

Tailored negativity. Campaign consultants, candidate personality, and attack politics

Alessandro Nai¹  | Anke Tresch²  | Jürgen Maier³ 

¹University of Amsterdam

²University of Lausanne & FORS

³University of Koblenz- Landau

Correspondence

Alessandro Nai, Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), Postbus 15791, 1001 NG Amsterdam, The Netherlands
 Email: a.nai@uva.nl

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Abstract

To what extent are negative election campaigns “tailored” to the personality of the candidates? And with what electoral consequences? In this article we tackle these questions by focusing on the 2019 Swiss federal election. We estimate the presence of negativity as a function of the personality profile of competing candidates (Big Five) and the presence of professional consultants. Analyses based on data from a candidate survey (Selects 2019) suggest that campaign consultants are likely to take stock of the character of their candidate, and tailor the content of their campaigns accordingly - more aggressive for more energetic candidates (higher plasticity) and for less stable candidates (lower stability). These results, we argue, support our central claim that the role of consultants is to provide the most adequate campaign for the candidate they are promoting (“tailoring hypothesis”). We fail however to find any convincing evidence that such tailoring is electorally successful.

Zusammenfassung

Inwieweit sind negative Wahlkampagnen auf die Persönlichkeit der Kandidaten „zugeschnitten“? Und welche Konsequenzen hat dieser individuelle Zuschnitt für ihren Wahlerfolg? In diesem Artikel gehen wir diesen Fragen mit Daten einer Kandidatenbefragung nach, die im Rahmen der Schweizer Nationalratswahlen 2019 durchgeführt

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wurde (Selects 2019). Wir modellieren das Vorhandensein negativer Wahlkampfkommunikation als Funktion des Persönlichkeitsprofils der konkurrierenden Kandidaten (Big Five) und der Präsenz von Wahlkampfberatern. Unsere Analysen deuten darauf hin, dass Wahlkampfberater den Charakter ihrer Kandidaten einschätzen und den Inhalt ihrer Kampagnen entsprechend anpassen: aggressiver für energischere Kandidaten (höhere Plastizität) und für weniger stabile Kandidaten (geringere Stabilität). Diese Ergebnisse stützen unsere zentrale Annahme, dass Berater die Persönlichkeit der Kandidaten heranziehen, um die am besten geeignete Kampagnenstrategie zu bestimmen („Tailoring-Hypothese“). Wir finden jedoch keine Hinweise darauf, dass sich der individuelle Zuschnitt von Wahlkampagnen auf den Wahlerfolg niederschlägt.

Résumé

Dans quelle mesure les campagnes électorales négatives sont-elles adaptées à la personnalité des candidat·e·s? Et avec quelles conséquences électorales? Dans cet article, nous abordons ces questions en nous concentrant sur les élections fédérales suisses de 2019. Nous analysons la présence de négativité en fonction du profil de personnalité des candidat·e·s en lice (Big Five) et de la présence de consultant·e·s professionnel·le·s. Les analyses basées sur les données de l'enquête sur les candidat·e·s (Selects 2019) suggèrent que les consultant·e·s de campagne sont susceptibles de tenir compte de la personnalité de leur candidat·e et d'adapter le contenu de leurs campagnes en conséquence – débouchant sur des campagnes plus agressives pour les candidat·e·s plus énergiques et pour les candidat·e·s moins stables. Selon nous, ces résultats confirment notre postulat central selon lequel le rôle des consultant·e·s est de fournir la campagne la plus adéquate possible pour leur candidat·e (« hypothèse du tailoring »). Nous ne trouvons cependant aucune indication que cette stratégie influence le succès électoral des candidat·e·s.

KEYWORDS

Big Five, Campaign consultant, Electoral success, Negative campaigning, Personality, Switzerland

INTRODUCTION

Negative campaigning – i.e., “any criticism leveled by one candidate against another during a campaign” (Geer, 2006: 23) – is undoubtedly a key element of modern elections, and one that is likely to matter beyond the simple electoral results. Some argue that negative campaigning has detrimental effects for the political system, for instance, causes the electorate’s demobilization and alienation (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995) or fuels political cynicism (e.g., Capella & Jamieson, 1997). Others have a more optimistic view and show that negative messages can carry useful information for voters (e.g., Finkel & Geer, 1998), stimulate arousal, interest, and participation (e.g., Geer, 2006; Soroka & McAdams, 2015), and even increase issue knowledge (e.g., Brians & Wattenberg, 1996). Because of the likely systemic effects of campaign negativity, it is thus unsurprising that research investigating its drivers has considerably expanded in recent times. Why, and under which conditions, are competing candidates more likely to “go negative” on their opponents? Research has identified some correlates of the use of negative campaigning, for instance, that challengers (e.g., Benoit, 2007), candidates trailing in the polls (e.g., Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995), or candidates with a “darker” personality profile (Nai & Maier, 2020) are more likely to attack.

Some scholars attribute the increasing popularity of attack politics to the growing professionalization of election campaigns (e.g., Scammell, 1998). One component of professionalized campaigns is the employment of paid external advisors (e.g., Gibson & Römmele, 2009; Tenscher et al., 2016). Conventional wisdom suggests that campaign consultants tend to advise candidates to attack their opponents, driven by the conviction that negativity “works” (e.g., Herrnson et al., 2019; Lau & Pomper, 2004). Indeed, campaign consultants acknowledge that rules like “go negative early, often, and right through election day, if necessary” or “if attacked, hit back even harder” are central guidelines of their campaign playbooks (Kamper, 1997: 46) in order to achieve what they are paid for: winning elections. Some evidence indeed shows that professional campaign consultants tend to privilege negative campaigning techniques (Francia & Herrnson, 2007; Grossman, 2012; Swint, 1998). Yet, the mechanisms supporting a greater use of campaign negativity for more “professionalized” candidates are still poorly understood. In this article, we argue that the encouragement to go negative, for campaign consultants, depends directly on the *personality profile* of the candidate. Taking stock of three different strands of literature - on campaign professionalization, campaign negativity, and the personality profile of political candidates - we argue that consultants “tailor” the tone of their candidates’ campaigns based on whether or not a candidate has a personality profile that is already conducive to greater (lower) negativity. We will also argue that this “tailoring” is likely to be successful, in driving a stronger electoral performance.

We test this overarching expectation for Switzerland – a country with limited use of negative campaigning (Bol & Bohl, 2015; Stüchelberger, 2021), weak party organizations, and low campaign professionalization (Engeli & Tonka, 2010), especially as compared to the United States. Nonetheless, the Swiss electoral system incentivizes candidates to wage personalized campaigns in order to attract preference votes (e.g., Selb & Lutz, 2015), and some candidates spend large amounts of money for their own campaign (Tresch et al., 2020). By concentrating on the level of individual candidates, rather than parties, as previous studies did, we can expect to find much more variation in terms of campaign professionalization and negative campaigning.

We test our tailoring hypothesis, and its electoral consequences, with data from a candidate survey conducted after the 2019 Swiss national elections. We proceed in three steps. Given that little is known about the use of campaign consultants outside the US, we first concentrate on the question which candidates reach out to external advisors for their campaigns, then introduce our idea that consultants tailor the decision to go negative to the personality of the candidates, and finally reflect about the electoral ramifications of these decisions. Our results provide some preliminary support for the idea that a tailoring effect is in place - for instance,

candidates with a more energetic profile (extraversion, openness) are more likely to go negative on their rivals if they have hired a campaign consultant - even if the electoral consequences of such tailoring are more complex.

