**Attacking to Gain?**

**Effects of Negative Campaigning on British Voters’ Electoral Participation and Party Preferences in the 2015 General Election**



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**Abstract**

Regardless the prominence of negative campaigning in election campaigns worldwide, including in Britain (see Van Heerde Hudson 2011; Scammell and Langer 2006), the theory on effects of negative campaigning has been completely based on U.S. research (see for a handful exceptions Maier and Maier 2007; Pattie et al. 2011, Nai 2013; Haddock and Zanna 1997; Sanders and Norris 2005; Dassonneville 2010; Roy and Alcantara 2014; Desposato 2007; Rivera 2013). The evidence therefore is potentially biased and non-generalizable. Consequently, we have little knowledge about the effectiveness of negative campaigning across political systems (Fridkin and Kenney 2012) and are largely unaware about its attitudinal and behavioural effects on British citizens. This study examines to what extent and in what way negative campaigning affects voters’ electoral participation and party preference in the 2015 General Election Campaign in Britain? By examining these questions with the help of survey data from the 2015 British Election Study this study contributes to the field of negative campaigning in three ways. First of all, this is the largest study on the effects of negative campaigning on voters’ electoral participation and party preference in a multiparty system (N in excess of 40.000). Second, this study is the first within-country comparative study in Europe, studying the three countries of Great Britain; England, Scotland and Wales. Finally, this study is the first to measure the effects of negative campaigning using a non-ipsative measure of party preference (PTVs) which is able to tap voters’ party support in contrast to an ipsative measure of party preference that taps voters’ vote choice.

We do not find evidence that negative campaigning discourages electoral participation in these three multiparty systems. Exposure to negative campaigning might not always alter voters’ vote choice, but is likely to change parties’ relative standing in voters’ electoral preferences set. The more positive voters perceive a party’s campaign the more they prefer the party. In addition, we show that when voters’ second preferred party wages a more positive campaign than their first preferred party, this has a positive effect on their party preference for their second preferred party. Both findings provide preliminary evidence to the claim that the use of negative campaigning might not always be beneficial and has the potential to electorally strengthen ‘other parties’ in a multiparty system.

**Keywords:** Negative Campaigning, Electoral Participation, Party Preference, PTVs

**Introduction**

Negative campaigning is a widely applied campaign practice (see Nai and Walter 2015) and its practitioners generally believe it to be an effective campaign method (Lau and Pomper 2004; Lau and Rovner 2009). However, contrary to popular belief there is little scientific evidence that the practice of negative campaigning is a particularly effective campaign technique (Lau and Rovner 2009) and its use is not without controversy. Negative campaigning has been associated with unintended consequences such as a decrease in voter turnout (Ansolabere et al. 1994). As a result, negative campaigning is often regarded a campaign practice that in the long run might endanger the health of our democracy. If large numbers of voters regularly fail to participate in elections that puts into question the democratic nature of those elections, especially if those who fail to vote can be expected to hold different political preferences than those who do vote.

Regardless the prominence of negative campaigning in election campaigns worldwide, including in Britain (see Van Heerde Hudson 2011; Scammell and Langer 2006; Walter 2014), the theory on effects of negative campaigning has been completely based on U.S. research (see for a handful exceptions Maier and Maier 2007; Pattie et al. 2011, Nai 2013; Haddock and Zanna 1997; Sanders and Norris 2005; Dassonneville 2010; Roy and Alcantara 2014; Desposato 2007; Rivera 2013). The evidence therefore is potentially biased and non-generalizable. Consequently, we have little knowledge about the effectiveness of negative campaigning across political systems (Fridkin and Kenney 2012) and are largely unaware about its attitudinal and behavioural effects on British citizens. With this study we aim to contribute to the scholarly debate on the effectiveness of negative campaigning and its unintended consequences, by studying the effects of negative campaigning on electoral participation and party preference in a multiparty system. In a multiparty system we cannot only expect negative campaigning to be less effective, i.e. its benefits not to go to the attacking party but to another party, but also potentially to be less corrosive, i.e. voters who are put off from their preferred party by negative campaigning can vote for another party instead of turning away from the electoral process. *To what extent and in what way does negative campaigning affects voters’ electoral participation and party preference in the 2015 General Election Campaign in Britain?* By examining these questions this study contributes to the field of negative campaigning in three ways. First of all, this is the largest study on the effects of negative campaigning on voters’ electoral participation and party preference in a multiparty system (N in excess of 40.000). Second, this study is the first within-country comparative study in Europe, studying the three countries of Great Britain; England, Scotland and Wales. Finally, this study is the first to measure the effects of negative campaigning using a non-ipsative measure of party preference (PTVs) which is able to tap voters’ party support in contrast to an ipsative measure of party preference that taps voters’ vote choice. Exposure to negative campaigning might not always alter voters’ vote choice, but it is likely to change parties’ relative standing in voters’ electoral preferences set. The effects of negative campaigning on electoral participation and party preference can be studied at the aggregate and at the individual voter level, in this study we focus on the latter. In addition, we leave the question to how the effect of negative campaigning on voters’ party preference translates in actual party’ vote shares for a future paper. The survey data used in this study comes from the 2015 British Election Study.

This study theorizes and empirically shows that negative campaigning does not affect voters’ electoral participation, but does affect voters’ electoral preferences in a multiparty system. Negative campaigning not only seems to depress voters’ party preference for the attacking party, but also strengthens their preference for their second preferred party in their electoral choice set. In addition, the results suggest that Propensities To Vote Scores (PTVs) are a far more suitable measure for gauging effects of negative campaigning on voters’ party preferences, as they also capture small changes in voters’ party preferences as a result of exposure to negative campaigning. Depending on how these party preferences translate in vote choice, this paper presents the first evidence that negative campaigning might not always be that beneficial in a multiparty system. In this paper we first of all discuss the literature on negative campaigning and its effects on voters’ electoral participation and party preference and formulate our expectations. Next, we present our measurement approach, case study, the data, variable operationalization and methods of analyses. Following we show the results and interpret these findings. Finally, we draw conclusions and discuss the issues left.

