Unintended Consequences of Negative Campaigning: Backlash and Second-Preference Boost Effects in a Multi-Party Context

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Abstract

This study examines effects of negative campaigning by political parties on citizens' electoral preferences in the 2015 General Election in England. We do so using a large internet panel study and an operationalisation of (perceived) negative campaigning that avoids social desirability. Our study acknowledges England's multiparty system by distinguishing between the campaign tones of all parties. Potential problems of endogeneity are addressed by leveraging the panel structure of the data and by extensive controls. We find that electoral preferences are weakened for parties engaging in negative campaigning, and that this backlash effect gets stronger over the course of the campaign. We also find support for a second-preferences boost hypothesis: preferences for one's second-most preferred party are strengthened if its campaign is more positive than that of one's most-preferred party.

Keywords: Negative Campaigning, Electoral Preference, Backlash Effect, Second-order Boost Effect, Multiparty System, 2015 General Election

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Introduction

Negative campaigning is a widely applied campaign practice. It consists of attacking opponents' abilities, accomplishments and policies instead of focussing on one's own offering in these respects (Geer 2006). However, contrary to popular belief there is little empirical evidence that negative campaigning is particularly effective (Lau and Rovner 2009). Its use is not without controversy as it has been associated with unintended consequences such as a decrease in political trust and voter turnout which might endanger the health of representative democracy (Kamber 1997; Ansolabehere et al. 1994; Krupnikov 2011).

Although used worldwide, research about its effects is overwhelmingly based on the U.S. context (exceptions are Maier and Maier 2007; Pattie et al. 2011; Haddock and Zanna 1997; Sanders and Norris 2005; Ceron and d' Abba 2015; Roy and Alcantara 2016). The resulting insights are therefore potentially country-specific, and we have little firm knowledge about its effects in other political systems (Fridkin and Kenney 2012).

In this study we assess effects of negative campaigning on electoral preferences in England. With it we contribute to the scholarly debate on negative campaigning and its consequences, by studying its effects on voter's electoral preferences in a context with more than just two (viable) electoral options. We theorise that negative campaigning can be expected to be less effective in the presence of multiple parties as its benefits may accrue to other parties than the attacking party. Our study focuses on the 2015 General Election in England, in which voters generally had a choice of 5 parties. Our main interests are whether and how negative campaigning affects voters' electoral preferences, and our hypotheses involve so-called backlash and third-party effects which are discussed below. This study contributes to the study of negative campaigning in three ways. Firstly, it is gauges the effects of negative campaigning on preferences for multiple parties in ways that go beyond the few previous studies that do so (Pattie et al., 2011). Secondly, the panel structure of our data and the large sample size allow for an analysis design (including extensive and refined controls) to ameliorate ubiquitous concerns about confounding factors and endogeneity better than other studies in the extant literature. Thirdly, this study looks at the heterogeneity of effects of negative campaigning over the course of the campaign, which has not yet been considered in the extant literature.

We find that negative campaigning does affect English' voters' electoral preferences. It depresses preferences for the attacking party, which is sometimes referred to as the 'backlash' effect, the existence of which has been suggested in the few other studies of negative campaigning in a multiparty system (Pattie et al. 2011; Roy and Alcantara 2006; Maier and Maier 2007). This backlash effect becomes stronger over the course of the campaign. Moreover, we report the novel finding that (in a multiparty system) negative campaigning may be beneficial for voters' second-most preferred party (a 'second-preference boost' effect).

We first discuss the literature on negative campaigning and its effects on voters' electoral preferences, resulting in our hypotheses. Next, we present our case (the 2015 General Election in England), data, operationalisation, and analytical design. We then present and discuss the results; and end by drawing conclusions and implications for the study of negative campaigning.

Negative Campaigning and Electoral Preferences

In their election campaigns political parties decide on the balance between emphasizing their own abilities, accomplishments and policy stands and attacking their opponent(s) on these grounds. The first is known as positive campaigning, the latter as negative campaigning (Geer 2006). The literature examining this choice generally uses a rational choice perspective: political actors weigh the costs and benefits when deciding whether to attack or not (Riker 1996; Lau and Pomper 2004). The goal to be realised is to win the elections and negative campaigning can help to realise this if it increases the attacking party's vote share or decreases the vote share of its main rival(s). Thus, a candidate or party resorts to negative campaigning to become voters' most preferred party by diminishing positive feelings for competitors (Lau et al. 2007; Budesheim et al. 1996). Yet, negative campaigning may be dangerous, as it risks generating negative affect toward the attacker, a so-called "backlash" or "boomerang" effect (see Johnson-Cartee et al. 1991; Roese and Sande 1993; Pinkleton et al. 2002). Whether or not parties decide to attack depends on their expectations of the losses their opponent will suffer from the attack and the risk they face themselves from being perceived negatively.