CANDIDATE PROFILE, CAMPAIGN CONSULTANTS, CAMPAIGN STYLE, AND ELECTORAL SUCCESS

The role of campaign consultants in election campaigns

There is a wide consensus in the scholarly literature that election campaigns are becoming more professionalized (Farrell, 1996). One indicator of professional campaigns is the employment of (paid) consultants (e.g., Tenscher et al., 2016). The use of consultants has particularly increased in the “Digital Age”, or the so-called third stage (Farrell & Webb, 2000) or post-modern phase (Norris, 2000) of election campaigning, which is characterized by the growing importance of the Internet and social media. To fully exploit the potential of these new technologies for the communication with and targeting of specific voter groups, campaign organizations are increasingly dependent on in-house campaign professionals and external consultants and agencies (Farrell & Webb, 2000: 106).

In the US, professional consultants and agencies have indeed become central players in contemporary campaigns. Hiring professional consultants is not only the norm for candidates running for national and statewide office, but has also become common in state legislative elections (Abbe & Herrnson, 2003). Although the use of campaign professionals has become so widespread in US elections, some candidates rely more on them than others. As Johnson (2002: 17) observes, “the decision to use professional consulting services often boils down to the hard reality of campaign finances”. But professionalization is not just a function of campaign spending. The competitiveness of the race as well as political experience also play a role: open-seat candidates assemble more professional campaign organizations, and incumbents hire consultants more often than their challengers (Abbe & Herrnson, 2003; Herrnson, 1992).

Until recently, there was no systematic research on the role and practices of political consultants outside the US (Plasser, 2009). In Western European countries, with their “party-centered” style of campaigning (Plasser & Plasser, 2002), campaigns had long been prepared, controlled, and run by the political parties. More recently, however, several scholars argued that concerning campaign consultants, campaigning in Europe is converging towards the American model (Farrell et al., 2001; Plasser, 2009) and that the growing prominence of new information and communication technologies has led to an increased involvement of campaign professionals also in Europe (Karlsen, 2010). However, most European research looks at parties, not candidates, and does not primarily focus on campaign consultants, but integrates the reliance on external advisors into general scales of campaign professionalization (e.g., Gibson & Römmele, 2009; Strömbäck, 2009). However, a handful of recent studies using candidate surveys indicate a rather low presence of political consultants in the personal campaign of national parliamentary candidates, ranging from an average of 15% in a recent comparative study (Karlsen et al., 2020: 86–87, see also Sampugnaro & Montemagno, 2021) to 2.6% in a Portuguese study (Lisi, 2013: 268).

Although we have increasing knowledge about the extent to which consultants get hired in different elections in the US and in European countries, and which types of candidate rely on external advisors, we do not know much about the consequences of having a consultant - both in terms of campaigning choices and electoral results. Candidates hire consultants because they believe that they can help them win an election. In the next subsections, we discuss our general rationale for the role of campaign consultants in driving campaigning choices and electoral results, based on the general idea that consultants operate by taking into account the

personal profile and character of the candidate they are promoting - they “tailor” their strategies on the personality traits of their candidate.

Candidate personality and the tailoring hypothesis

Evidence exists that at least some professional campaign consultants tend to privilege negative campaigning techniques (Francia & Herrnson, 2007; Grossman, 2012; Swint, 1998) - which is one of the reasons invoked by John Geer (2012) to explain the increase in campaign negativity in the US. Looking at elections for the US House of Representatives, Nyhan & Montgomery (2015) show indeed that unrelated candidates who rely on the same consulting companies tend to campaign in a similar way, suggesting a fundamental role of consultants and spin doctors in deciding the (negative) tone of the campaign.

But the role of professional consultants in campaigns is not well understood; we know little about how campaign strategies are developed in the first place (Medvic, 2006). We argue here that campaign consultants do not advocate negative campaigns across the board, but rather tailor the tone of the campaign depending on the profile of their candidate. Negative campaigns are a risky business, and evidence exists that candidates are not all equal before the risk of backlash - for instance, incumbents are more likely to be electorally punished when going negative on their rivals (Lau & Pomper, 2004). Good campaign consultants should account for the differential risks and benefits of attack strategies for their own candidate, which leads us to expect significant interaction effects between the candidate profile and whether or not they rely on campaign consultants on their decision to go negative. Even if candidates should not be expected to only rely on their consultants' advice when deciding their campaigning strategy, it is unlikely that such advice is totally inconsequential.

Some evidence exists that professional consultants adjust campaign content based on the strengths and weaknesses of their candidate's profile. According to Medvic (2006), consultants tend to promote messages that “resonate with voters. These messages must be credible in terms of a candidate's overall profile. That profile [...] will be a combination of the candidate's biography and achievements as well as his/her policy agenda and issue positions” (Medvic, 2006: 21). For instance, Dittmar (2015) shows that consultants who see voters as having gendered expectations are most likely to take gender into account in shaping campaign themes and tactics; consultants who reported that voters see female candidates as ethical and male candidates as more prone to corruption were also likely to recommend that female candidates stress honesty in campaigns. Candidates, in other terms, can be expected to be encouraged by professional campaign consultants to emphasize their assets and de-emphasize their liabilities, in what amounts to the “selective projection” of a campaign image (Manheim, 1975: 94).

Expanding on this research, we propose that professional consultants “tailor” the content of their campaigns based on the specific *personality traits* of their candidate. In line with widespread research in political science literature, both at the voters' level (Gerber et al., 2011) and in political elites (Joly et al., 2019; Nai, 2019; Nai & Maier 2020), we focus here on the *Big Five* inventory (BFI; McCrae & John, 1992). The BFI identifies main traits: *extraversion* (sociability, energy, impulsivity), *agreeableness* (likeability, friendliness, congeniality), *conscientiousness* (dependability, steadiness, proclivity for precision and meticulousness), *neuroticism* (anxiety, edginess, emotional instability), and *openness* (curiosity, proclivity to engage in new activities and make discoveries).

Consistent evidence suggests that a higher-order and simplified structure exist beyond the Big Five, based on deep underlying personality dimensions (or “meta-traits”). A widely used classification identifies *two* meta-traits, the so-called “Huge Two” (Silvia et al., 2008, 2009): stability and plasticity. On the one hand, *stability* indicates a general tendency “to maintain stability and avoid disruption in emotional, social, and motivational domains” (DeYoung, 2006:

1138), and reflects high scores on agreeableness and conscientiousness, and low scores on neuroticism. On the other hand, *plasticity* indicates the tendency “to explore and engage flexibly with novelty, in both behavior and cognition” (DeYoung, 2006: 1138), and reflects high scores on extraversion and openness. These meta-traits have been identified both in the public at large (e.g., Digman, 1997; DeYoung, 2006) and in political elites (e.g., Caprara et al., 2007). Because the “Huge Two” represent a simplified and integrated inventory of personality, it is for these two traits that we develop specific expectations – and expect a tailoring effect driven by the presence of campaign consultants.

Turning first to the direct effect of candidates' personality profiles, we expect high scores on stability (high agreeableness and conscientiousness, low neuroticism) to be associated with lower negativity, and higher scores on plasticity (high extraversion and openness) to be associated with higher negativity. These expectations stem directly from what we could expect in terms of the direct effect of the separate traits.