**Negative Campaigning, Electoral Participation and Party Preference**

Election campaigns involve various strategic decisions for the competing parties, one important strategic decision that shapes their campaign behaviour is whether they choose to emphasize their own abilities, accomplishments and policy stands or whether they concentrate on attacking their opponent(s) on these grounds. The first is known as positive campaigning, the latter as negative campaigning (Lau and Pomper 2004; Geer 2006). So why do parties decide to go negative? The literature examining this question generally takes a rational choice perspective and argues that the decision to attack is a strategic one (Riker 1996; Lau and Pomper 2004). Political actors engage in a cost-benefit analysis before deciding whether to attack or not (Lau and Pomper 2004). It is posited that only once the expected beneﬁts outweigh the costs, will negative campaigning be used in an electoral campaign. This decision to go negative is driven by the desire to attain a certain goal, namely to win the elections and negative campaigning can potentially increase the attacking party’s vote share. Thus, a candidate or party resorts to negative campaigning in an attempt to become voters’ preferred party by diminishing positive feelings for opposing candidates or parties (Lau et al. 2007; Budesheim et al. 1996; Garramone 1984). Negative campaigning is considered to be a dangerous choice, as one runs the risk that the attacks will generate negative feelings toward the attacker instead of the target, which can potentially decrease the attacker’s vote share (Garramone 1984; Johnson-Cartee, Copeland and Johnson 1991; Roese and Sande 1993). This risk is the so-called "backlash" or "boomerang" effect (Damore 2002; Pinkleton et al. 2002). Whether or not candidates or parties decide to attack depends on the expected balance between the losses their opponent will suffer from the attack and the risk they face from being perceived negatively.

However, parties in a multiparty system face a different cost-benefit analysis than parties in a two party system (Walter et al. 2014; Ridout and Walter 2013; Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Elmelund-Praesteaker 2008, 2010; Walter and Nai 2015). Strøm and Müller (1999) assume parties to be rational actors whose behavior is guided by three overarching political objectives: office, policy and votes. Within a two-party system, especially one with majority electoral districts, parties can concentrate on vote-seeking goals, as a majority of votes enables them to achieve office and to implement policy as a result. In contrast, parties operating within a multi-party system have to carefully balance their vote-, office- and policy-seeking objectives. In these systems, obtaining the most parliamentary seats does not automatically translate into government office or influence over policy. As a result, first of all the costs of negative campaigning are higher in a multi-party system than in a two-party system, as parties not only need to worry about possible backlash effects, but also about potential post-election bargaining costs (Walter and Van der Brug 2014; Brants et al 1982; Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Elmelund-Præstekær 2010). A campaign, which is fought too aggressively and too negatively, may damage parties’ ability to govern together (for example see Sjöblom 1968; Brants et al. 1982; Kaid and Holtz-Bacha 2006). Second and more important for this study, the rewards of negative campaigning in a multiparty system are less certain than in a two party system; as the number of parties increases it is less likely that the attacker will benefit from an attack (Elmelund-Praestekaer 2008; 2010; Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Ridout and Walter 2013). Most models on vote choice rely at least implicitly on the concept of electoral utility and they assume that voters vote for the party from which they expect the highest utility (Van der Eijk et al. 2006). Voters have a choice set of preferred parties from which they choose at every election (Tillie 1995). As a result of negative campaigning, a voter’s expected utility for voting for the attacked party may decline, but in a multiparty system that may not result in an increase in the expected utility for the party doing the attacking (Tillie 1995). After the utility for the first preferred party is lowered, these voters are likely to vote for another party in their electoral choice set. Especially in multiparty systems voters prefer or identify with more than one party, as it is likely that there are a number of fairly ideologically similar parties competing (Schmitt 2009; Tillie 1995; Van der Eijk and Niemöller 1983). Thus, parties in a multi-party system face a different cost-benefit structure and as a result have a more difficult task calculating the likelihood of success when going negative, than parties operating in a two-party system.

Campaigns are not only about impacting voters’ party preferences, but also about mobilizing (and demobilizing) groups of voters. Election outcomes can be affected by who actually does vote and who does not. If party supporters of a specific party stay at home in sufficient numbers, then their party will suffer at the polls and they help the other party win the elections and become the largest party in a two party system. According to some scholars (Ansolabehere et al. 1994; Desposato 2007; Houston and Doan 1999; Wattenberg and Brians 1999; Lemert, Wanta and Lee 1999) an unintended consequence of negative campaigning is that exposed voters can become cynical about specific parties or politics in general and as a result turn away from the electoral process thereby potentially affecting the election outcome. When the voters that initially thought to vote for the targeted party stay home, this is beneficial for the attacking party. Voters that after exposure to negative campaigning have become disillusioned with their first preferred party are able to vote for their second preferred party in a multiparty system. Therefore, we can expect that in a multiparty system the effect of negative campaigning on turnout to be smaller. Although negative campaigning might be beneficial for a party’s support in the short term, in the long term the demobilisation of voters is corrosive for the functioning of democracy.

