt amused, satisfied, pleased, relieved, and sad (from 1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*) about the situation described. We also asked respondents their agreement (from 1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*) with four reactions they had when reading it: “I enjoyed what happened to that person”; “I’m satisfied with what happened to that person”; “I couldn’t resist a little smile”; and “I actually had to laugh a bit” (adapted from van Dijk et al., 2008).

We combined all items for the three scenarios (27 items in total, reversing the scores for feeling “sad”) into a general additive scale of Schadenfreude ($\alpha = .93$, $M = 3.2$, $SD = 1.0$).

Study 3. United States, State Schadenfreude

Sample

An initial opt-in sample of 1,508 US citizens completed a survey via the online platform Amazon MTurk in early

May 2019. Participation was rewarded with US\$ 0.7. Respondents who failed the screener ($N = 100$) were excluded from our analyses. After exclusion of these respondents, the final sample comprised 1,408 US respondents. The sample was composed of 53% female respondents with a relatively high interest in politics (only 2.3% declared “no interest at all”), and leaning more toward the left: The average position of the left-right scale was 4.6 out of 10 ($SD = 3.0$), and 55.0% declared a strong or leaning preference for the Democratic party (vs. 34.1 for the Republican party).

Experimental Procedure

Participants were exposed to one of seven different conditions: Condition 1 (control) was a positive message on the issue of healthcare, where the sponsor advocates for a comprehensive reforms and universal coverage (positive, control); Conditions 2-4 were negative messages attacking either the policy positions on healthcare of the target or the their character; Conditions 5-7 were the same as the previous ones but included humorous elements (satirical jokes about the target). All messages were sponsored by Pete Buttigieg (who was eyeing the Democratic nomination for the 2020 Presidential election at that time); the six negative messages targeted Mitch McConnell, the Republican Senate Majority Leader. The difference between types of attacks and the presence/absence of satirical elements are not relevant for the purpose of this article and are explored in another work (Verhulsdonk et al., 2020); for the purpose of this article, we simply contrast the positive condition (control) with the remaining (negative) conditions.

Manipulation checks were successful (see Figure C3 and related t tests in Appendix C, in the OSF project). The treatments based on attacks received, on average, a substantially higher score on the “negativity” check.

Dependent Variables

After exposure to the treatment, respondents had to separately evaluate to what extent they found McConnell “competent” (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

Schadenfreude

In contrast to Studies 1 and 2 that tested for the effect of trait Schadenfreude, Study 3 included an experimental manipulation intended to trigger a Schadenfreude *state*. A random half of respondents were exposed to a video portraying a man in a bathing suit bragging about his physical strength, then leaping into a frozen pool and crash-landing on the unbreaking ice. After exposure, respondents had to evaluate to what extent they found the video “funny” (from 1 = *totally disagree* to 7 = *totally agree*); overall, respondents found the video averagely amusing; $M = 4.1$, $SD = 2.0$.

Additional Variables

To verify the validity of our measures of Schadenfreude we included in the questionnaire for Studies 1 and 2 measures for personality traits (Big Five, Dark Triad), deservingness, and self-esteem. This analysis was not performed for Study 3 because of the different nature of the measured Schadenfreude (state, after exposure to stimulus).

Big Five and Dark Triad

We used the Ten Items Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling et al., 2003) to measure the Big Five of agreeableness, extraversion, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness. Even if unable to capture all nuances and facets of personality due to its brevity (Bakker & Lelkes, 2018), the TIPI has the advantage of being relatively quick to administer, while achieving comparatively satisfactory results. Respondents had to declare their agreement (from 1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*) with a series of 10 statements that describe them (e.g., “I see myself as sympathetic, warm,” “... as anxious, easily upset”). To measure the three “dark” personality traits, we used the battery of 12 questions described in the *Dirty Dozen* (Jonason & Webster, 2010). Respondents had to declare their agreement (from 1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*) with a series of statements that describe them (e.g., “I tend to want others to admire me”; “I have used deceit or lied to get my way”).