Agreeableness is generally associated with social activities, communal social interactions, and conflict avoidance (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2003), and is therefore likely to inhibit negative campaigning. Indeed, the few recent studies investigating the relationship between candidates' personalities and their campaign negativity show strong and consistent evidence that agreeableness decreases the likelihood for candidates to be verbally aggressive (de Vries et al., 2013) and to go negative on their rivals (Maier & Nai, 2021). Similarly, Nai & Maier (2020) demonstrate that candidates for the US senate scoring high on darker personality traits (and especially on psychopathy), usually an inverse function of agreeableness (Stead & Fekken, 2014), are significantly more likely to attack their opponents on social media. *Conscientiousness* is associated with professional success, achievement orientation, dependability, and a marked proclivity for organization and planning (Judge et al., 1999). Importantly, conscientious individuals tend to show restraint and self-control in social interactions, which should act as a brake for harsher - and riskier - campaign strategies, but the empirical evidence for such a relationship is weak, at best (Maier & Nai, 2021). Similarly, so far no effects have been found for *neuroticism*, in spite of rather strong theoretical arguments in favor of more campaign negativity for more neurotic candidates, given that neurotic individuals report higher scores of impulsiveness and premeditated aggressiveness (Stanfort et al., 2003).

Extraversion is associated with sociability and energy, but also with boldness, social dominance, and disinhibition (e.g., Newman, 1987) - all facets that can be logically expected to be associated with more muscular campaigns. In political leaders, extraversion has been associated with charismatic leadership (Bono & Judge, 2004), and boldness and lack of inhibition could prevent highly extroverted candidates from identifying or caring about the potential risks associated with political attacks. However, empirical findings are so far rather mixed (Maier & Nai, 2021). Similarly, it is difficult to see a theoretical rationale linking openness and campaign negativity in a straightforward way.

Although the few available works on the relationship between candidates' personality traits and their attack behavior show rather limited effects of the separate traits, with the exception of agreeableness, a recent comparative study using candidate survey data finds clear effects of the two meta-traits: while stability (the average score of agreeableness, conscientiousness and inversed neuroticism) is significantly and rather strongly associated with lower campaign negativity, plasticity (the average score of extraversion and openness) is significantly related with higher negativity (Nai et al., 2022).

In this article, we advance the novel hypothesis that political consultants “tailor” the content of the candidates' campaigns to the personality profile of the candidates themselves, in line with evidence that consultants tend to promote messages that are “in character” with the candidates they are promoting (e.g., Dittmar, 2015; Manheim, 1975; Medvic, 2006). Campaign consultants can, by creed and professional orientation, be expected to have a good understanding of the profile of the candidates they are promoting. This includes, we argue, their

personality profile. Consistent evidence suggests that external observers can quite effectively grasp the personality profile of those they observe (e.g., Colbert et al., 2012; McCrae & Costa, 1987), and this of course should be particularly the case for those paid to do so.

As discussed, more negative campaigns are in character for candidates higher in plasticity and lower in stability. We thus simply expect a stronger effect of these two traits on the use of campaign negativity - respectively, a stronger positive effect for plasticity and a stronger negative effect for stability - for candidates that reported hiring a campaign consultant (“tailoring hypothesis”).

To be sure, only indirect evidence of this tailoring effect at play can be provided with self-reported data gathered from the candidates themselves (see below), especially because these data lack any insights into the strategic suggestions concretely put forward by the consultants acting in the background of candidates in our dataset. Yet, very much like the size of exoplanets can be estimated indirectly by looking at the drop in brightness of their orbiting star during their transit in front of it, we argue that the tailoring effect of consultants can be estimated indirectly - in our case, by looking at drops or spikes in campaign negativity for candidates with and without consultants. A strong case for tailoring can be made, in our opinion, if the simple presence of consultants were to be associated with stronger personality effects on campaign negativity.

To summarize, we advance the following hypotheses when it comes to the drivers of campaign negativity:

H1a. Candidates scoring high on the stability meta-trait are less likely to go negative.

H1b. Candidates scoring high on the plasticity meta-trait are more likely to go negative.

H2. The presence of campaign consultants reinforces the direct effect of personality traits described in hypotheses H1a and H1b (“tailoring hypothesis”).

Electoral results

Is the tailoring of campaign tone operated by consultants based on the personality profile of their candidates electorally successful? Beyond assessing the presence of the tailoring in the first place, which is the cornerstone of this article, we also explore whether its presence yields better electoral results for the candidates involved in such a tailoring. From a theoretical standpoint, disentangling the electoral success of such a tailoring is rather complex, and involves discussing the expected direct effect of candidates' personality on their electoral success (e.g., Joly et al., 2019; Nai, 2019; Scott & Medeiros, 2020), the role of campaign negativity to shape electoral performances (e.g., Lau et al., 1999, 2007; Lau & Pomper, 2004; Lau & Rovner, 2009), and the contribution of campaign consultants in this respect. A rather consistent body of research shows that campaigns that can avail themselves of the aid of professional consultants tend to be more successful (e.g., Abbe et al., 2001; Medvic & Lenart, 1997; Sabato, 1981; Thurber & Nelson, 2001) - even if the effectiveness of the relationship between the candidate and the consultant depends on circumstantial conditions (Martin & Peskowitz, 2015), and dynamics are more complex outside of the US case (Baines et al., 2001). Furthermore, the specific contribution of campaign consultants on the interaction between candidate personality traits and campaign negativity is, in the specific case under investigation (and not knowing the direct effect of neither personality nor campaign negativity), complex to estimate a priori. This exercise is beyond the scope of this investigation. Instead, we simply explore whether the presence of campaign consultants (vs. their

absence) alters the joint effects of negativity and personality on electoral results. Intuitively, we might expect that consultants know what they are doing and are successful in doing it. If consultants decide to tailor the campaign on the profile of the candidates they are promoting, we argue, this is because they believe that this is an electorally successful strategy. This intuition is however insufficient to formulate a full hypothesis, and as such we will simply explore the nature of the interaction between personality, negativity and the presence of campaign consultants.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

We use data from a candidate survey that was part of the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS) and conducted in the framework of the Swiss Election Study (Selects, 2020) after the 2019 Swiss national election. The 2019 election saw a record number of candidates running for office: a total of 4,736 candidates competed for one of the 246 seats in the national parliament (+22.3% as compared to the previous election). By Swiss standards, the election was characterized by several major shifts. First, in an election dominated by voters' concerns about climate change, the two green parties – the Green Party and the Green Liberals – made significant gains and took 21% of the votes, while all four governing parties, but especially the national-conservative Swiss People's Party and the Social Democrats, suffered important electoral losses (losing 3.8% and 2% respectively). Second, the campaign was also marked by the Women's strike in June, which saw hundreds of thousands of women across Switzerland taking the streets to call for gender equality and the end of discriminations. At the elections in October, the share of female MPs went up from 32 to 42%, and women even accounted for a majority of newly elected MPs (53%) in the National Council. Third, and relatedly, the 2019 election saw the highest non-re-election rate in the past twenty years: 31 incumbents were not re-elected (among these only four women).

All candidates running for the National Council or the Council of States were invited to the 2019 Swiss Candidate Survey, regardless of their parties' previous representation in parliament or their chances to win a seat. 2,158 candidates participated in the online/paper survey, amounting to a response rate of 45.6%. Three quarters of the participating candidates belong to one of the four governing parties (SVP, FDP, CVP, SP) or the two green parties (GPS, GLP). One quarter belongs to other party lists from the entire ideological spectrum. Response rates are unequal across parties, but we do not believe this to be a major problem given that we will run multi-level models which mainly look at the within-party list differences of candidates' performances. In Switzerland, candidate competition is more relevant within parties than between parties (Selb & Lutz, 2015); what matters is whether candidates do better than their fellow candidates on the same list, while the electoral score of candidates from other lists is irrelevant. As candidates are nested within lists, and as we are mainly interested in how candidates perform compared to other candidates on the same list, we applied multilevel modelling with individual candidates nested into party lists. Because the dynamics of campaign negativity are likely to differ considerably according to the electoral system in place (Maier & Nai, 2022), in this article we focus only on candidates that competed on party-lists for a seat in the lower house (National Council), for which the election was fought under a proportional rule. This excludes candidates running only for the upper house ($N = 27$) or for both houses ($N = 50$). However, robustness checks will include all candidates for the National Council, producing very similar results. Furthermore, additional robustness checks will also exclude candidates from six small cantons with only one seat, showing again virtually identical results.