It has been argued that in a multiparty system parties' cost-benefit analysis must be different than in a two-party system. In the latter the political objectives of winning votes, office and policy (Strøm and Müller 1999) tend to be strongly connected. However, when elections are expected to result in a 'hung' parliament and the need for a coalition government, parties have to carefully balance their vote-, office- and policy-seeking objectives. The largest party is not guaranteed to be a partner in a coalition and enjoy the ensuing influence over policy. Negative campaigning may have ramifications for post-election coalition formation. Campaigning too aggressively and too negatively, may reduce a party's chances of being included in a coalition (for historical examples see Sjöblom 1968; Brants et al. 1982; Kaid and Holtz-Bacha 2006). Additionally, and of importance for this study, the rewards of negative campaigning are less certain in a multiparty system (Ridout and Walter 2015). To appreciate this, one has to realise that much of the literature referred to uses an implied Downsian perspective of voter behaviour: voters assess, given their own interests, their preferences for, or in other words the electoral attractiveness to them of each of the parties (these are 'utilities' in Downs' terms, 1957:36-7), and they subsequently vote for the party that is ranked highest in this respect.[1] Lowering the attractiveness of an opponent by attacking is rational in a two-party system as long as the benefit is not outweighed by a backlash effect that lowers one's own attractiveness. In a multiparty system, however, attacking an opponent may not only affect the ranking of the attacked and the attacking parties for voters, but also the ranking of other parties, particularly when many voters see at least two parties as approximately equally attractive as options to vote for (something that certainly holds for England, see Kroh et al. 2007).[2] Thus, as the number of parties increases, and as the number of voters for whom two parties are approximately equally attractive as options to vote for increases, it is less certain that the attacker rather than any other party will benefit from an attack. Although this logic is well recognised by scholars of multi-party systems (see Elmelund-Praestekaer 2008; 2010; Hansen and Pedersen 2008; Ridout and Walter 2015) there is yet little empirical underpinning for it.

Campaigns are not only about influencing voters' electoral preferences, but also about mobilizing (and demobilizing) groups of voters. Some scholars report negative campaigning to lead to voters abstaining from voting (for example, Ansolabehere et al. 1994; Houston and Doan 1999; Wattenberg and Brians 1999; Lemert et al. 1999; see also Krupnikov, 2011, for an interesting specification of the conditions under which negative campaigning can be expected to have demobilising effects). This may affect election outcomes. Such demobilising effects are more plausible in a two-party context where negative campaigning may make both parties less attractive, than in a multiparty system where many voters see more than just one party as sufficiently attractive to turn out and vote for. Therefore, we can expect any effect of negative campaigning on turnout to be smaller in multiparty systems. Although this article does not focus on such effects, we report in the Online Appendix analyses that demonstrate that our data do not show any such demobilising effect.

In spite of numerous studies on consequences of negative campaigning, the field is still inconclusive, as illustrated by our summary of the literature in Table 1. Some scholars (such as Shen and Wu 2002; Pinkleton 1997; Arceneaux and Nickerson 2010; Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Desposato 2007) find that negative campaigning decreases voters' support for the targeted party. A larger group of scholars reports that negative campaigning decreases voters' support for the attacking party (including Min 2004; King and McConnell 2003; Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Haddock and Zanna 1997; Merritt 1984), also in a multiparty setting (Pattie et al. 2011; Maier and Maier 2007; Roy and

Alcantara 2016). The notion that third parties can benefit from negative campaigning in a multiparty system finds preliminary evidence in only two studies (Pattie et al. 2011; Roy and Alcantara 2016).

Backlash and third-party effects are unintended consequences of negative campaigning. This study extends the work by Pattie et al. (2011) and Roy and Alcantera (2016) by specifying which party should benefit most from a backlash against an attacking party and under which circumstances this will occur. Following a Downsian logic it is the second-most preferred party that should benefit from others going negative, as long as it runs a more positive campaign than the voter's other preferred party.

---TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE---

The data that we use in this article (discussed below) provide great detail on the campaign tone (positive/negative) of each of the parties in the 2015 General Election in England, but are less informative about the parties that are targeted by any negative campaigning.[3] These data therefore allow us to test most directly hypotheses derived from the literature reviewed above (and summarised in Table 1) that focus on two unintended consequences of negative campaigning:

> **Backlash Effect (H1)**: Negative campaigning by a party diminishes its electoral attractiveness.
>
> **Second-Preference Boost Effect (H2):** Negative campaigning by voters' most preferred party boosts the electoral attractiveness of their second-most preferred party, if the latter is more positive in its campaign tone.

Lack of definitive information in our data about the party targeted by negative campaigning makes it impossible to directly test any hypotheses about the intended consequences of negative campaigning (thus, about the damage inflicted on targeted parties and about conditions for this to occur).