Deservingness and Self-Esteem

To measure deservingness, we use a battery of six items developed by James et al. (2014) that ask for the respondent’s agreement (from 1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*) with statements like “I believe in justice being served” or “I take pleasure in seeing people punished for their wrong doing.” Reliability of the additive scale is average to high (Study 1: $\alpha = .55$, $M = 5.0$, $SD = 0.8$; Study 2: $\alpha = .71$, $M = 5.0$, $SD = 1.0$). We then measured self-esteem via the widely used Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) that measures global self-worth using the respondent’s agreement with 10 statement (from 1 = *disagree strongly* to 7 = *agree strongly*) such as “At times I think I am no good at all” and “I take a positive attitude toward myself.” The additive scale has a high reliability (Study 1: $\alpha = .83$, $M = 4.9$, $SD = 0.9$; Study 2: $\alpha = .93$, $M = 5.3$, $SD = 1.3$).

Measurement Validity

Results for all correlations can be found in Table A1 in the Appendix (OSF project).

Schadenfreude correlated strongly and positively with the Dark Triad, in line with the literature (James et al., 2014, Porter et al., 2014; Greenier, 2018); in Study 2 it also

correlated negatively with all Big Five excluding extraversion (which correlated negatively in Study 1). In both studies, Schadenfreude correlated positively with deservingness (Feather & Nairn, 2005); in Study 2 it correlated negatively with self-esteem (van Dijk et al., 2011). Schadenfreude was significantly higher for males than for females (van Dijk et al., 2006). Younger respondents scored higher on Schadenfreude (Study 2); in Study 2 (United States) it correlated positively with right-wing self-identification, whereas in Study 1 (The Netherlands) it was more likely associated with respondents on the left.

Results

We applied the same analyzing strategy for all three studies. Although the variables are slightly different, we tested a moderated mediation model. To test our hypothesis, we analyzed whether (trait or state) Schadenfreude moderates the perception of negative political messages (a-path moderation) and the effect of the negative message on the target politician (c-path moderation, see Figure 1 for a schematic depiction).¹

Study 1. The Netherlands, Trait Schadenfreude: Moderated Mediation

We first wanted to find out whether the perception of the political message is dependent on levels of trait Schadenfreude and, second, if the effects on the evaluation of the politicians differ with levels of trait Schadenfreude. We therefore conducted a moderated mediation analysis to see whether the perception of negative messages as “amusing” as well as the effects of negative messages depend on trait Schadenfreude as measured by the Schadenfreude vignettes. First, it is clear that there was no effect of the negative as well as the uncivil message when not taking into account Schadenfreude as moderator. Both the effect on perceiving the message as amusing (negative civil: $b = 0.609$, $SE = 0.330$, $p = .065$; negative uncivil: $b = 0.606$, $SE = 0.328$, $p = .065$) and the effect on the evaluation of the target (negative civil: $b = 3.314$, $SE = 4.444$, $p = .0432$; negative uncivil: $b = 2.215$, $SE = 4.201$, $p = .598$) were insignificant.

When including Schadenfreude, it becomes evident why this is the case: As expected in H1a, the perception of the negative tweets as amusing is dependent on levels of Schadenfreude. People high in Schadenfreude found

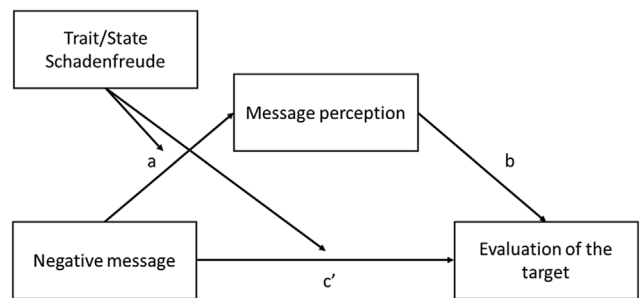


Figure 1. Moderated mediation model for all three studies.

the negative and the harsh twitter message much more amusing than did participants with medium or low Schadenfreude (see Table 1); the interaction terms of Schadenfreude and the negative conditions are significant (negative civil: $b = 0.938$, $SE = 0.387$, $p = .015$; negative uncivil: $b = 1.112$, $SE = 0.401$, $p = .005$). The pattern shown in Table 1 indicates a negative (but insignificant) effect of negativity on perceiving the tweet as amusing for participants with low trait Schadenfreude, while for participants with high levels of Schadenfreude, we find a significant *positive* effect.

By contrast, the direct effect of the negative and uncivil message was not moderated by trait Schadenfreude – both interaction effects remained insignificant, thus finding no support for H1b (negative civil: $b = 5.586$, $SE = 5.201$, $p = .283$; negative uncivil: $b = 3.412$, $SE = 5.401$, $p = .527$).