Measures

Personality

The candidate questionnaire included a short scale for the self-rating of the Big Five personality traits (Rammstedt & John, 2007). Respondents were asked to evaluate to what extent a series of ten statements described their personality (e.g., “I see myself as someone who is outgoing, sociable,” “... gets nervous easily,” “... is reserved”; see question wording and translations in [Appendix C](#)). The average score of pairs of statements yields scores for each of the five traits, all varying between 1 “Very low” and 5 “Very high.” On average, candidates rated themselves as relatively high on conscientiousness ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.75$), agreeableness ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.66$), openness ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.89$), and extraversion ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.85$), and much lower on neuroticism ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 0.88$). Interestingly, the average profile of Swiss candidates somewhat contrasts with the profile of German candidates, who score much lower in agreeableness (Nai et al., 2022), of Danish and Canadian candidates, who tend to exhibit higher scores on extraversion and openness (e.g., Nørgaard & Klemmensen, 2019; Schumacher & Zettler, 2019; Scott & Medeiros, 2020), but is rather in line with the profile of Belgian elected officials (Joly et al., 2019).

Short scales are imperfect instruments to measure all facets and nuances of human personality (Bakker & Lelkes, 2018), but represent a reasonable and pragmatic instrument in omnibus questionnaires, to avoid overburdening respondents with lengthy inventories. Because the five traits tend to be associated in known patterns - for instance, agreeable candidates in our data score significantly lower on neuroticism, $r(1970) = -0.29$, $p < .001$ - and in line with existing research, the Big Five scores of candidates in our dataset have been simplified into scores on two meta-traits, stability and plasticity. The first one is simply the average score of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and reversed neuroticism ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.54$), whereas the second is the average score of extraversion and openness ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.65$). The two meta-traits are positively associated, but not extremely strongly so, $r(1992) = 0.21$, $p < .001$.

Campaign consultant

Candidates were asked whether their campaign employed a “professional consultant” (yes/no; [Appendix C](#)). Less than 8% of candidates answered positively to this question, suggesting that Swiss election campaigns tend to be still relatively amateurish when comparing with the US, but similar to what is known from other West European countries (Karlsen et al., 2020; Lisi, 2013; Sampugnaro & Montemagno, 2021). The presence of a campaign consultant will be a central feature of our empirical models, either directly or in conjunction with other factors (personality traits, and the tone of the candidates' campaigns). To ensure that it is the specific effect of having a campaign consultant that is captured in our analyses, and not the more general effect of campaign professionalization, we will control all models by the size of the team supporting the candidate campaign (see below).

Negativity

The questionnaire included a four-item battery asking candidates about the tone of their campaign, and more specifically how strongly they criticized “particular items on the platform of other parties,” “other parties' records during the term,” “issues specific to the personal campaign of other candidates,” and “personal characteristics and circumstances of other candidates” (from 1 “not at all” to 5 “very much”; see [Appendix C](#)). A factor analysis (PCA)

indicates the presence of only one principal underlying dimension, and we thus created an additive index reflecting the general use of negative campaigning ($\alpha = 0.79$), also ranging from 1 to 5. On average, candidates reported a rather low level of negativity in their campaigns ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 0.91$), rather in line with observational evidence about the level of negativity in Switzerland discussed elsewhere (e.g., Stüchelberger, 2021).

Electoral results

Given the rather complex nature of the Swiss open ballot PR system for National Council elections, it is not easy to identify standardized measures of candidate performance. In line with previous research (Lutz et al., 2018; Selb & Lutz, 2015), we measure electoral success for any given candidate in terms of the number of preference votes they received. Swiss voters can simply cast a pre-printed party ballot, but they also have different options to express their preferences for and against specific candidates: first, they can change a party list by dropping one or several candidates from the list, and/or, second, by writing the name of one or several party candidates twice (“cumulation”) or by adding candidates from other parties (“panachage”); third, they can fill an empty ballot with candidate names from one or several parties. The only condition is that the overall number of candidate names on the ballot does not exceed the number of seats in the voter’s canton of residence. This means that in the largest canton, Zurich, voters can give up to 35 preference votes, and in small cantons, such as Uri or Jura, they only have one or two preference votes. Seats are distributed in two steps: first, seats are allocated to parties according to the total number of votes for candidates of the party list; second, these party seats are distributed among the candidates in order of their number of votes. Thus, although on pre-printed ballots candidates are listed in an order determined by the parties (often alphabetically), ultimately candidates are ranked by voters, according to the number of the votes that they received.

To measure candidate performance, we consider the number of cumulative preference votes (that is, those coming from changed ballots of own-party voters), weighted by the number of changed ballots for the party list (see Lutz et al., 2018).¹ This procedure yields a standardized variable that allows a comparison of the performance of each candidate with the success of their fellow candidates from the same list, as well as with candidates from different lists. A value of 1 on this indicator means that a candidate receives, on average, one (cumulative) preference vote per party list voter. In the dataset, the variable ranges between 0.10 and 1.85 ($M = 0.62$, $SD = 0.25$), and is positively correlated with a simple binary indicator measuring whether the candidate was ultimately elected or not, $r(2069) = 0.29$, $p < .001$.

Covariates

Our models are rather conservative, and control for a large palette of determinants likely to influence the use of campaign consultants, campaign negativity, and electoral results. First, the political experience of candidates is measured via their incumbency status (i.e., whether they are already members of parliament at the time of the election), their membership to a governing party, and their previous experience in running campaigns (additive variable counting the number of participations in the previous four federal elections, ranging from 0 to 4). Second, ideology is measured via self-reported left–right position (11-point scale from 0 “left”

¹Data on the number of preference votes candidate, party list and canton comes from the “Panachierstatistik” of the Federal Statistical Office (BFS, 2019).

to 10 “right”), extremism (6-point scale from 0 “moderate” to 5 “extreme”, obtained by folding the left–right variable on itself), and the candidates' ideological distance with their party (11-point scale from 0 “no difference” to 10 “maximal difference”). Third, we control for the size of candidates' campaign team (number of persons), their perceived closeness of the race (3-point scale from 0 “not close at all” to 2 “very close”), and the level of personalization of their campaign, that is, whether they indicated that they were running a campaign for the party or for themselves (11-point scale from 0 “attract as much attention as possible for me as a candidate” to 10 “attract as much attention as possible for my party”). Finally, we control for the candidates' demographic profile in terms of gender, age in years, and migration background (that is, whether the candidate had a Swiss citizenship when born; binary variable). Models that explain electoral results are also controlled by the position of candidates on the list (count variable, from 1 to n), which is an important confounder when it comes to electoral success in list-based proportional representation. Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table A1 ([Appendix](#)).

RESULTS

We present, sequentially, a series of models that explain (i) whether having a campaign consultant drives campaign negativity, both directly and in conjunction with the candidates' personality profile, and (ii) whether personality, the presence of a campaign consultant, and campaign negativity jointly drive the electoral fortunes of candidates. Even though we only dispose of observational data, which does not usually allow to disentangle causality effects, the logic of association of the most important variables is unlikely to be endogenous. For instance, we can safely exclude that the personality of candidates is driven by the tone of their campaign or their electoral results. All models are multilevel linear regressions with candidates nested into electoral lists (parties), with robust standard errors.