Context, Data, Variables and Analytical Design

Context

We examine the 2015 General Election in the United Kingdom. These elections are conducted in 650 single-member constituencies using the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) electoral system. We focus only on England (which contains almost 84% of all eligible voters in the UK, and 82% of the seats in the House of Commons), because the parties and party systems in other countries of the UK (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) differ too much to be accommodated in a single analysis. Across England, voters can choose from candidates of five parties: the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, UKIP, and the Greens. The Conservatives and Labour are traditionally by far the largest and politically most important parties, and the only ones with realistic hopes of leading the government and providing the Prime Minister. The previous elections of 2010 resulted in a hung parliament and a coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. During the run-up to the 2015 General Election it was generally expected that 2015 would again result in a hung parliament. That the Conservatives won an absolute majority was uniformly experienced as a total surprise (Green and Prosser 2016; Cowley and Kavanagh 2018). In spite of the prominent position of the two major parties, electoral competition is not restricted to these two, not even in England (and certainly not in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland). Indeed, in England in 2015, over 27% of the votes were cast for other than the two major parties, in spite of the FPTP electoral system being extremely inhospitable to minor parties. Moreover, about half of all citizens held virtually equally strong electoral preferences for at least two of the five parties, but rarely for both Conservatives and Labour.[4] The English party system is thus a multiparty system, skewed towards the two major parties, but with the other parties of considerable importance in terms of voter preferences and party competition. We focus on the formal campaign, from the dissolution of parliament (30 March) until polling day (7 May).

Data

The analyses are based on data from the 2015 British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) (waves 4, 5 and 6). The study was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC); the fieldwork was conducted by YouGov.[5] The survey is an internet panel which has in excess of 20,000 respondents per wave. 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' with random daily subsamples of 700-1000 respondents being interviewed. Wave 6 was conducted immediately following the General Election, between 8 and 26 May 2015. Our analyses are based on the responses of 19,123 English respondents who took part in each of these three waves.

Independent and dependent variables

We operationalize our main ***independent*** variable, negative campaigning, by respondents' perceptions of the election campaigns of each of the five competing parties. In the literature, a perception approach is used frequently to measure the tone of parties' election campaigns; it is founded on the premise that perceptions are more telling than actual campaign behaviour of parties and politicians when, as is the case here, trying to explain voters' political preferences and electoral behaviour (Sigelman and Kugler 2003).[6] This approach is, obviously, not without its problems. Perceptions are notoriously subject to partisan bias, with party supporters perceiving the campaign of their own party or candidate as less negative. Indeed, the strongest predictor of perceptions of campaign tone is often partisanship (Ridout and Fowler 2012), although perceptions of campaign tone cannot be reduced to mere reflections of partisanship (Pattie et al. 2011). Mattes and Redlawsk (2014:52) observe that most often the survey questions used to gauge public opinion on negative campaigning are formulated in ways that invoke partisan and social desirability bias, by explicitly using the terms 'negative' and 'positive' (examples include Sigelman and Kugler 2003; Ridout and Franz 2008; Sides, Lipsitz and Grossmann 2009; Stevens 2012; Ridout and Fowler 2010; Pattie et al. 2011). To reduce such partisan and social desirability effects, we reformulated the survey question so that it does not contain the terms 'negative' and 'positive' but instead asks to what extent parties focused in their campaign on their own policies and personalities, or on those of others. By doing so we link this operationalization much closer to the theoretical construct of negative campaigning that, as discussed above, is defined exactly in these terms. This enhances the construct validity of this measure (Adcock and Collier 2001). The survey question is 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, and UKIP. Responses could be given on a 5-point scale, 1 indicating a campaign that mainly focused on criticism of other parties and personalities and 5 indicating a campaign that mainly focused on putting forward a party's own policies.[7] English voters' perceptions of the parties' campaign tone in the 2015 General Election correlate highly with expert's perceptions [8], which demonstrates the relevance of these perceptions.

Our main ***dependent*** variable is electoral preference. As discussed above, existing theorising sees negative campaigning influencing the electoral attractiveness of the political parties that engage in it, as reflected in our hypotheses. As 'going negative' is not necessarily restricted to a single party, we cannot operationalise electoral preference in exclusive terms (which would be the case if we use vote choice, intended vote choice or party identification as measures of electoral preference). We therefore use as our dependent variable so-called non-ipsative electoral preferences. Such preferences are measured in the BESIP in two forms (each asked to a random half of the sample): propensity to vote scores (PTVs) (see Van der Eijk et al. 2006) and like/dislike scores for political parties. [9] Both questions have been asked for the same parties for which perceptions of campaign tone were asked: Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, UKIP and Greens. Both questions reflect respondents' non-ipsative preferences, and in order to maximise our empirical basis we combined them for our analyses into a single measure.[10]