Regardless the numerous studies on the effects of negative campaigning on voters’ party preferences and electoral participation, the field is still inconclusive about its effects, see Table 1. Some scholars indeed find that negative campaigning decreases voters’ support for the targeted party (e.g. Shen and Wu 2002; Pinkleton 1997; Arceneaux and Nickerson 2010; Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Desposato 2007), however, a larger group of scholars claims that negative campaigning decreases voters’ support for the attacking party (e.g. Min 2004; King and McConnell 2003; Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Haddock and Zanna 1997; Merritt 1984), including in a multiparty setting (Pattie et al. 2011; Maier and Maier 2007; Roy and Alcantara 2014). The notion that third parties benefit from negative campaigning in a multiparty system finds preliminary evidence in two studies (Pattie et al. 2011; Roy and Alcantara 2014). Apart from a handful studies (Ansolabehere et al. 1999; Desposato 2007; Houston and Doan 1999; Wattenberg and Brians 1999; Lemert, Wanta and Lee 1999) not much evidence in favour of the demobilization hypothesis was found, most studies found no, a conditional or a mobilizing effect of negative campaigning on turnout (Arcenaux and Nickerson 2010; Brooks and Geer 2007; Garramone et al. 1990; Clinton and Lapinski 2004; Goldstein and Freedman 2002; Djupe and Peterson 2002). On the basis of theory and these empirical findings we formulate the following hypotheses for the effects of negative campaigning on voters’ electoral participation and party preferences in Great Britain:

**Vote Intention Hypothesis (H1):** The more negative voters perceive a party’s campaign tone to be the more likely they are to vote

**Party Support Hypothesis (H2):** The more negative voters perceive a party’s campaign the lower the preference that voters have for the party in question.

**Third Party Support Hypothesis (H3):** The more negative voters perceive the campaign of their first preferred party, the higher the preference that voters have for their second preferred party.

As not all voters are equally susceptible to negative campaigning (Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Min 2004), we will control for various voter characteristics in our models as they are likely to mediate the effect, such as party identification (Lau and Pomper 2004; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Arcenaux and Nickerson 2010) and gender (King and McConnell 2003).

---TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE---

**Measurement Approach**

The main independent variable in our study is negative campaigning as indicated by respondents’ perceptions of the focus of the election campaigns of the various parties. Survey analysis is the second most frequently used method for measuring the tone of the election campaign. When used, it is argued that the “reality” does not matter, but rather how voters perceive the campaign, in particular if we wish to understand the effects of negative campaigning on voters’ attitudes and electoral behaviour (Sigelman and Kugler 2003). The most popular alternative method of measuring negative campaigning consists of content analysis of campaign communications, an approach that is problematic because of incomplete coverage of the universe of campaign communications, uncertainty about individual exposure and acceptance, and unreliability of codings. Where both approaches have been used, considerable disagreement is generally found between them (Sigelman and Kugler 2003; Ridout and Franz 2008), which is claimed to be a source of inconclusive findings in the scholarly debate about the effects of negative campaigning (Sigelman and Kugler 2003). Therefore, in this effect study we measure the tone of the campaign on the basis of voters’ perceptions expressed in a survey.

Measuring negative campaigning on the basis of voters’ perceptions is, obviously, not without its own problems. Perceptions may vary widely between voters, and are potentially subject to biases of various types, such as party identification and memory (Sigelman and Kugler 2003; Brooks 1997). Voters often perceive the campaign of their own party or candidate as less negative, and they seem to be subject to considerable recency bias (Brooks 1997; Sigelman and Kugler 2003). The strongest predictor of voters’ perception of the campaign tone is partisanship (Ridout and Fowler 2012), thus giving rise to endogeneity concerns. However, Pattie et al. (2011) demonstrate that perceptions of campaign tone cannot be fully explained by partisanship. The set of questions that we use to measure voters’ evaluations of the tone of the campaign is a reformulated version of questions that have been used previously (Pattie et al. 2011) in the context of the 2007 Scottish Elections. The questions have been reformulated so as to remove any explicit mentioning of the terms ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ which, we feared, are likely to trigger or exacerbate partisan biases in the responses. Moreover, recent work by Kyles and Mattes (2014) has shown that questions containing the word ‘negative’ activate a social-desirability effect leading to over- or under-reporting of the negativity or positivity of the campaign. The survey questions are formulated as follows:

*‘In their campaigns political parties can focus on criticising the policies and personalities of other parties, or they can focus on putting forward their own policies and personalities. What is, in your view, the focus of the national campaign of the (fill in party name)?’   
The question was asked for each of the following parties: Conservatives; Labour; Liberal Democrats; Greens; UKIP; SNP (only in Scotland); Plaid Cymru (only in Wales).*

*Focuses mainly Focuses mainly*

*on criticising 1 2 3 4 5 on putting forward DK*

*other parties their own policies   
and personalities*

The BES internet panel does, however, provide better analytical opportunities to disentangle endogenous and non- endogenous effects than any of the existing studies of negative campaigning (including those in the US), because of (a) the control for individual dynamics offered by multiple previous panel waves; (b) the rolling thunder design that allows control for recency bias; (c) the large number of constituencies (each with their own campaigns) for which data are collected.

Party choice cannot only be examined by using party preferences, but also electoral utilities

Voting is seen as a reaffirming partisanship, but many voters do not have a strong party identification or they identify with an ideology or social group that can be represented by several political parties. In all these cases it is likely that voters have preferences for more than just one party and we need to study those preferences at the end of the day. When voters vote they choose between the parties that vie for their support. This implies that votes have preferences for different parties such that at any time, parties can be arrayed for each voter in order of preference and that the strengths of these preferences van be compared. We measure their preferences in terms of propensity to vote scores (PTVs) (Eijk and Franklin 2006) and party like/dislike scores. This non-ipsative measure gives us more information than an ipsative measure of party preference. Knowing which party voters intend to vote for only tells us which party stood first in the voter’s preference order, not which party was second or lower, and certainly not by how far those parties lagged behind the first preference party (Eijk and Franklin 2006). As PTVs allow us to calculate the degree to which voters support more than one party, this non-ipsative measure is also more suitable for measuring party preferences in a multiparty system.