Campaign negativity

We first estimated the use of negative campaigning (composite index) by competing candidates, as a function of their profile. [Figure 1](#) presents coefficient plots based on standardized variables to allow for the direct comparison of effect sizes (full results using the original unstandardized variables in Table A1, [Appendix A](#)). The models show, first, the presence of some effects that are in line with the existing literature. Campaign negativity is more likely for ideologically extreme candidates (Nai, 2020) and for males (Herrnson & Lucas, 2006; Kahn, 1993). Incumbency does not seem to play a significant role on the decision to go negative, contrarily to a well-known trend in the literature (Lau & Pomper, 2004). Importantly, the personality profile of candidates is associated with the tone of their campaigns. Campaign negativity is more likely among candidates that score lower in agreeableness, in line with results presented in Nai & Maier (2020) for the role of “dark” personality traits of US Senate candidates, and with trends in Germany and Finland that also rely on candidate survey data (Nai et al., 2022). Inversely, campaign negativity is significantly and substantially more likely for candidates high in extraversion, and somewhat more likely for candidates high in neuroticism. Importantly, strong and clear effects exist for the two underlying personality dimensions. In line with our expectations, campaign negativity is negatively associated with higher scores on the stability meta-trait (agreeableness, conscientiousness, and reversed neuroticism; H1a), and positively associated with higher scores on the plasticity meta-trait (extraversion and openness, H1b).

Results in [Figure 1](#) show that the presence of campaign consultants, all things considered, is not significantly (or substantively) related to a greater use of campaign negativity. The

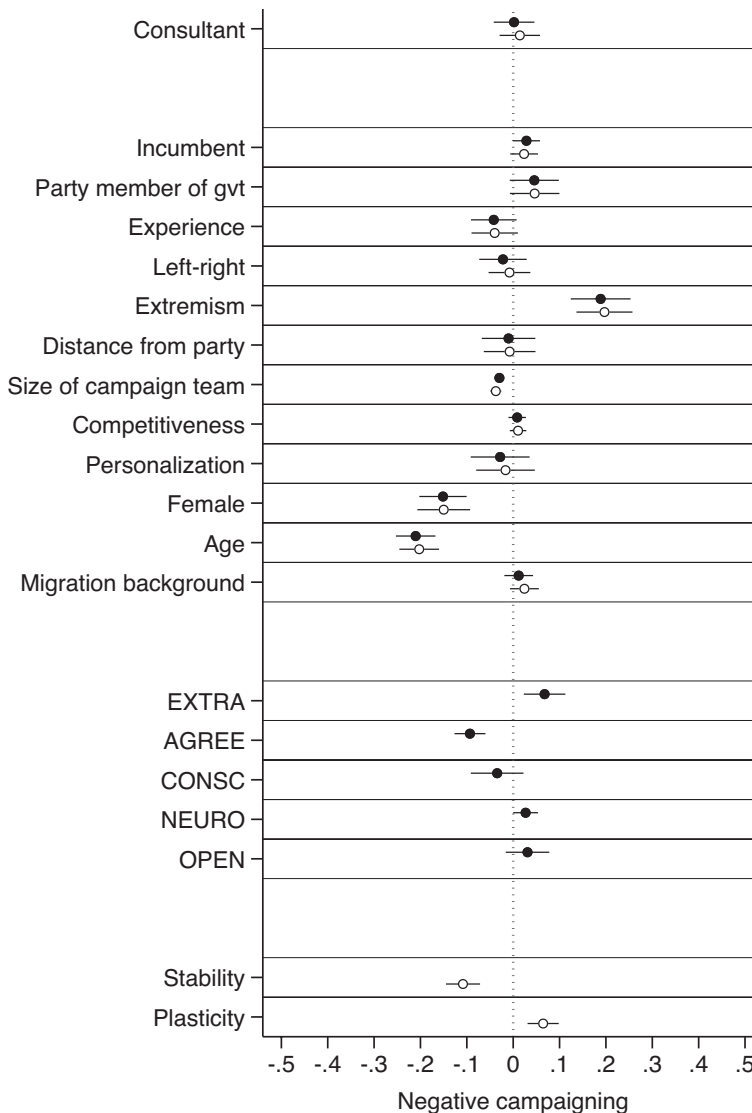


FIGURE 1 Negative campaigning, coefficients plot

Note: 95% confidence intervals, all variables standardized ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$). Full results of models with original variables are in Table A1 (Appendix A). Black circles refer to models run on the five separate personality traits. White circles refer to models run on the two-meta-traits of stability and plasticity.

potential importance of consultants in shaping campaign content appears however clearly when their presence is interacted with the specific personality of the candidate they are advising. In line with the “tailoring hypothesis” that is the cornerstone of this article (H2), the personality profile of candidates is particularly associated with their use of campaign negativity when a campaign consultant is present. Figure 2 substantiates the direction and magnitude of these interaction effects, via predicted linear effects (all covariates fixed at their mean value; full results in Table A2,² Appendix A).

²Note that the table only reports the coefficient of interaction effects, but the models included all covariates discussed above; furthermore, only one interaction effect is included in each model, to avoid outing an excessive strain on the estimations.

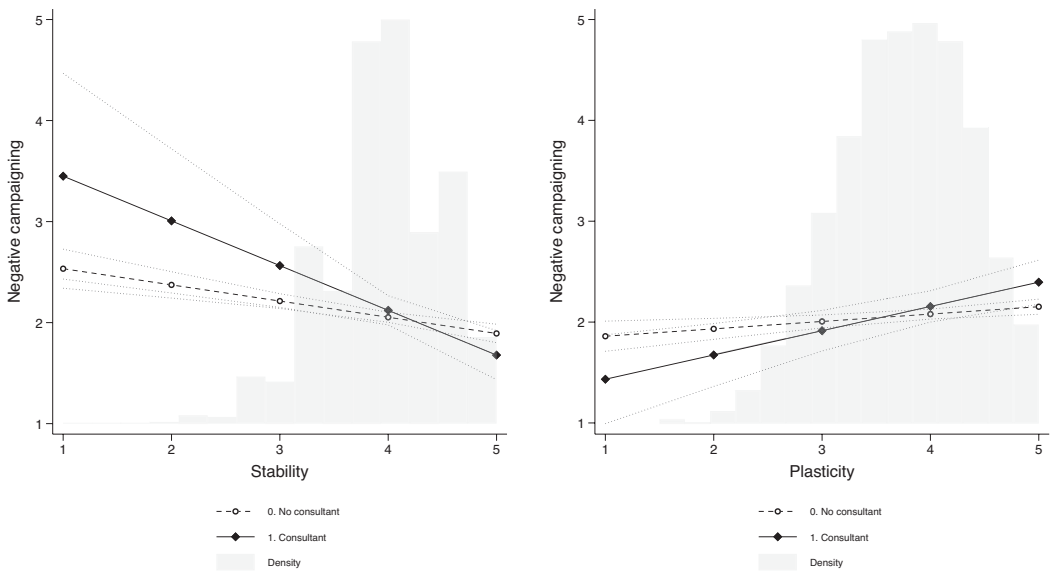


FIGURE 2 Campaign negativity by Personality dimensions * Campaign consultant
 Note: Predicted linear effects with 95% Confidence intervals, based on coefficients in Table A2, M6 and M7 (Appendix A). All other variables fixed at their mean.