Analytical Design

Our analyses aim to establish the effects of parties' campaign tone on citizens' electoral preferences for these parties.[11] This raises a number of analytical problems. A first analytical problem is how to deal with perceived campaign tone (measured for each of the five parties) and electoral preferences (also measured for each of the five parties). A seemingly obvious solution would be to conduct separate analyses for each of the five parties, and subsequently to compare the coefficients derived from each of these separate analyses. This, however, would lead to coefficients that are not comparable because of the stark differences of the distributions of the dependent and independent variables in the separate analyses. Instead, we aim to analyse the information about all parties simultaneously, which can be achieved by restructuring the data in a form that is analogous to that used in conditional logit analysis. The units of analysis then consist of respondents-party dyads; this implies that each respondent is represented by five records in the restructured data, with each of these records pertaining to a different party (an illustration of this analytical design is included in the Online Appendix). In contrast to conditional logit analysis, the dependent variable is not dichotomous but (quasi-)interval, thus lending itself to OLS. The restructuring requires that independent and control variables should be defined so as to fit within this respondent-party dyadic structure. For campaign tone, our independent variable, this is already the case. Some other variables can easily be integrated in this structure of respondent-party dyads, as in the case of control variables relating to ideology and issues, where we use the distances between respondents and each of the parties. For some of the variables (mainly the demographic and socio-economic control variables) this dyadic data structure requires the construction of an inductively defined measure of 'affinity' of respondents with each of the parties. After this restructuring of the data the actual analysis is performed on the basis of OLS (which, given the data structure, is also known as 'stacked OLS' with standard errors clustered on voters. Further details of this analytical design are discussed in Van der Eijk et al. 2006; De Sio and Franklin 2011; Franklin and Renko 2013). This analysis design results in a single coefficient to be estimated for the effect of the independent variable, which reflects a *generic* effect of negative campaigning, i.e., an effect that applies to all parties.

A second analytical problem is endogeneity. It would be overly naïve to conduct a straightforward regression of electoral preferences on campaign tone. Our dependent and independent variables are both strongly correlated with respondents' evaluations for parties and any bivariate relationship can be interpreted in multiple ways. To minimise endogeneity threats, we employ the following strategy.[12] First, our dependent, independent and control variables are derived from different waves of the panel. Campaign tone is observed during the campaign (wave 5), the dependent variable (electoral preferences) in wave 6, and most control variables in wave 4 (with the exception of socio-demographic background characteristics, which are largely time-invariant, and sometimes date back to wave 1). This temporal separation rules out the most obvious forms of endogeneity. Second, in the absence of suitable instruments, we rely on extensive controls. As the major threat of endogeneity stems from partisan attitudes, we focus on controlling for a the most important partisan attitudes and substantive political orientations in British politics, namely (1) classic partisanship: whether or not one identifies with the party involved in the dyadic respondent-party unit; (2) distance between the position of oneself and that of the party involved on the left-right scale; (3) similar distances on more specific dimensions relating to the EU, and to redistribution; (4) affect (on a 0-10 scale) for the leader of the party in the dyadic unit; and, finally (5) pre-existing values of the dependent variable, which encapsulate common antecedent factors influencing both our dependent variable (electoral preferences) as well as our independent variable (parties' campaign tones). We control in this way more comprehensively for sundry partisan orientations then when using just party choice or party identification.[13] Finally, we control for a variety of socio-demographic variables that may affect the dependent and independent variables and their covariation. These are gender, age, ethnicity, gross household income, ethnicity, home ownership, work status, religion, age ending fulltime education, marital status and subjective class. Details of their coding are reported in the Online Appendix.

Results

Before measuring the effects of negative campaigning on voters' electoral preference, we first present how our respondents perceived the campaign tones used by the English parties during the 2015 General Election campaign. Averaged across all five parties and all days of the campaign, parties are perceived to campaign negatively more frequently than positively. On the 5-point response scale, almost 40 per cent of responses are that parties focused mainly on criticising others (21.4% on position 1 and 18.5% on position 2), while just over 34 per cent of responses imply that parties mainly focus on their own policies and personalities (14.4% and 20.1% on positions 5 and 4 respectively). The remainder of responses (25.6 per cent) are in the middle of the scale. Distinguishing between the days of the campaign shows that the tone of parties' campaigns fluctuates somewhat over time, however without any clear trends. Distinguishing between parties shows clear differences. According to English citizens the most negative campaigns were run by the Conservative Party and Labour Party, while the Greens and UKIP were seen to focus least on critiquing others and most on presenting their own policies and personalities. Given the support of the various parties in the electorate (and in the sample) these differences contradict the suspicion that perceptions are predominantly reflections of partisan attitudes. Were that to be true, the two largest parties (Conservatives and Labour) should be perceived as least negative in their campaigning. This is clearly not the case, which reinforces, in spite of endogeneity concerns discussed above, our perspective that these perceptions contain an important non-partisan driven component (see also our earlier discussion in the section on our analytical design and in note 8).

---FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE---

We now turn to estimating effects of parties' campaign tone on electoral preferences. We start with Hypothesis 1, which holds that negative campaigning reduces parties' electoral attractiveness. The results of the regression analysis are reported in Table 2[14]. The model accounts for voters' electoral preferences for parties, as observed in wave 6 of the panel, with three kinds of variables. The first of these is the independent variable, parties' campaign tone. The second group of variables included in Table 2 consists of six controls for partisan attitudes and orientations, as previously discussed in the description of our analytical design. All these variables have been observed in wave 4 of the panel and are included because they can be expected to affect both the dependent and the independent variables. Omitting them as controls would ascribe unjustified causal effects to campaign tone. The third group of variables included in the analysis is the least interesting and consists of controls for socio-demographic variables (listed in section A3 of the

Online Appendix) and two 'technical' controls. The first of these concerns the in which form questions about parties' electoral attractiveness were asked (see also section on our analytical design, and note 10, above): PTVs or like-dislike ratings. The coefficient of this control turns out to be not significant. The second concerns whether the party in question had fielded a candidate in the respondent's constituency, which has to be included in the analysis as its absence from the ballot can be expected to diminish its electoral attractiveness for obvious reasons. As Table 2 demonstrates, this is indeed the case.