**Case Selection and Data**

The case examined in this study is the 2015 General Election Campaign in Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales).[[1]](#footnote-1) Elections are conducted on the basis of a First-Past-The-Post system; with 650 single-member electoral districts. The general election consists therefore of 650 co-occurring, but separate elections, each with its own campaign, nested within an over-all, national campaign. In these constituencies voters can choose between the candidates of four to six parties. The three countries of Great Britain can be treated as separate countries on account of their different party systems. Whereas the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, UKIP, and Greens compete in all three countries, the SNP (Scottish National Party) fields candidates only in Scotland, while Plaid Cymru does so only in Wales. Although Great Britain in the past was often characterized as a two-party system, nowadays one can safely characterize it as a multiparty system. In 2010 the practice of single party majoritarian governments was broken as no single party held a majority of seats; as a result a coalition government between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats was formed. In the run-up to the 2015 General Election it was generally expected that the 2015 election campaign would again result in a hung parliament.

The period studied is the formal campaign, that lasted almost six weeks from 30 March (dissolution of parliament) until 7 May( polling day) (SN/PC/06574). The analysis is limited to the main 6 parties that were competing in this election campaign, respectively Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, UK Independence Party (UKIP), Green Party, Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP), and Plaid Cymru. The analyses are based on data from the 2015 BESIP survey (waves 4, 5 and 6) that has been conducted for the BES by YouGov and has been funded by the ESRC.[[2]](#footnote-2) The survey is an internet panel which has in excess of 40.000 respondents. We use information from waves 4, 5 and 6. Wave 4 was conducted before the formal campaign between 4th March 2015 and 30th March 2015. Wave 5 was conducted during the formal campaign between 31st March 2015 and 6th May 2015 in the form of a ‘rolling thunder’ survey with random daily subsamples of 700-1000 respondents being interviewed. Wave 6 is a post-election wave of the panel conducted between 8th May and 26th May 2015. Our analyses are based on the responses of 26.112 respondents who took part in all of these three waves.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Method of Analysis**

To examine the effects of negative campaigning on voters’ electoral participation and party preferences, we run three separate sets of models.First of all, to test whether negative campaigning affects whether voters vote we conduct a logit analysis as the dependent variable Turnout in Wave 6 is dichotomous (0 No, did not vote; 1=Yes, voted). Second, we test whether negative campaigning affects voters’ party preferences. The non-ipsative measure of party preferences is an interval variable measured in Wave 5 with values ranging from 0 to 10, consequently, we run a conditional OLS regression analysis with standard errors clustered on voters. The additional benefit of modelling the presumed effect of negative campaigning on party preference with a conditional OLS regression analysis is that not only the influence of voter characteristics on the dependent variable can be modelled, but also the impact of party characteristics, such as the perceived tone of their campaign and characteristics of the relationship between the voter and party, such as ideological proximity of the party to the voter (Van der Eijk et al. 2006). To be able to perform a conditional OLS, we pooled all the 41.837 voters from the different daily samples and created a stacked data matrix where voter x party combinations are the unit of analysis (See Van der Eijk et al. 2006 for more details on this modelling strategy). We created 7 stacks for the 7 parties included in our analysis which leads to a total number of cases of 292859. Third, we test whether voters increase their preference for their second preferred party in their electoral choice set when their first preferred party runs a negative campaign. To test this we again run a conditional OLS regression model set up in a similar fashion with an additional four dummy variables. These four dummy variables represent the difference in campaign tone between voters’ first and second preferred party. We conduct this model on a subset of British voters, namely voters that have a unique[[4]](#footnote-4) first preferred party that they give at least a score of 7 or higher and have a second preferred party that they give at least a score of 6 or higher on this non-ipsative measure of party preferences.

**Operationalization Variables**

**Model 1: Turnout**

The dependent variable ***Turnout*** is dichotomous (0 No, did not vote; 1=Yes, voted) and measures turnout at Wave 6 after the election. The independent variables to be included in the analyses are a set of variables that measure voters’ perception of the ***Campaign Tone*** for each specific party at Wave 5, All variables have values ranging between 1 (Focuses mainly on criticizing other parties) and 5 (Focuses mainly on putting forward their own policies and personalities).

**Model 2: Party Preferences**

To be able to use all observations in the dataset we create a dependent variable called ***PartyPreference***that contains information from two different questions. Half of the sample has been asked the like/dislike question: How much do you like or dislike each of the following parties? The respondents could rate the parties on a scale from 0 to 10 (0= Strongly Dislike; 10= Strongly Like). The other half of the sample has been asked the Propensity to Vote question: How likely is it that you would ever vote for each of the following parties? The respondents could rate the parties on a scale ranging from 0 to 10 (0=Very Unlikely; 10=Very Likely). The values of the variable Party Preference range from 0 to 10. We created a dummy variable ***QuestionPartyPreference*** indicating whether voters answered the like/dislike question or the PTV question on the specific party in Wave 5 (1=PTV, 0=Like/Dislike). When included in the model this variable picks up differences in means between the two questions and thus adjusts for differences in the intercept.

