Editorial

For a Research Agenda on Negative Politics

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Abstract
This thematic issue deals with the "negative" side of politics, more specifically with dynamics of political aggressiveness and ideological opposition in voters and elites. Why do candidates "go negative" on their rivals? To what extent are voters entrenched into opposing camps parted by political tribalism? And are these dynamics related to the (dark) personality of candidates and the expression of emotions in voters? A series of contributions written by leading and emerging scholars provide novel and groundbreaking empirical evidence along three main lines: (a) the evolution, causes, and consequences of political attacks and incivility by political elites; (b) the drivers and dimensions of affective polarization and negative voting in the public; and (c) the dynamics of candidate's personality and perceptions, the affective roots of attitudes and behaviors. This thematic issue aims at setting the stage for a new research agenda on negative politics, able to generate new insights by triangulating evidence and approaches from strands of literature that have mostly evolved on separate tracks.

Issue
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1. Introduction

In sharp contrast with the normative ideal of working together toward finding consensual solutions for the greater good, contemporary politics—at least in Western democracies—seems to be built predominantly on oppositional and conflictual elements. At the level of political elites, much attention has been granted in recent years to the dynamics of negative campaigning and attack politics (Nai, 2020). Dealing with an electorate with waning interest in politics, parties and candidates face a strong incentive to "go negative"; as a result, voters are exposed to campaign messages that often include more attacks towards the program and character of the opponent than concrete policy propositions—which might foster cyni-

cism in the electorate. On top of this shift toward attacking the opponent, contemporary politics also seems *qualitatively* more aggressive. Recent research has thoroughly documented the rise of political incivility (Rossini et al., 2021) and the general tendency of elites toward breaking social norms. Trump, Bolsonaro, Duterte, and many more, easily come to mind in this sense. Even more broadly, a clear aggressive stance seems central in the populist worldview, where a normative struggle between the pure people and the evil elite often takes center stage (Hameleers et al., 2018). All in all, political elites seem increasingly drawn toward showcasing negative, confrontational, aggressive behavior—likely due to the rise of political figures with darker personality profiles and characters (Nai & Martínez i Coma, 2019).

But negative politics is not an exclusivity of political elites. In voters as well, politics is often a matter of opposing what they dislike more than striving to promote what they might want or like. Within the electoral arena, growing evidence points towards dynamics of negative voting (Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2022; Medeiros & Noël, 2014), where voters cast their choice not to promote candidates or parties they support, but rather to stop candidates or parties they dislike. Even more profoundly, opposition between competing ideas—which, normatively, remains a cornerstone of a healthy democracy—is increasingly supplanted by a "principle dislike" against political foes. Such affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019), strongly rooted in dynamics of group identity and tribalism (Mason, 2018), increasingly sets the stage for politics as a war between opposing camps holding irreconcilable moral positions. Today, partisan differences in voters seem almost necessarily to morph into affective polarization and profound dislike of the other camp, which potentially can provide a fertile ground for the development of political violence (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022). Outside of the political arena, political activism often takes the form of contentious mobilization, and waves of mass protests regularly shook the established democratic order.

All in all, contemporary politics seems to be built on an intrinsically negative component. Elites privilege an aggressive stance against each other, echoed by the entrenchment of profound dislike between opposed campaigns in voters—and likely fueled by the obsession with the negative side of politics by news media (Geer, 2012). Yet, surprisingly, research on these phenomena has mostly evolved on separate tracks. This thematic issue takes stock of these separate strands of research and brings together empirical work on election campaigning, leader personality, negative voting, and antagonistic political attitudes towards the goal to start setting the stage for an integrated framework on Negative Politics.

2. Contributions

The contributions in our thematic issue can be classified into three broad topics: (a) drivers and consequences of negativity in election campaigns, (b) the roots of affective polarization and negative voting, and (c) the dynamics of candidate personality, perceptions, and emotions.