Figure 2 shows the estimated level of campaign negativity as a function of increasing levels of stability (left-hand panel) and plasticity (right-hand panel), for both candidates that relied on a campaign consultant (black diamonds) or not (white circles). In both panels, the effect of the personality meta-trait on campaign negativity is noticeably stronger when a consultant is present. More specifically, the figure shows that decreasing levels of stability (agreeableness, conscientiousness, and reverse neuroticism) increase the use of campaign negativity, especially when a consultant is present (left-hand panel). At the same time, increasing levels of plasticity (extraversion, openness) are associated with higher campaign negativity, but almost exclusively when a consultant is present (right-hand panel).

While the direction of these effects is in line with our expectations, their magnitude should not be overestimated. Figure 3 illustrates the contrast in the marginal effects calculated in more conservative models, where the two personality variables take a simplified binary form (values higher or lower than the average) to account for their skewness. Figure 3 shows that the effect of personality on the estimated usage of campaign negativity for candidates having relied on a campaign consultant is negative for stability and positive for plasticity, as expected. Yet, for stability (left-hand panel) the difference in the marginal effect of having a consultant or not is not significant. The trend is clearer for plasticity; at higher levels of plasticity, having a campaign consultant pushes for more negativity. The effect is also not significant at 95%, but its direction is likely positive given where the confidence interval cuts the contrast line at $y = 0$.

Electoral results

The final set of analyses refers to the question whether campaign consultants ultimately have an effect on a candidate's electoral results, independently and in interaction with the personality profile of their candidate and the tone of their campaigns. Figure 4 presents coefficient plots based on standardized variables for the direct effects of these factors (full results using the original unstandardized variables are in Table A3, Appendix A).

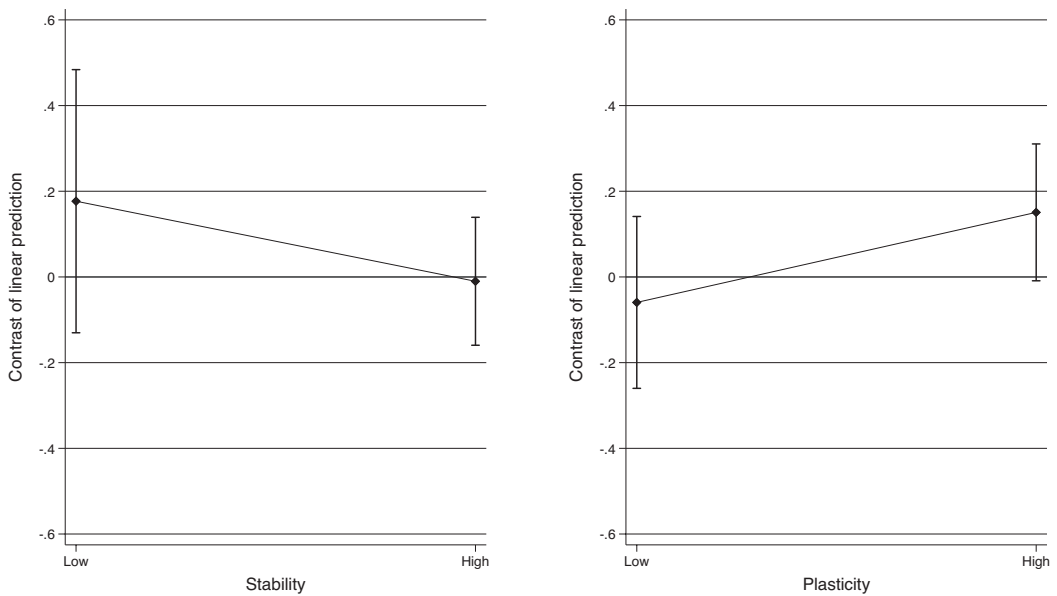


FIGURE 3 Campaign negativity by Personality dimensions * Campaign consultant (contrast marginal effects)
 Note: Contrast in marginal effects with 95% Confidence intervals. Personality variables are binary (higher/lower than the mean value of the original continuous variables). In all panels, the main line (and related confidence intervals) represents the presence of a campaign consultant, contrasted with the absence of a consultant.

Looking first at the covariates, the figure shows that incumbents were more likely to be successful, in line with the well-known “incumbency bonus” (Gaines, 1998) and in spite of the unusually high non-re-election rate in the 2019 Swiss elections. Better results are also estimated for candidates with greater experience, and for candidates appearing towards the top of the list. Neither campaign negativity nor the presence of consultants directly affects electoral results. The effect of consultants is significant in the baseline model without the covariates, but this is no longer the case in the full models - which is likely not reassuring for professionals and spin doctor agencies, especially those who believe in consultants’ “mythic ability to single-handedly deliver victory for their client-candidates” (Medvic, 1998: 150). Turning to the direct effect of personality traits, our models pick up a slight positive effect of stability - indicating that candidates higher in agreeableness, conscientiousness and emotional stability are more likely to perform better at the ballot box (even if none of these traits has a significant effect on its own). The effect remains nonetheless quite marginal, even if it is broadly speaking in line with large-scale comparative research showing that “stability” traits, and especially conscientiousness, are positively associated with better electoral performances of top candidates in national elections worldwide (Nai, 2019).

The last set of analyses tests for the interplay between the three sets of determinants - personality, negativity, and presence of a campaign consultant - on electoral results. Given the more demanding nature of the models, we use here simplified binary variables for personality dimensions and campaign negativity (high/low, based on the mean value on the original continuous variables). Table A4 (Appendix A) reports two separate sets of models, for candidates without a campaign consultant (models M1 and M2) and with a consultant (M3 and M4). Each model includes an interaction term between personality dimensions (stability, plasticity), and campaign negativity. Results of the interaction terms are substantiated with contrast marginal effects in Figure 5.

As the figure shows, in absence of campaign consultants (two top panels) the interaction between negativity and personality fails to shape electoral results in any meaningful way. Whenever a campaign consultant is present (two bottom panels), however, some trends appear. Stability yields better electoral results in presence of campaign negativity, whereas plasticity