Table 2 shows that five of the controls for partisan related attitudes and orientations are indeed significant predictors of the dependent variable (parties' electoral attractiveness in wave 6). By far the strongest effect is exerted by party identification, and by pre-existing values of the dependent variable Affect towards the leader of a party, and (small) distance to a party in left/right terms and in terms of preferences for redistribution also contribute significantly to the explanation of electoral preferences in wave 6, but respondents' distance to a party's position on the EU dimension does not add anything to the model once the other variables are included.[15]

Campaign tone has a highly significant effect on parties' electoral attractiveness, with a coefficient of 0.216. Thus, we find strong evidence in support of Hypothesis 1 which specifies the presence of a ***Backlash Effect*** because of negative campaigning. The estimated difference in the electoral attractiveness of parties running the most positive and the most negative campaign is, everything else being equal, 0.86 on a preference scale running from 0 to 10. One might consider the magnitude of this effect of campaign tone to be relatively minor in real-world terms given the range of the dependent variable (0 to 10). Yet, such a conclusion would miss the point. Indeed, for respondents who are true-blue loyalists and have a strong electoral preference for only a single party, it will not matter much whether or not that party wages a very negative campaign. They will vote for this party anyway, even if they were to be dismayed by the tone of its campaign. But many respondents find themselves in a quite different situation and have strong preferences for more than just one party. The estimated effect of campaign tone has therefore to be gauged in terms of its capacity to alter the rank-order between the most preferred parties, as that order determines which party is supported on the ballot. In 2015 we find that the difference in preference between their most and second-most preferred parties is no more than 1 for 14 per cent of the respondents in the sample we analyse here. For these respondents the prospect is very real indeed that what otherwise would be their most preferred party may lose its top spot in their preference order by waging an extremely negative campaign.

The next set of analyses reported in Table 2 tests our second hypothesis, namely that preferences for one's second-best party are boosted if it wages a more positive campaign than one's most preferred party does, the Second-Preference Boost Effect. To test this hypothesis, we take as our point of departure the model used to test Hypothesis 1, reported in Table 2. We modify this model by adding a variable that reflects the difference in campaign tone between voters' first and second-most preferred party.[16] This variable has a highly significant coefficient: 0.364 in the hypothesised direction. This effect pertains only to the second-most preferred party and has no consequences for the preferences for all other parties. Thus, when the most preferred party's campaign tone is more negative than that of the second-most preferred party, the electoral attractiveness of the latter is boosted compared to what it otherwise would have been. We estimated this effect using the same controls as for the backlash hypothesis. Thus, we find strong evidence in support of hypothesis 2 which specifies the ***Second-Preference Boost Effect:*** preferences for one's second-most preferred party are strengthened when its campaign is more positive than the campaign of one's most preferred party.

During our analyses we encountered an interesting, not hypothesised result. As stated above, wave 5 of the panel (in which the questions about campaign tone were included) was fielded as a so-called ‘rolling thunder’, with daily random subsamples of 700 to 1000 respondents. The question about campaign tone was thus for some respondents asked in the beginning of the campaign, for others in the middle, and for yet others late in the campaign. In view of other work that points to moderating effects of when negativity occurs during the campaign (Krupnikov 2011) we probed whether this temporal location had any consequences for our findings. We find that it has no consequence for the perception of the tone of parties’ campaigns (as could already be guessed from the trendless fluctuation in Figure 1). Yet, we do find that the effect of (perceived) campaign tone on party preferences varies systematically over the course of the campaign. When adding to our regression models interactions of the two independent variables with campaign day, we find that the interaction of Campaign Tone with campaign day is significant ($p<.01$) and positive. That means that the backlash effect identified by the significant coefficient of Campaign Tone increases in strength over the duration of the campaign. At the beginning of the campaign the strength of the backlash effect is .186, at the end (38 days later) it is .262. The strength of the second-preference boost does not increase or decrease over the duration of the campaign. Full results of the model with interactions are reported in section A5 and Table A3 of the Online Appendix.

Why exactly the backlash effect strengthens over the course of the campaign cannot be inferred from our current analyses. Further research is evidently required to establish whether such time dependencies can be replicated both in the English context and elsewhere, and if they are found more generally, to establish the reasons for it.

--TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE---

How important this second-preference boost is for respondents’ choices cannot be gauged on the basis of these analyses. If the ‘gap’ in strength of preferences between the two most preferred parties is large, the estimated effect will be too small to bridge it, and the rank-order between these two parties will remain unaffected. But for respondents who hold almost equally strong preferences for both, this relatively small effect (in terms of the 0 to 10 range of the preference scale) may well be large enough to change which of these two parties is the most preferred (and thus most likely to get their vote).

Conclusion and Discussion

Negative campaigning is a prominent topic in the field of election campaign research. In spite of the abundance of studies in this field, the examination of its effects on voters’ attitudes and behaviour beyond the United States is still very limited. In this study we examined the effects of negative campaigning on voters’ electoral preferences in the English multiparty context. Using data from the British Election Study, the study presented is one of the largest non-U.S. studies on negative campaigning.