Study 2. United States, Trait Schadenfreude: Moderated Mediation

We conducted a moderated mediation model to test whether trait Schadenfreude moderates the direct effect of negativity on the evaluation of the target of the attack and whether – in addition to the moderation of the evaluation as amusing – it moderates the direct relationship between negativity and the evaluation of the target. Appendix A (see the OSF project) shows the unmoderated direct and indirect effects, indicating that most effects on message perception and on the evaluation of the target remain insignificant when not taking into account Schadenfreude.

First, we tested whether there is a significant interaction for perceiving the negative messages as amusing and for the direct effect of the negative message on the target of the message (see Figure 1). For the topic of healthcare, we indeed found a significant interaction for the evaluation as amusing when the Democrat attacked the Republican

¹ As robustness check, we replicated all analyses using deservingness as a covariate; these additional models yield virtually identical results. All results for these robustness checks can be found in Appendix B in the OSF project (https://osf.io/w5spx/?view_only=302af47d561d48fe9a5e0b82f8cb5706).

Table 1. Effects of negative and uncivil message on perception of the message at different levels of Schadenfreude

Schadenfreude	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Civil negative message			
Low	-0.173	0.447	.699
Mean	0.575	0.316	.068
High	1.324	0.436	.002
Uncivil negative message			
Low	-0.241	0.437	.699
Mean	0.647	0.314	.039
High	1.534	0.457	< .001

Note. Positive message is the reference category, moderator is mean \pm 1 *SD*.

($b = 0.194$, $SE = 0.084$, $p = .021$), but not for the negative message sent by a Republican politician ($b = 0.118$, $SE = 0.177$, $p = .506$). Moreover, both direct interaction effects (c-path moderation) remained insignificant (Republican on Democrat: $b = .023$, $SE = 0.295$, $p = .937$; Democrat on Republican: $b = -0.051$, $SE = 0.169$, $p = .764$).

For the immigration topic, we found both a-path interactions, that is, the effects on the perception of the message, to be significant (Republican on Democrat: $b = 0.162$, $SE = 0.089$, $p = .048$; Democrat on Republican: $b = 0.183$, $SE = 0.087$, $p = .035$). The effect of negativity on the target of the attack yielded an insignificant interaction when the Republican attacked the Democrat ($b = 0.066$, $SE = 0.161$, $p = .685$), but a significant interaction for the message of the democratic politician ($b = -0.309$, $SE = 0.147$, $p = .036$). Table 2 shows an interesting pattern for this interaction: It was particularly people with high Schadenfreude that “followed” the attack and decreased their evaluation of the targeted politician, while participants with low Schadenfreude showed even an opposing effect, that is, increasing the evaluation of the target, when it was attacked (H1b).

Study 3. United States, State Schadenfreude: Moderated Mediation

In the third study, we wanted to test whether “state” Schadenfreude also moderates the perception and effects of negative campaign messages. Again, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis. We first wanted to test whether triggering Schadenfreude by showing the Schadenfreude video had the same effect as “trait” Schadenfreude in Studies 1 and 2. Thereafter, we also used the evaluation of the video, that is, finding the Schadenfreude video funny, as moderator of the perception and effect of the negative message.

While the negative message was indeed perceived as more negative ($b = 1.62$, $SE = 0.061$, $p < .001$) and being

in contrast to the positive messages, exposure to the Schadenfreude video did not moderate the perception of the messages as negative ($b = 0.124$, $SE = 0.124$, $p = .318$) nor the effect on the evaluation of the target ($b = -0.127$, $SE = 0.142$, $p = .368$). The negative message had a direct effect on the evaluation of the target of the attack ($b = -0.551$, $SE = 0.086$, $p < .001$) resulting in a significant indirect effect via perception of negativity ($b = 0.301$, $SE = 0.051$, $p < .001$). We thus reject H2a and H2b.