We control for a whole set of factors that are causally antecedent to the election but that may nevertheless impinge on the dependent and independent variables and their covariation. The variable ***Yhat1W5*** is a combined control variable made for the stacked analysis and controls for all these effects that are causally antecedent to the election, respectively gender, age, ethnicity, gross household income, ethnicity, home ownership, work status, religion, age ending fulltime education, marital status and subjective class . The y-hats are regression predictions of each of the non-ipsative preferences separately thus this requires a set of 16 regression analyses, one for each of the 8 parties and for the two different nonipsative preferences: ptvs and dislikes at wave 5. The 16 predicted values variables are then centered on zero and combined in one variable called *Yhat1W5*. See Van der Eijk et al. 2006 for detailed explanation on the creation and purpose of this variable in a conditional model.

The variable ***CampaignTone***isthe main independent variable to be included in the model. It measures for each voter how they perceive the tone of each party’s campaign. The variable’s values range from 1 to 5 (1=Focuses mainly on criticizing other parties; 5=Focuses mainly on putting forward their own policies and personalities). The variable ***LeftRightDistancetoParty*** measures the distance between the perceived party’s position and the voter’s position on the left right scale in Wave 4. The variable ranges from 0 to 10. The variable ***EUDistancetoParty*** measures the distance between the perceived party’s position and the voter’s position on the European Integration Scale in Wave 4. The variable combines the responses to two different questions about European Integration each posed to half of the sample. The variable ranges from 0 to 10.

The variable ***RedistributionDistancetoParty*** measures the distance between the perceived party’s position and the voter’s position on the Redistribution Scale in Wave 4. The variable ranges from 0 to 10. The variable ***LikePartyLeaders*** gauges how much voters like party leaders in Wave 4 on a scale ranging from 0 to 10. The dichotomous variable ***BestCampaignLeader*** indicates whether voters considered the party leader of each party the best performer during the campaign (0=No; 1=Yes). The dichotomous variable ***WorstCampaignLeader*** tells us whether voters evaluated the party leader as the worst performer during the election campaign in Wave 5 (0=No; 1=Yes). The variable ***Pre-existingPartyPreference*** measures voters electoral preferences in Wave 4 and is constructed in a similar fashion as the variable *PartyPreference*. The variable ***Scotland*** is a dichotomous variable indicating whether voters reside in Scotland (0=No; 1=Yes). The variable ***Wales*** is a dichotomous variable indicating whether voters reside in Wales (0=No; 1=Yes)

**Model 3: Party Preferences**

In this model we make use of all the variables operationalized for the previous conditional OLS model, but insert in addition four dummy variables, respectively ***CampaignToneDelta1, CampaignToneDelta2, CampaignToneDelta3*** and ***CampaignToneDelta4***. Together these four dummy variables measure the difference in campaign tone between voters’ second and first preferred party, which are both measured on a five point scale (1=Focuses mainly on criticizing other parties and 5=Focuses mainly on putting forward their own policies and personalities). The difference score of campaign tone can have a negative or positive value. The difference score is negative when the second preferred party wages a campaign more focussed on criticizing opponents than the first preferred party. The difference score is positive when the second preferred party wages a campaign more focussed on its own policies and personalities than the first preferred party. These difference scores are transferred in four dummy variables. CampaignToneDelta4 represents the largest possible difference in campaign tone between the two preferred parties and CampaigToneDelta1 represents the largest possible positive difference between the two preferred parties. For testing the third hypothesis we have to look whether the dummies have positive coefficients in our model.

**Results**

Before measuring the effects of negative campaigning on voters’ electoral participation and party preference, we ask ourselves what are the public perceptions of the tone of the 2015 General Election campaign in Britain? Graph 1 displays the aggregate British voters’ perceptions of the tone of the campaign per party throughout the campaign. It shows that there are clear differences between voters’ perceptions of the tone of the campaign per party and that the tone of the campaign fluctuates over time. According to voters’ perceptions the most negative campaigns were run by the Conservative Party and UK Independence Party. Graph 2 to Graph 4 display the aggregate voters’ perception of the tone of the campaign per party throughout the campaign for each of the three countries. The results show that voters perceived differences in parties’ campaigns across the three countries.

---GRAPH 1 ABOUT HERE---

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---GRAPH 4 ABOUT HERE---

After having established that voters perceive campaign tone differences between parties and across the three countries, we will examine the impact of negative campaigning. First, we will examine the impact of negative campaigning on voters’ electoral participation. Second, we will examine the impact of negative campaigning on voters’ party preferences. Due to the large number of cases we do not look at significance when interpreting the results, instead we look at the size and direction of the effect when controlling for additional variables to counter concerns of endogeneity and construct validity.

---TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE---

Table 2[[5]](#footnote-5) presents the result of the logit analyses ran, Model 1 is the overall model and Model 2 to 4 are analyses on subsets of voters, respectively English, Welsh and Scottish voters. This is done to see whether results are similar across these groups of voters and to estimate the effect of parties that did not compete in all three countries, respectively the Scottish Nationalist Party and Plaid Cymru. When looking at these models, we see that the coefficients for the party’s campaign tone variables are small and mostly not significant already before entering any control variables into the model. One could still think about a spurious zero effect, however, the results do not improve when control variables are entered into the model. The results indicate voters’ perceptions of negative campaigning do not affect their electoral participation. Thus we do not find support for the ***Vote Intention Hypothesis (H1)***: The more negative voters perceive the campaign tone to be the more likely they are to vote.

---TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE---

Table 3 presents the set of analyses ran, Model 1 is our base model including only the variables QuestionPartyPreference showing the differences in means between the two electoral preference questions and Yhat1W5 which controls for all effects that are causally antecedent to the election. The variable QuestionPartyPreference shows that the two versions of nonipsative preferences have indeed different means. The R² is low as could be expected (0.072) and the residuals of this model are not well distributed suggesting that there is heterogeneity that is not (yet) accounted for.