Starting with election campaigns, Reiter and Matthes (2022) introduce the concept of "dirty campaigns"—that is, campaigns that violate social norms by, e.g., engaging in incivility and deceitful campaigning techniques. On top of expanding our conceptual toolkit when it comes to thinking about how political elites engage in "negative" campaigns, their article goes a step further and shows how such "dirty" campaigns can lead to distrustful attitudes in the public, likely moderated by partisan attitudes. Vargiu (2022) offers a novel take on political incivility and argues for the necessity to account for voters' perceptions of such incivility. Following a con-

structionist perspective, the author looks at how such perceptions shape candidate likeability during recent elections in France, Germany, and the Netherlands—and shows that perceived incivility tends to correspond to more negative feelings towards candidates, but also that it is relative incivility, more than absolute levels, that does the heavy lifting when it comes to candidate sympathy. Yan (2022) looks at recent elections in Taiwan (2008–2022) to uncover drivers of negative campaigning at the candidate and competition levels and highlights the importance of contextual factors when it comes to modeling the decision to go negative. Beyond expanding our understanding of the drivers of negativity in such an important and overlooked case, the article relies on a methodological approach—qualitative comparative analysis—rarely used in communication research. Poljak (2022) investigates the presence of attacks and incivility during "routine times," looking at parliamentary debates in Belgium, Croatia, and the UK. The author focuses specifically on gender dynamics, and shows evidence that politicians tend to adhere to gender stereotypes—women attack less (and are less likely to use incivility) and are more rarely targeted by attacks.

Turning to affective polarization and negative voting, using a sample of American and Swedish respondents, Bankert (2022) investigates the influence of personality traits (e.g., the "Big Five," authoritarianism, etc.) on negative and positive partisanship. Results show strongly heterogeneous effects, indicating that the personality origins of partisanship differ across countries (and party affiliation)—suggesting the need for more comparative research. Bettarelli et al. (2022) bridge the gap between the literature on emotions, affective polarization, and protest behavior. Looking at survey data from Belgian voters, the authors uncover the affective roots of political perceptions and actions, for instance, by showing how anger and hope towards politics can effectively combine to drive voters towards engaging in protest behavior, and how affective polarization can compensate for the lack of such emotions. Walder and Strijbis (2022) look at the use of party cues within the context of Swiss direct democratic votes, focusing in particular on the effects of negative party identification. Triangulating experimental and observational evidence, the authors show that voters tend indeed to align themselves against parties they dislike, which opens up an important new line of research on negative partisanship during referenda. Guldemond et al. (2022) investigate the extent to which Dutch opinion leaders on Twitter spread deceiving content and the effects that such content has. Via the computational analysis of a large sample of tweets, the authors show that users who "follow" a deceitful opinion leader become more affectively polarized.

Finally, turning to dynamics of candidate perceptions, personality, and emotions, Maier et al. (2022) offer one of the very first insights into the "dark" personality of politicians that relies on self-ratings from candidates running for German state elections—opening up

an exciting new research agenda that tackles the nefarious nature of politicians' character via what candidates themselves say about their own profile. Harsgor and Nevitte (2022) investigate whether evaluations of presidential candidates drive turnout in American elections. Using long-term survey data (1968–2020), the authors show that turnout is affected by the differences in affect between the main competing candidates, and the nature of such affect. Rohrbach (2022) dives into how negativity is expressed in voters' thoughts about women and men politicians when exposed to negative media cues—and how these thoughts affect, in turn, their vote preferences. Results across two studies with German-speaking respondents suggest that negative cues generate negativity in voters' thoughts similarly for men and women, but such negative thoughts seem more prejudicial for the electoral chances of men. Capelos et al. (2022) dive into the psychology of the "angry voter." A close look at interviews with "angry" American citizens reveals the centrality of *ressentiment*—that is, the tendency to transform grievances (e.g., injustice, shame, envy) into anti-social outputs associated with morally righteous indignation, rage, and destructive anger. Verbalyte et al. (2022) provide a sociological explanation of "trolls" who engage in personal attacks and insults online. Looking at a sample of American respondents, the authors show the existence of two main categories of trolling: one based on fun and entertainment and another with more defensive/reactive roots. Personal profiles, such as political identity and religiosity, play a role in whether people engage in such trolling activities online.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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