In contrast to exposure to the Schadenfreude video, the *evaluation* of the video revealed significant interactions with the perception and effects of the political messages. Again, the evaluation of the video as funny had a significant impact on the effects of negative messages. Participants perceiving the Schadenfreude video as not being funny also perceived the negative message as more negative, whereas those who evaluated the video as (very) funny perceived the negative message as less negative; this interaction is significant ($b = -0.095$, $SE = 0.046$, $p = .040$), confirming H3a. By contrast, those who perceived the video as not funny perceived even the positive message as somewhat negative. In a similar vein as in Study 2, the effect of negativity on the perception of the message was largest for participants who did not appreciate the Schadenfreude video (see Table 3).

We did not find a significant interaction effect for the perception of the Schadenfreude video and the evaluation of the target ($b = 0.038$, $SE = 0.053$, $p = .475$); in other words, the *perception* of the message was moderated, but not its effects – similar to what was discussed for Studies 1 and 2. We thus reject H3b. However, as shown in Table 3, effects are highest for people who did not appreciate the Schadenfreude video.

Discussion

This study contributes to our understanding of negative political messages by introducing trait and state Schadenfreude as moderator of the perception and effects of political attacks. The results can be summarized as follows: (1) In all three studies, Schadenfreude moderated the perception of the negative message as “amusing” (Studies 1 and 2) or “negative” (Study 3). The specific pattern of effects shows that particularly people with low trait Schadenfreude reacted strongly (and negatively) to the political messages. (2) Stimulating state Schadenfreude (in our case, by showing a video) did not have as strong an effect as the trait measured in the first two studies. However, people who reacted positively to the Schadenfreude video, in turn, perceived the attack messages as less negative when compared with people who did not react with

Table 2. Effects of negative messages on perception of the message and the target of the negative message

Schadenfreude	Republican on Democrat			Democrat on Republican		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Health: Message perception						
Low	-1.111	0.238	< .001	-0.418	0.109	< .001
Mean	-0.998	0.169	< .001	-0.239	0.077	.001
High	-0.885	0.239	< .001	-0.061	0.109	.576
Health: Evaluation of target						
Low	-0.589	0.408	.526	-0.009	0.435	.978
Mean	-0.281	0.236	.337	-0.052	0.303	.864
High	-0.304	0.405	.454	-0.103	0.401	.782
Immigration: Message perception						
Low	-0.522	0.218	.017	-0.249	0.117	.034
Mean	-0.196	0.154	.205	-0.073	0.083	.380
High	0.157	0.216	.469	0.103	0.118	.384
Immigration: Evaluation of target						
Low	0.123	0.409	.764	0.367	0.198	.064
Mean	0.261	0.288	.364	0.069	0.139	.618
High	0.411	0.402	.308	-0.227	0.199	.255

Note. Positive message is the reference category, moderator is mean \pm 1 SD.

Table 3. Effect of the negative message at different levels of appreciation for the Schadenfreude clip

Schadenfreude	Message perception: Negative			Evaluation of target		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Low	3.802	0.279	< .001	-1.324	0.355	< .001
Medium	3.425	0.188	< .001	-1.174	0.259	< .001
High	2.048	0.246	< .001	-1.025	0.309	< .001

Note. Positive message is the reference category, moderator is mean \pm 1 SD.

Schadenfreude to the funny video. There are several explanations for these findings: Trait Schadenfreude and the evaluation of the Schadenfreude video as funny could be facets of a more general predisposition to “enjoy” negative situations, not far from Fridkin and Kenney’s (2011) idea that some citizens are more “tolerant” of negativity. Moreover, Studies 1 and 2 show that the opposite of Schadenfreude – that is, people reacting with negative feelings when something negative happens – is likely to have played a bigger role in the results. We cannot thus exclude that it is feelings of empathy or pity that moderate the perception and effects of negative messages, instead of Schadenfreude per se. (3) Schadenfreude mostly did not moderate the direct effect of the negative message on the evaluation of the target politician. Only in Study 2 did we find that trait Schadenfreude moderated the effect in a way that recipients high in trait Schadenfreude were rather persuaded and followed the attack, that is, evaluated the target of the attack more negatively, while participants with low Schadenfreude even showed a reverse effect and increased their evaluation of the politician who was attacked. This supports the assumption that people low in Schadenfreude

might react with feelings of pity or empathy leading to the unintended reverse effect of the attack message.