We found that negative campaigning relates to voters’ electoral preferences in two ways. When voters perceive a party going negative, this erodes their electoral preference for that party. This study of the 2015 General Election in England corroborates the presence of such a backlash effect in a multiparty system as has been suggested by the few studies conducted in other multiparty systems, namely Scotland, Germany and Canada (Pattie et al. 2011; Maier and Maier 2007; Roy and Alcantara 2016). Moreover, we established that the strength of this backlash effect increases over the course of the campaign, a phenomenon not yet investigated in the extant literature. The second main finding from this study is that voters’ preference for their second-most preferred party increases in strength when it wages a more positive (or less negative) campaign than their most preferred party. This effect is by some referred to as a 'Third-Party' effect (see Ridout and Walter 2015; Walter and Nai 2015), as neither the attacker nor the target benefit from the attack. We prefer the more informative labelling in terms of a Second-Preference Boost effect, as the boost does not accrue to just any third party, but specifically to the party that vies most strongly with the most-preferred party for top of the voter's preference order. We attribute this second-preference boost effect to the multi-party character of English politics, and not to other characteristics that set the English context apart from the US and from other multi-party systems. The English context contrasts with the US in terms of having a parliamentary rather than a presidential system of government, by the existence of a relatively disciplined party system, and a strong focus on parties rather than on candidates. It contrasts with many other multi-party systems in terms of the political dominance of two of the parties, its electoral system (FPTP),the partisan alignments of the national press combined with its non-partisan BBC, and a distinct confrontational style of political discourse. Yet, we feel that the presence of more than two options in electoral contests is the most relevant factor for the existence of this second-preference boost effect. As discussed earlier, the existence of some kind of a 'Third Party' effect has been theorised (but not tested empirically) by scholars in multi-party systems that are quite different from England in other respects (e.g, the Netherlands, Denmark) and, indeed, the logic of the argument relies centrally on the presence of multiple options for choice and not on any of the other system characteristics referred to. We would therefore expect such effects to exist also in all other elections with multiple alternatives, irrespective of whether these are defined in terms of parties or in terms of individual candidates, at least to the extent that citizens see at least two of these alternatives as sufficiently attractive. US primary contests, and the first round of French Presidential elections may thus be contexts that are dominated by candidates rather than parties, and where we would expect the same second preference boost effect to operate as in party-centred elections in systems such as in, for example, Italy, the Netherlands, and Denmark.

How the impact of the tone of parties' campaigns on electoral preferences will subsequently impinge on actual votes and vote shares depends on the competitive relations between parties.[17] For citizens who have strong preferences for only one party, the effects of negative campaigning on electoral preferences are too weak to change which of the parties is most preferred, and subsequently voted for. But for those who have strong preferences for two (or occasionally more) parties, these relatively small effects may well affect the rank-order at the top of their preferences, and thus their vote, and particularly in those situations where the backlash effect and the second-preference boost effect have mutually reinforcing effects on electoral preferences. Approximately 14 per cent of the sample we analysed here falls into this group whose actual vote choice is potentially affected by how they experienced the campaigns of the various parties. This article is not the place to estimate in detail the consequences (in terms of vote shares) of parties' negative campaigning; we will report that elsewhere. The analyses presented here demonstrate that the potential for such electoral consequences is far from negligible. As already indicated, any definitive account of gains and losses that are attributable to citizens' reactions to how campaigns are waged cannot be derived only from the *unintended* consequences of negative campaigning that were analysed in this article, but also on the *intended* consequences. In a multiparty system this requires considerably more empirical information than is currently available, but again, the results of our analyses here demonstrate that citizen reactions to campaign tone are sufficiently strong to warrant the investment in more extensive data collection.

Notwithstanding its contribution, this study is not without its limitations. The most important one of these is referred to upfront in our hypothesis section, namely the lack of definitive information in our data about the consequences of negative campaigning for parties targeted by it. It is therefore impossible to directly assess the net effect of negative campaigning (and thus the rationality of its use) To address that question, a much larger set of items has to be included in surveys, which not only focus on the campaign behaviour of individual parties, but also on the parties targeted by others' campaigns. This study also does not address varieties of negative campaigning, such as whether it focusses on competence or integrity, or on policy positions, or whether it is *ad hominem*. Some research has suggested that citizens are not equally turned off by different kinds of critique on political opponents (which is the defining characteristic of negative campaigning), but mostly by incivility in how attacks are voiced and launched (Fridkin and Kenney 2011). Ideally, future work would replicate this study in a variety of multiparty systems while taking into account the diversity of forms of negative campaigning and its targets. Experimental approaches (which may be embedded in surveys) would be particularly helpful, not only to strengthen any causal inferences, but particularly to systematically cover different combinations of attacking party, targeted party, and content of attacks.