In Model 2 we include our main independent variable, namely CampaignTone. The R² increases to 0.322 and the coefficient of the variable CampaignTone shows a strong positive relationship with our dependent variable (1.29). The positive coefficient shows that voters have much higher nonipsative preferences for parties that they perceive as mainly focussing on their own policies and personalities than parties that focus mainly on criticizing other parties during the campaign.

After having established that there is an initial effect of negative campaigning on voters’ electoral preferences, we continue to present models in which we included various additional variables in order to be as certain as possible that our estimate of the effect of CampaignTone is not biased. Therefore we put in variables which reduce endogeneity concerns (e.g. LeftRightDistancetoParty, EUDistancetoParty, RedistributionDistancetoParty, LikePartyLeaders), and variables that may help counter construct-validity concerns (e.g., Best/Worst Campaign Leader), in order to counter potential critique that CampaignTone does not measure what it is intended to, but something else. Model 3 adds to Model 2 the respondents’ left-right distances to all parties. The coefficient of LeftRightDistancetoParty is negative and slightly beyond -0.5, which indicates that a party that is distanced 2 places further from the respondent will, ceteris paribus, have a 1 point lower non-ipsative preference score. The Campaign Tone variable diminishes in magnitude, but remains quite large in absolute terms, respectively 0.92. Further controls for endogeneity lead to Model 4 further controls for endogeneity by adding the variables EUDistancetoParty and RedistributionDistancetoParty. The R² increases only a little to 0.489 which is not surprising as there is overlap between the three distance variables. All three distance variables have negative coefficients and most importantly in spite of these extra controls, the effect of campaign CampaignTone remains strong, namely 0.85. Model 5 further controls for endogeneity by including a somewhat different measure, namely the liking (or not) of party leaders (LikePartyLeaders). The inclusion of this variable boosts the R² to 0.647 indicating that the variable is only somewhat collinear with the ideological and policy distances introduced in the two previous models. The coefficient of LikePartyLeaders is strong and positive and the coefficient of CampaignTone decreases to 0.40. This still signals a respectable effect of voters’ perceptions of the campaign tone on their electoral preferences.

In Model 6 we include two independent variables from Wave 5 (i.e., from the same wave as the dependent variable itself), namely the ratings of who were best and worst performing leaders in the campaign (BestCampaignLeader, WorstCampaignLeader). We do this not to control for endogeneity concerns but to counter the possible critique that the effect of the variable CampaignTone is misinterpreted, and that it actually reflects positive or negative evaluations of the campaign performance of party leaders. The R² has increased to 0.669. The coefficients show that the evaluation of party leaders as best or worst performing in the campaign do matter for voters’ electoral preferences, but the important thing here is that they do not replace or wipe out the effect of campaign tone, which remains at 0.35, again undoubtedly highly significant. This means that the effect of tone cannot be dismissed as reflecting something else, such as party leaders’ assertiveness, or their persuasiveness in their campaign performances. At the same time it, signifies that the evaluation of leaders’ campaign performance is not (or at least not entirely) a reflection of whether or not they go negative. Model 7[[6]](#footnote-6) includes voters’ non ipsative party preferences at Wave 4 (Pre-existingPartyPreference) as a lagged independent variable to explain the same kind of preferences in Wave 5. This is the most stringent way to control for endogeneity, as this will pick up any systematic factors that impinge on these preferences in Wave 4 as well as in Wave 5 and that were not yet accounted for by the independent variables in Model 6. Even then the effect of ToneW4 does not disappear, it reduces to 0.230 but that is still a sizeable effect.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus, we find evidence in support of the ***Party Support Hypothesis (H2)***: The more negative voters perceive a party’s campaign the lower the preference that voters have for the party in question.

Model 8 tests our third hypothesis, namely that the second party benefits if the first party goes negative. Model 8 is our last model 7 plus four dummy variables that measure the difference in campaign tone between voters first and second preferred party in their electoral choice set. These four dummy variables all have significant and positive coefficients. This indicates that they are positively related to the model’s dependent variable (voters’ non-ipsative party preference measured in Wave 5) when the first preferred party wages a more positive campaign than the second preferred party. Thus, when the first preferred party’s campaign tone is perceived more negatively than the second preferred party’s campaign tone, this increases voters’ preference for their second preferred party. Thus, we find evidence in support of the **Third Party Support Hypothesis (H3):** The more negative voters perceive the campaign of their first preferred party, the higher the preference that voters have for their second preferred party.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

Negative campaigning is a prominent topic in the field of election campaign research. Regardless the abundance of studies work examining its effects on voters’ attitudes and behaviour outside the context of the United States is very limited, thereby possibly affecting the correctness and generalizability of the findings. In this study we embarked on an endeavour to examine the effects of negative campaigning on voters’ electoral participation and party preference in three countries with a multiparty system that are party of Britain, respectively England, Scotland and Wales. With the help of the large British Election Study, the study presented was one of the largest non-U.S. studies on negative campaigning. In addition, to a large data source this study enjoyed making use of a more objective formulation to measure voters’ perceptions of campaign tone. Therefore, the results in this study are less likely to be flawed than many other studies.

The results interestingly show that negative campaigning does not lower turnout in a multiparty system. Thereby relieving us from the concern that negative campaigning is deterious to the state of our democracy. However, nor do we find a mobilization effect as found in many recent studies. Although this cannot be empirically tested, we think this finding is a consequence of the large number of other parties voters can choose from when they are disappointed as a consequence of negative campaigning in a specific party.