These results come with some caveats. First, they are limited to the US case. Even if Study 1 was conducted with a non-US sample, the experiment is set up as attacks between US political actors (Bernie Sanders and Paul Ryan). Research on negativity in politics is overwhelmingly concerned with the US (see, e.g., Nai & Walter, 2015), and in this sense our results do not contribute directly to the development of research outside this well-known case. Yet, our results are not directly interested in the effects of negativity, but rather on the importance of individual moderators (Schadenfreude); because these moderators are likely to play a similar role regardless of the context, we expect our results to translate outside the US case as well.

Second, our studies are limited to “general” Schadenfreude, which does not have much to say about politics per se; the three scenarios in Studies 1 and 2 cover several unconnected issues (a traffic situation, an annoying neighbor, a sport competition), and the stimulus used to elicit Schadenfreude in Study 3 (video) is anything but political. In this sense, we might wonder whether “political

Schadenfreude” – that is, feeling satisfaction about the misfortune of political opponents – might be a better candidate as moderator for the reception and treatment of negative messages. Of course, this would raise additional questions about the intervening role of motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2006), which could potentially blur the direct contribution of Schadenfreude in and of itself; in this sense, using as we did here more general measures of this trait/state allowed us to circumvent and “keep at bay” the intervening role of partisan predispositions.

Third, the dynamics shown here are limited to the target of political attacks. Yet, several studies point toward the presence of (unintended) effects for the sponsor of attacks as well. Given that negative campaigning is generally disliked by the public at large (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011), it is in most cases a risky strategy, facing the not unlikely chance of backfiring against its sponsor (“backlash effect”; Roese & Sande, 1993). Schadenfreude could potentially contribute to the effectiveness of political attacks for the sponsor as well. If, as shown here, individuals high in Schadenfreude are more likely to find the negative messages amusing, then a lower backlash against the sponsor could perhaps be expected. On the other end of the spectrum, it could be citizens low in Schadenfreude who are especially likely to “punish” the sponsor of the negative message and thus less likely to be persuaded by these messages.

Fourth, due to the experimental and nonlongitudinal nature of our tests, we are not able to assess how long a Schadenfreude reaction lasts (Study 3); although the Schadenfreude-inducing video was presented to the respondents just before the experimental component on negativity, we cannot exclude that the feeling, even if correctly elicited by the stimulus, already vanished once exposed to the negative message. This could also explain why the results of Study 3 are, overall, less pronounced. The reactions toward the negative messages and the Schadenfreude video are also limited to the measure of “amusement.” We did not take into account the scale used for the scenarios. Although it is plausible that the amusement stems from the misfortune or negative information of the other person and therefore could be a valid measure of Schadenfreude, it would have been more precise to measure the reactions more extensively.

These limitations notwithstanding, the results presented in this article – across two different countries, different types of samples, issues, and actors – strongly suggest that Schadenfreude is an important candidate for a broader understanding of negative campaigning effects and for research in targeted (political) communication. Some individuals like their politics nasty, and it matters. In the wake of several game-changing elections worldwide and the consolidation of a more aggressive and populist form of

political competition (Gerstlé & Nai, 2019), the importance of negativity in elections is perhaps at its peak. Yet, too little is known on its effectiveness to yield an electoral victory. Indeed, “it would appear, *à la* Newton’s third law, that for every research finding about the effectiveness of negative advertising, there is an equal and opposite research finding” (Lau & Pomper 2004, p. 19). Our results add an important piece to the understanding of why, perhaps, existing research on negative campaigning has yielded, so far, such inconclusive results, by showing that individual differences are likely to moderate the perception of negativity (and its effects, albeit more marginally so). We are still far from an integrated model where a comprehensive set of individual differences – personality, attitudinal predispositions, and even sociodemographic profile – can be identified into a broader framework for the effectiveness of negative political messages. Such an integrated model should also consider the differential effect of different types of attacks, for example, the difference between policy and character attacks (Lau & Pomper, 2001) or the use of humor and satire in attacks (Verhulsdonk et al., 2020), as well as the interactions between individual differences and different types of attacks – for instance, the fact that individuals high in Schadenfreude (or low in agreeableness; Weinschenk & Panagopoulos, 2014) might be more likely to particularly appreciate a certain type of attack, perhaps nastier and more sarcastic. Within this framework, our article contributes to the current and future research by suggesting that Schadenfreude – as a psychological trait, but also as a time-constraint state – is a serious candidate when it comes to identifying which individual differences will be, ultimately, responsible for the effectiveness (or failure) of negativity in politics.

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