Finally, since negative campaigning is widely assumed to be effective (an assumption reflected in many parties' actual campaign behaviour), further research should move beyond the individual level and model the aggregate consequences of negative campaigning for parties' vote shares. Doing so in multiparty systems is inherently more complex than when only two parties or candidates compete and requires estimates of the individual-level effects of negative campaigning on electoral preferences, a requirement to which this study contributes. More work along these lines still needs to be done in multiparty systems but we believe that this study brings us closer to a more general theory on consequences of negative campaigning.

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[1] Note that although parties' motivation for negative campaigning may be defined in terms of voters' *choices*, the Downsian perspective on voter behaviour implies that effects of negative campaigning are to be assessed primarily in terms of the '*utility*' (or electoral attractiveness) of parties for voters, see also Van der Eijk (2006).

[2] As an example, many voters whose first preference is for the Conservatives, have a preference for the Liberal Democrats that is of almost equal strength. If the Conservatives were to wage a very negative campaign against, say, Labour, and this would result in a backlash effect, the resulting reduced preference for the Conservatives may propel the Liberal Democrats to the top of the preference ordering of these voters.

[3] We use the term 'campaign tone' to refer to the negativity or positivity of parties' campaigns.

[4] The proportion of the English electorate holding strong electoral preferences for more than a single party was estimated on the basis of the 2015 British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP). This was operationalized

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as having two parties tied or close together at the top of the respondents' preference ordering, with 'close' being at most 2 points apart on vote propensity scores (PTVs, described below) for the parties involved (on a scale from 0 to 10). These analyses are reported at http://nottspolitics.org/2015/05/04/the-british-and-their-political-parties-multiple-preferences-and-their-consequences/

[5] The dataset and its documentation (Fieldhouse et al. 2015) are publicly available from www.britishelectionstudy.com.

[6] The most popular alternative consists of content analysis of campaign communications or of media coverage of campaign communications. Its endemic problems relate to incomplete coverage of the universe of campaign communications, uncertainty about individual exposure to and acceptance of such communications, and unreliability of coding.

[7] A possible objection against perceptual data is that the responses could reflect generalised positivity or negativity response biases. We analysed the responses for the five parties using the ordinal IRT procedure of Mokken-scaling (Mokken 1971; Van Schuur 2011), the results show that the responses do not express such an underlying response bias.

[8] When comparing voters' perceptions measured in the BES with experts' perceptions measured in the EAS (Election Agent Study, see Fisher et al. 2016), we find that after correcting for partisan bias voters' and experts' perceptions of parties' campaign tone correlate 0.83. Both kinds of perceptions correlate inconsistently with measures of parties' campaign tones based on newspaper election coverage, leading sometimes to strong and sometimes to weak and not-significant correlations depending on which national newspaper is used. These inconsistent results reflect different selections by newspapers of what to cover and what not. These analyses are reported in Walter and Van der Eijk 2019.

[9] Responses to non-ipsative preference questions are not constrained to yield a fixed sum, as is the case for ipsative preference questions. Intended or reported party choice is ipsative as only one of the parties can be scored '1'; such questions inform us about the first place in a voter's preference order, but not about which party was in second place, nor by how far second and lower ranked parties lagged behind the first party in strength of preference (See van der Eijk et al. 2006). Non-ipsative electoral preferences, in our case PTV (propensity to vote for a party) or party like/dislike scores, allow us to observe the extent to which voters support multiple parties, an obvious advantage in a multiparty system.

[10] To control for differences between the distributions of these two different forms of our dependent variable, we included in our analyses a dummy specifying which of the two was asked. Additional robustness analyses demonstrate that the responses to both questions do not perform differently in the analyses to be reported below.

[11] The general theoretical model underlying these analyses is a two-stage model of electoral decision making, along Downsian lines. In the first stage citizens determine how attractive each of the parties is as an option to vote for. In the second stage they select the option that is most attractive as the one to vote for. Our analyses pertain to the first stage of this theoretical perspective and thus fit in the field of studies on factors that impinge on electoral attractiveness of parties. Variables that ubiquitously play a role in such studies include ideological and policy considerations, social-psychological attachments to parties, voters' and parties' positions vis-à-vis social structural divisions and cleavages, and affect with respect to political leaders. From this basis, sundry other factors can also be studied, such as, economic conditions (Van der Brug et al. 2007), or, as in the present study, the positivity or negativity of parties' campaigns. For a general overview of the kinds of factors that can be included in such analyses see section A2 in the Online Appendix.

[12] An alternative, the use of instrumental variables, was impossible as no workable instruments could be identified in the survey, or in associated information of a spatial character (constituency characteristics), or in temporal variables (how early or late in the campaign respondents were interviewed).

[13] These very extensive controls risk over-controlling (implying capitalisation on chance, and reducing the effect of the independent variable), which would manifest itself in a leptokurtic distribution of residuals (something that we do indeed find). We find this an acceptable risk given the absence of suitable instrumental variables and because this gives us a conservative estimate of the effect of the independent variable.