In addition, we found that negative campaigning affects voters’ party preference. When voters perceive a party going negative that erodes their electoral preference for that party. This effect is by some referred to as the backlash effect. We expect that the erosion of electoral preferences for that party will have an impact on actual party choice, but we do not explicitly investigate that in this paper. In addition, we find that voters’ increases their preference for their second preferred party in their choice set when their first preferred party wages a more negative campaign than their first preferred party. This effect is by some referred to as the ‘Third Party’ effect, as both attacker and target do not benefit from the attack. However, this had not been empirically tested before. So we find preliminary support for the notion that negative campaigning might not always be beneficial in a multiparty system. We can however make no claims about its effectiveness until we have conducted further research on how a decrease in electoral preference translates into a party’s vote share.

**Research Agenda**

As this paper is part of the research project ‘CSNCC: Comparative Study of Negative Campaigning and its Consequences’ several papers will follow. We will delve deeper into the attitudinal effects of negative campaigning on voters, including their levels of political trust and efficacy; we will examine the effectiveness of negative campaigning in a multiparty setting by exploring how a decrease in electoral preference due to negative campaigning translates into a party’s vote share and we will examine the value of using of voters’ perceptions of campaign tone in the field of negative campaigning. See for more information www.annemariewalter.eu

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**Tables and Graphs**

**Table 1 (Un) Intended Effects of Negative Campaigning on Voting Behaviour[[8]](#footnote-8)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Effect** | **Supporting Studies** | **Debunking Studies** | **Cases Studied** |
| Depress Voters’ Preference Targeted Party | Shen and Wu 2002; Pinkleton 1997; Houston and Doan 1999; Merritt 1984; Desposato 2007; Kaid and Boydston 1987; Jasperson and Fan 2002; Mathews and Dietz-Uhler 1998; Arceneaux and Nickerson 2010; Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Kahn and Kenney 2004; Kaid 1997; King and McConnell 2003; Pinkleton 1997; Pinkleton 1998; Thorson et al. 1991 | Min 2004; Pattie et al. 2011; Maier and Maier 2007; King and McConnell 2003; Roy and Alcantara 2014; Chang 2003; Haddock and Zanna 1997; Hill 1989; Martinez and Delegal 1990 | United States, Canada, Germany, Scotland, Brazil, United Kingdom |
| Increase Voters’ Preference Attacking Party | Brader 2005; Kaid 1997; King and McConnell 2003; Wadsworth et al. 1987 | Min 2004; Pattie et al. 2011; Maier and Maier 2007; King and McConnell 2003; Roy and Alcantara 2014; Arceneaux and Nickerson 2010; Jasperson and Fan 2002; Chang 2003; Hill 1989; Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Haddock and Zanna 1997;Merritt 1984; Mathews and Dietz-Uhler 1998; Kahn and Kenney 2004; Min 2004; Houston and Doan 1999; Pinkleton 1997; Pinkleton 1998 Kahn and Geer 1994; Martinez and Delegal 1990 | United States, Canada, Germany, Scotland, Brazil, United Kingdom |
| Increase Voters’ Preference Third Parties | Pattie et al. 2011; Roy and Alcantara 2014 |  | Scotland, Canada |
| Decrease Electoral Participation | Ansolabehere et al. 1999; Ansolabeher and Iyengar 1995; Desposato 2007; Houston and Doan 1999; Nai 2013; Wattenberg and Brians 1999; Lemert, Wanta and Lee 1999 | Arcenaux and Nickerson 2010; Brooks and Geer 2007; Garramone et al. 1990; Clinton and Lapinski 2004; Geer and Lau 2006; Goldstein and Freedman 2002; Freedman and Goldstein 1999; Brader 2005; Min 2004; Brooks 2006; Nai 2013; Finkel and Geer 1998; Djupe and Peterson 2002; Jackson and Carsey 2007; Jackson and Sides 2006; Kaid 1997; Lau and Pomper 2004; Niven 2006; Thorson et al. 2000 | United States, Brazil, Switzerland |

**Graph 1: Aggregate Voters’ Perceptions of the Level of Negative Campaigning Per Party Across the Campaign (Interpolated Median)**

**Graph 2: Aggregate Voters’ Perceptions of the Level of Negative Campaigning Per Party Across the Campaign in England (Interpolated Median)**

**Graph 3: Aggregate Voters’ Perceptions of the Level of Negative Campaigning Per Party Across the Campaign in Scotland (Interpolated Median)**

**Graph 4: Aggregate Voters’ Perceptions of the Level of Negative Campaigning Per Party Across the Campaign in Wales (Interpolated Median)**

**Table 2: The Effect of Negative Campaigning on Electoral Participation (Logit)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Model 1**  **Great Britain** | **Model 2**  **England** | **Model 3**  **Wales** | **Model 4**  **Scotland** |
| **CampaignToneLabourParty** | .058  (.033) | .125  (.000) | -.036  (.684) | -.005  (.951) |
| **CampaignToneConservativeParty** | .019  (.450) | .059  (.040) | .054  (.521) | -.139  (.090) |
| **CampaignToneLiberalDemocratsParty** | .009  (.760) | .004  (.919) | .118  (.258) | -.047  (.618) |
| **CampaignToneGreenParty** | .117  (.000) | .061  (.043) | .169  (.099) | .094  (.293) |
| **CampaignToneUKIndependenceParty** | .040  (.081) | .078  (.002) | .056  (.439) | -.056  (.439) |
| **CampaignToneSNP** |  |  |  | .023  (.753) |
| **CampaignTonePlaidCymru** |  |  | .118  (.243) |  |
| **Constant** | 2.245  (.000) | 1.924  (.000) | 1.610  (.000) |  |
| **-2LL** | 8287.911 | 6396.871 | 746.713 | 975.642 |
| **Nagelkerke R²** | .006 | .009 | .029 | .010 |
| **X²** | 44.292  (.000) | 45.282 | 18.336  (.000) | 8.966 (.000) |
| **% Correctly Classified** | 95.0 | 94.4 | 95.1 | 97.3 |
| **N** | 21120 | 15014 | 1947 | 3974 |