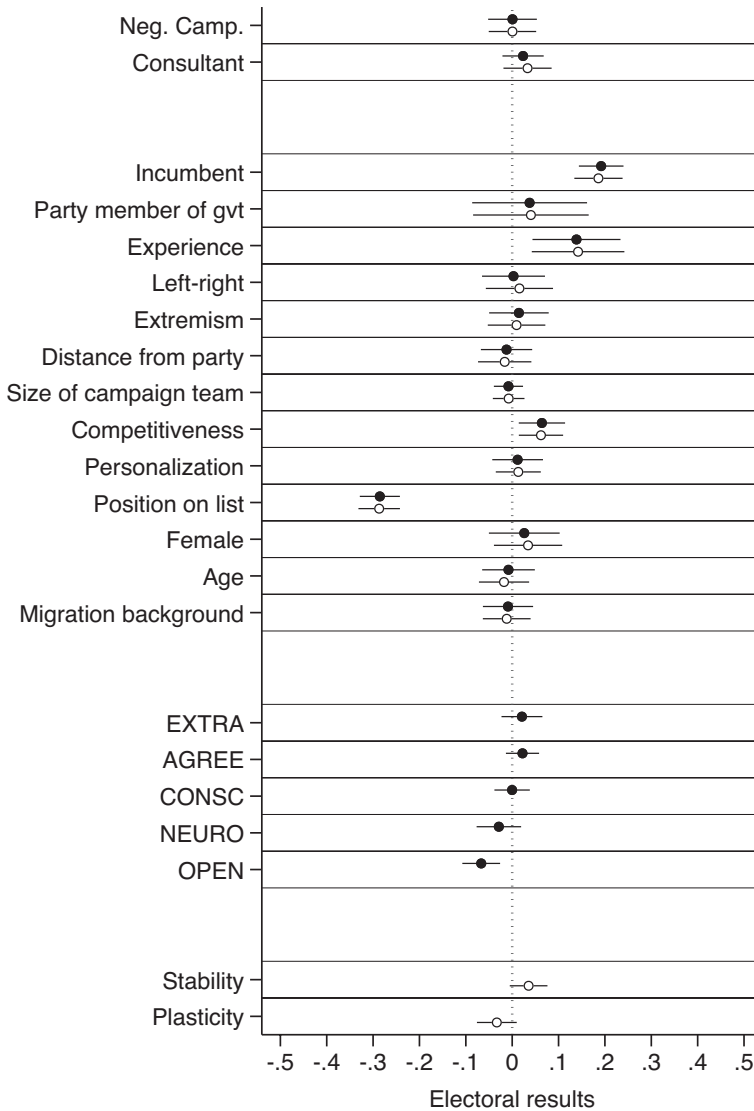


FIGURE 4 Electoral results, coefficients plot

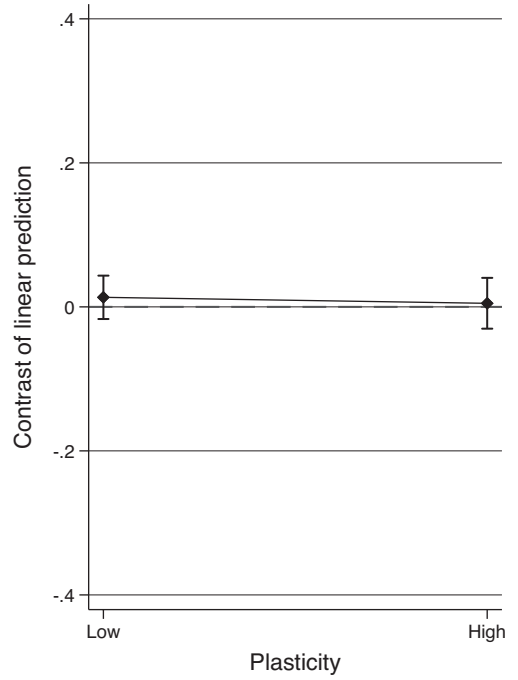
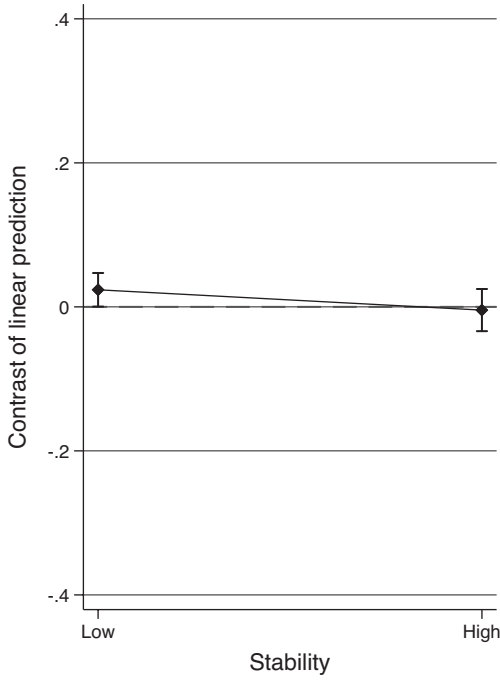
Note: 95% confidence intervals, all variables standardized ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$). Full results of models with original variables are in Table A3 (Appendix A). Black circles refer to models run on the five separate personality traits. White circles refer to models run on the two-meta-traits of stability and plasticity

yields worse results. The trends are seemingly at odds with the direct tailoring effect illustrated beforehand (e.g., candidates scoring high in plasticity are more likely to go negative when they use a campaign consultant), but the general effect remains relatively marginal. All in all, we do not find convincing evidence that the tailoring effect discussed beforehand is electorally consequential in a strong and meaningful way.

Robustness checks

We ran several series of robustness checks (Appendix B). First, Tables B2 to B5 replicate the main models but do not exclude candidates who competed (simultaneously or

No consultant



Consultant

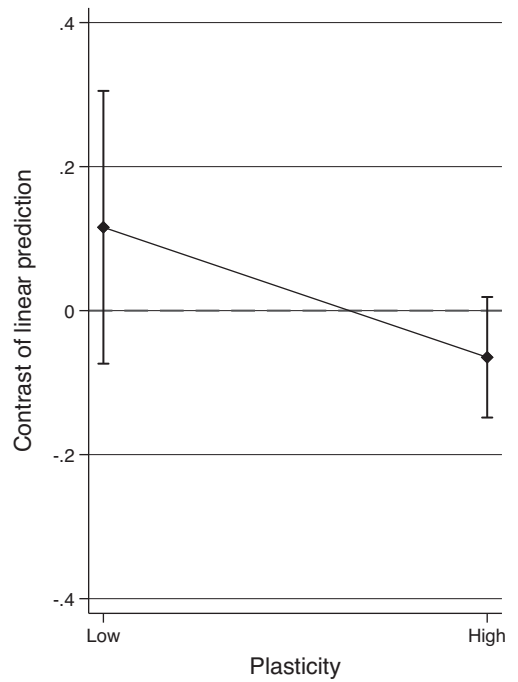
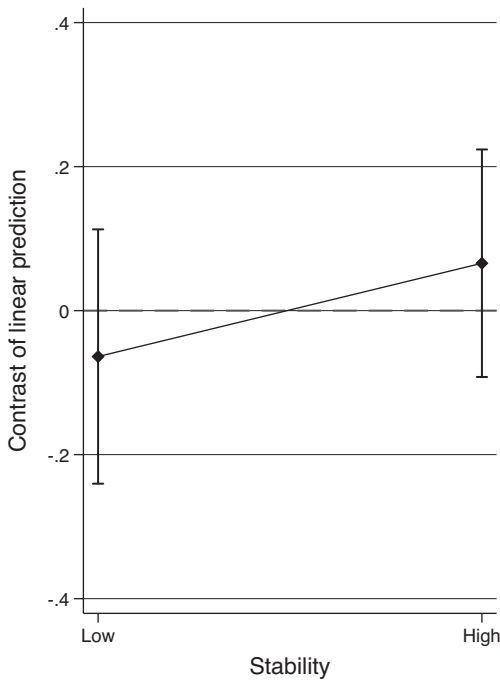


FIGURE 5 Election results by Campaign negativity, Personality dimensions, and Campaign consultant (contrast marginal effects)

Note: Contrast in marginal effects with 95% Confidence intervals. Personality variables and the use of negative campaigning are binary (higher/lower than the mean value of the original continuous variables). In all panels, the main line (and related confidence intervals) represents high campaign negativity, contrasted with low negativity. Full results in Table A4 ([Appendix A](#)).