[14] The results in Table 2 are based on responses from 7772 individual responses, a much smaller number than the 19,123 English respondents who participated in waves 4, 5 and 6 of the panel. This reduction is caused by missing responses in dependent, independent and control variables. The loss of cases can be diminished by omitting from the model variables with very large proportions of missing responses (such as the respondent-party distance on the issue of income redistribution, for which 51% of responses are missing). Although doing so leaves the general pattern of results the same, it increases the coefficient of campaign tone, which we feel is mainly the consequence of endogeneity. We therefore refrained from omitting controls that would increase the risk of endogenous findings. Obviously, this affects the composition of the group included in the analyses,

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as it contains, compared to the entire sample, fewer women, more educated respondents with a higher social status and more wealth, and, particularly, a higher level of interest in the elections. In terms of party choice in the 2015 elections, left-right self-placement and perception of the tone of parties' campaigns, this subsample is quite similar to the overall sample. These comparisons are reported in Section A4 and Table A2 in the Online Appendix. As all these variables are included in the extensive set of controls (see section A3 of the Online Appendix) they are irrelevant for the findings.

[15] The coefficients of these controls for partisan attitudes and orientations cannot be directly interpreted as causal effects on parties' electoral attractiveness. Obviously, these variables are highly endogeneous on each other, and their causal importance can only be gauged upon full specification of a path-analytic model. That, however, is not the object of this paper.

[16] First and second-most preferred parties are identified based on pre-existing (non-ipsative) party preferences in Wave 4 of the panel (Spring 2015, prior to the hot phase of the campaign), while our dependent variable is observed in Wave 6 (immediately following the election).

The difference between the campaign tone of the first and second-most preferred parties reflects whether the second-most preferred party is more positive (or less negative) in its campaign tone than the first party (coded 1) or not (coded 0).

[17] We use here the perspective on electoral competition that focuses on the openness on the demand side, referred to by Bartolini (2002) as 'availability'. This emphasises not the outcome of competition, but the range of counterfactual outcomes that can ensue from it, a perspective also emphasised by Elkins (1974).

Table 1 Reported Effects of Negative Campaigning on Party Preferences[17]

Postulated Effect	Supporting Studies	Debunking Studies	Cases Studied
Depress Voters' Preference for 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 2016*; Chang 2003; Haddock and Zanna 1997; Hill 1989; Martinez and Delegal 1990	United States, Canada, Germany, Scotland, Brazil, United Kingdom
Depress Voters' Preference for Attacking Party	Maier and Maier 2007; King and McConnell 2003; *Pattie et al. 2011*; *Roy and Alcantera 2016*; Jasperson and Fan 2002; Chang 2003; Hill 1989; Fridkin and Kenney 2004; Haddock and Zanna 1997; Merrit 1984; Matthews and Dietz-Uhler 1998; Kahn and Kenney 2004; Kahn and Geer 1994 Houston and Doan 1999;; Min 2004; Pinkleton 1997; Pinkleton 1998; Martinez and Delegal 1990; Dowling and Wichowsky 2015	Increase Voters' Preference Attacking Party Brader 2005; Kaid 1997; King and McConnell 2003; Wadsworth et al. 1987; (under the condition that the attacked party is ideologically adjacent *Ceron and d'Abba 2015*) No Effect Voters' Preference Attacking Party Arceneaux and Nickerson 2010; Schulz and Pancer 1997	United States, Canada, Germany, Scotland, Italy
Increase Voters' Preference Third Parties	*Pattie et al. 2011*; *Roy and Alcantara 2016*		Scotland, Canada

Note: studies indicated in *italics* pertain to multi-party systems, studies in normal font pertain to two-party systems.

Table 2: The Backlash Effect of Negative Campaigning in the 2015 General Election in England: Effects of Campaign Tone on (non-ipsative) Electoral Preferences (OLS Regression coefficients and standard errors)

	Test of Hypothesis 1	Test of Hypothesis 2
Campaign Tone (wave 5)	.216 (.011) ***	.212 (.011) ***
Second-most preferred party being more positive than most preferred party (wave 5)		.364 (.093) ***
Controls for Partisan related Attitudes and orientation (all in wave 4)		
Party Identification	.787 (.034) ***	.799 (.034) ***
Left Right Distance to party	-.107 (.006) ***	-.107 (.006) ***
Redistribution Distance to party	-.031 (.005) ***	-.031 (.005) ***
EU Distance to party	.001 (.004)	.001 (.004)
Like/Dislike Party Leaders	.152 (.008) ***	.152 (.008) ***
Pre-existing Non-Ipsative Electoral Preference	.616 (.009) ***	.615 (.009) ***
General controls		
Controls for Demographics and Socio-Economic variables	✓	✓
Control for version of the dependent variable	.031 (.023)	.029 (.023)
Control for whether party is on the ballot in R’s constituency	.323 (.141)	.328 (.140)
Constant	.561 (.149)	.564 (.148)
Adjusted R square	.803	.803

*Note: Source: 2015 BESIP (waves 4, 5, 6) N (respondents) = 7772. ***: significant at .001. The model is an OLS-regression on a stacked dataset, with clustered standard errors on respondent. The dependent variable in this model is (non-ipsative) Electoral Preference (wave 6).*

Figure 1: Aggregate Voters' Perceptions of the Level of Negative Campaigning Per Party across the Campaign in England (Interpolated Median)