*N.B. The model run is a logistic regression model on the original dataset. N=41837. The dependent variable is Turnout (0=No, not voted; 1=Yes, voted) and measures whether voters recalled voting on Election Day.*

**Table 3: The Effect of Negative Campaigning on Electoral Preference (Conditional OLS)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Model 1**  **Base model** | **Model 2** | **Model 3** | **Model4** | **Model 5** |
| **CampaignTone** |  | **1.298**  **(.000)** | **.919**  **(.007)** | **.846**  **(.008)** | **.402**  **(.007)** |
| **LeftRightDistancetoParty** |  |  | -.553  (.004) | -.434  (.005) | -.219  (.004) |
| **EUDistancetoParty** |  |  |  | -.142  (.004) | -.053  (.003) |
| **RedistributionDistancetoParty** |  |  |  | -.105  (.004) | -.048  (.003) |
| **LikePartyLeaders** |  |  |  |  | .632  (.004) |
| **QuestionPartyPreference** | -.280  (.023) | -.285  (.000) | -.275  (.019) | -.273  (.011) | -.297  (.016) |
| **Constant** | 4.015  (.016) | .264  (.000) | 3.192  (.032) | 3.863  (.035) | 1.681  (.032) |
| **R²** | .072 | .322 | .468 | .489 | .647 |
| **Adjusted R²** | .072 | .322 | .468 | .489 | .647 |
| **N** | 90293 | 84847 | 73451 | 65969 | 65969 |
|  | **Model 6** | **Model 7** | **Model 8** |  |  |
| **CampaignTone** | **.345**  **(.007)** | **.230**  **(.007)** | **.221**  **(.005)** |  |  |
| **LeftRightDistancetoParty** | -.213  (.004) | -.089  (.005) | -.089  (.003) |  |  |
| **EUDistancetoParty** | -.050  (.003) | -.012  (.002) | -.011  (.002) |  |  |
| **RedistributionDistancetoParty** | -.046  (.003) | -.020  (.003) | -.021  (.003) |  |  |
| **LikePartyLeaders** | .538  (.004) | .125  (.004) | .125  (.004) |  |  |
| **BestCampaignLeader** | 1.848  (.029) | .974  (.023) | .987  (.023) |  |  |
| **WorstCampaignLeader** | -.518  (.025) | -.422  (.020) | -4.26  (.020) |  |  |
| **Pre-existingPartyPreference** |  | .650  (.003) | .649  (.003) |  |  |
| **QuestionPartyPreference** | -.294  (.016) | -.110  (.012) | -.114  (.012) |  |  |
| **CampaignToneDelta4** |  |  | 1.128  (.490) |  |  |
| **CampaignToneDelta3** |  |  | 1.068  (.336) |  |  |
| **CampaignToneDelta2** |  |  | 1.143  (.169) |  |  |
| **CampaignToneDelta1** |  |  | 1.248  (.089) |  |  |
| **Constant** | 1.985  (.032) | .739  (.026) | .762  (.026) |  |  |
| **R²** | .669 | .795 | .795 |  |  |
| **Adjusted R²** | .669 | .795 | .795 |  |  |
| **N** | 65969 | 65969 | 65969 |  |  |

*N.B. The model run is a conditional OLS on a stacked dataset. N=292859. The dependent variable in this model is PartyPreference that measures voters’ electoral preferences by combining information from two different questions in wave 5, namely the Like/Dislike question (partylikeGridW5) and the Propensity to Vote question (PTVGridW5). All the models run include variable Yhat1W5, which is a combined control variable made for the stacked analysis and controls for all these effects that are causally antecedent to the election, respectively gender, age, ethnicity, gross household income, ethnicity, home ownership, work status, religion, age ending fulltime education, marital status and subjective class (See Van der Eijk et al. 2006). As these effects are not the main focus of our paper the effects are not presented in this model they can be requested from the authors.*

1. Northern Ireland is not covered by the British Election Study and therefore excluded from this study. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The dataset BESIP can be downloaded from www.britishelectionstudy.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Source of this information is www.britishelectionstudy.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This means the absence of so-called ties, i.e. a voter ranking two parties equally high. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Not presented in the table are the results on the residual analyses. We performed for all the models a residual check to examine whether the model is properly specified. The model is properly satisfied from model 3 onwards. The regressions result in residuals that are nicely symmetrically distributed, but too light-tailed to be fully normal. This however does not bias the coefficients and is not a problem for hypothesis testing (e.g. the estimation of standard errors/confidence intervals/p-values) in contrast with the situation where the residuals would have been too heavily tailed in their distribution (in that case estimation of robust standard errors would be in order). A light-tailed distribution of residuals may suggest over-controlling. In our analyses this means that we make it more difficult for ourselves to find significant effects. Thus, that we find them nonetheless is relatively strong evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. We also ran model 7 with a uniform weight applied to the data to compensate for the increase in cases by stacking. Because of the 7 stacks, the uniform weight was 1/7. This procedure leaves all the coefficients the same, but changes the standard errors, but leaving everything highly significant. The results found are not just to the substantial increase in cases as a result of the stacking. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Not displayed as models in our paper we examined whether there were interaction effects with the various countries. The effects found are uniform across the three countries. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. We do not claim this overview to be exhaustive. The table is used as support to the theory paragraph and illustrate the inconclusiveness in the field on the (un) intended consequences of negative campaigning. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)