exclusively) for the upper house (Council of States); results are in general robust, in a couple of cases even stronger (e.g., the presence of campaign consultants now significantly increases electoral success; Table B4), even if the interaction term for plasticity weakens (Table B3). Second, Tables B6 and B7 replicate the analyses for electoral results based on a binary indicator of success (Elected vs. Non-elected). Given the very low proportion of candidates who get elected (less than 4% in our dataset), these models are much more conservative and represent a narrower picture of electoral success. These additional analyses do not present better results for the electoral effectiveness of tailored negativity (that is, we do not find additional evidence that such a tailoring effect is electorally consequential; some models furthermore failed to converge; Table B7). Interestingly, models with such a more restrictive measure of electoral success seem to indicate that campaign negativity is electorally detrimental - not necessarily a counter-intuitive result in usually “tame” Swiss elections. Third, Tables B8 to B11 show results for models that replicate the main analyses but exclude candidates from six small cantons that have only one seat in the National Council (Uri, Obwalden, Nidwaldern, Glarus, Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Appenzell Innerrhoden), and for which the election is technically not fought under proportional representation. Results are robust. Fourth, we have replicated all models but using instead the underlying “one factor of personality” (e.g., Musek, 2007) instead of the separate traits or the two meta-traits. A factor analysis (PCA) run on the five separate personality traits revealed the existence of one principal underlying dimension (explaining 32% of the variance), to which all five traits contribute positively (neuroticism reversed); this unitary underlying dimension reflects a broad socially desirable personality profile (high on extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, and low on neuroticism). Tables B12 and B13 report results of alternative models that use a unitary personality measure that we obtained by simply averaging the five separate traits ($\alpha = 0.46$). Results for this unitary factor of personality are substantially less convincing than the main results discussed in the article. This unitary factor is negatively associated with campaign negativity, but this effect is not significantly stronger (or weaker) depending on the presence of campaign consultants (no tailoring; Table B12). Furthermore, the unitary factor of personality is not associated with better or worse electoral results, neither directly nor when interacted with the presence of consultants and campaign tone (Table B13). These results suggest that the two meta-traits of stability and plasticity, more convincing theoretically in our case, are also more relevant empirically. Finally, a case could be made that the decision to hire a campaign consultant stems from the personality of candidates in the first place; with this in mind, Table B14 estimates the likelihood of hiring a campaign consultant as a function of candidate profile (including their personality traits). By and large, the effect of personality does not seem to be particularly remarkable, neither with or without the full set of controls used in the previous analyses. Model M2 does show a significant effect for extraversion - more extraverted candidates seem more likely to hire a consultant. This effect is however rather weak and, we believe, accounted for in models that interact the presence of consultants with the personality profile of candidates.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article is one of the first contributions outside the US context that focuses on the role of professional consultants in shaping campaign messages and candidates' electoral fortunes. It advanced the novel idea that campaign consultants “tailor” the tone of campaign messages to the personality profile of the candidate they promote and recommend negative campaigning only for candidates whose personality is already prone to more aggressive campaigns. In addition, we argued that candidates should better perform electorally in presence of this tailoring effect.

Based on data from the 2019 Swiss federal elections, we find that negative campaigning is a function of the deep, personal profile of competing candidates. Even in models with full controls, candidates who score lower in agreeableness and conscientiousness are more likely to go negative on their rivals. More generally, negativity is lower for more “stable” candidates (underlying dimension of higher agreeableness and conscientiousness, lower neuroticism) and higher for more “energetic” ones (underlying dimension of extraversion and openness). The presence of campaign consultants, per se, does not drive campaign negativity upwards (or downwards), against trends in the US literature (Francia & Herrnsen, 2007; Grossman, 2012; Nyhan & Montgomery, 2015; Swint, 1998) and our expectations. Importantly, however, our results suggest that campaign consultants are likely to take stock of the character of their candidate, and tailor the content of their campaigns accordingly - more aggressive for more energetic candidates (higher plasticity) and for less stable candidates (lower stability). These results, we argue, are suggestive about the role of consultants to provide the most adequate campaign for the candidate they are promoting (“tailoring hypothesis”). We do however find no indication whatsoever that this marriage is electorally successful.

These results face some notable limitations. First, we are focusing on a single country – Switzerland. There is, of course, nothing wrong with country-specific case studies on election campaigns – the literature is full of examples in which only one country (usually the US) has been studied. However, the question remains whether our findings are specific for Switzerland or whether they can be generalized for other non-US countries. Second, although there are good arguments that analyzing the self-perceptions of candidates has advantages it also raises the problem that their responses might be affected by social desirability or processes of rationalization. As our data includes candidates whose identities are anonymous to us, we are unable to validate their self-reports on the use of negative campaigning. However, the risk that candidates downplay their attack behavior might not be that severe. Given that honesty, sincerity, and integrity are among the most important image traits that voters look for in competing candidates (Holian & Prysby, 2014), candidates running for office have strong incentives to be sincere. Moreover, a previous study using a German candidate survey based on the same CCS questionnaire we use here showed that the average level of candidates' self-reported negativity, aggregated by party, correlates rather strongly with expert ratings of these parties' campaign negativity (Maier & Nai, 2021). We are thus confident that our self-reported measures of campaign tone are at least not “off the mark”. Still, it is possible that candidates with a given personality are more willing to report campaign negativity than others, or that they perceive negativity differently. Methodological work shows that personality traits affect survey response style (e.g., Hibbing et al., 2019) and self-reported behavior (e.g., Meston et al., 1998), but only moderately. We see no particular reasons why this should be different for campaign negativity. In addition to negative campaigning, some other variables, for instance personality traits or the employment of campaign consultants, are also self-reported measures. This raises endogeneity issues that are well-known from other fields of research, e.g., studies on voting. We therefore should avoid statements on the absolute level of certain aspects of campaign behavior but should also be careful to not overstretch the results based on correlational

analysis. Third, due to the low number of candidates who have hired consultants we are unable to run more fine-grained analyses. Furthermore, we lack systematic information on who hired the consultant (the candidate itself or the party for a larger group of candidates) and on what the exact tasks of the consultants were (only technical support, only strategic support, or both). Relatedly, candidates might have different understandings of what a “consultant” is; for instance, some might not consider graphic designers as such, while others might include them. Fourth, a case could be made that more prominent candidates, for instance more prominent local leaders, are less likely to take part in candidate surveys like the one used here. Especially in light of evidence suggesting that local dynamics matter for candidate evaluation (e.g., Collignon & Sajuria, 2018), this omission from the data could potentially skew the results towards less salient candidates. Further research should investigate the potential moderating role of candidate prominence in the eye of the voter, in itself likely to be a function of their personality. Fifth, we have analyzed negative campaigning in general. However, not all attacks are the same; they differ, for instance, with respect to focus (policy vs. character attacks) or the level of (in)civility. Therefore, future research should use a more nuanced version of campaign negativity. Finally, our data are only a snapshot fixed in time. As dynamics of campaign negativity are a function of the evolution of the campaign, panel data would be ideal to better understand the use of attacks.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our findings offer a promising contribution to the literature on political consulting and should encourage other scholars to investigate the “tailoring effect” in other settings. In addition, future work on the tailoring effect of campaign consultants should investigate candidate characteristics beyond their personality profile - for instance by zooming in on the electoral standings of competing candidates. Consistent evidence shows that candidates lagging in the polls (or generally facing the prospect of electoral defeat) tend to go more negative than frontrunners (Skaperdas & Grofman, 1995; Walter et al., 2014), and campaign consultants are likely to play a role in this sense.

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OPEN RESEARCH BADGES




All data and replication materials are available at the following OSF repository: https://osf.io/mx5u6/?view_only=30609451a0ed42429f1297cb7d19ef58

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data information and replication materials are available at the following OSF repository: <https://osf.io/mx5u6/>

ORCID

Alessandro Nai  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7303-2693>

Anke Tresch  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1762-1965>

Jürgen Maier  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8301-5125>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Alessandro Nai is Assistant Professor in Political Communication at the University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on the dark side of politics, electoral behavior in a comparative perspective, and the psychological roots of communication mechanisms.

Anke Tresch is Head of the Political Surveys team at FORS and an Associate Professor (ad personam) in Political Sociology at the University of Lausanne. Her research focuses on electoral behavior and campaigns, party competition, and political communication.

Jürgen Maier is professor of Political Communication at the Department of Political Science, University of Koblenz-Landau. His research focuses on the content and the impact of campaign communication.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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