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Undermining a Rival Party's Issue Competence through Negative Campaigning: Experimental Evidence from the USA, Denmark, and Australia

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Abstract
Much party communication encourages voters to lower issue-related evaluations of rival parties. Yet, studies of such influence are rare. Drawing on research on political parties' negative campaigning, this article starts to fill this gap. We triangulate evidence from four survey experiments across six issues in Denmark, the US, and Australia, and show that a party's negative campaigning decreases voters' evaluations of the target party's issue-handling competence (i.e. issue ownership), but does not backlash on voters' evaluations of the sponsor. Such attack on the target party does not have to be tied to a negative policy development like the crime rate to undermine the target party's competence evaluations. At the same time, a negative policy development only undermines a party's evaluations when it is accompanied by a rival party's negative campaigning attack. The implications for party competition and the mass-elite linkage are important.

A cornerstone of representative democracy is that voters form opinions about candidates and parties in order to elect representatives to parliament. This is a demanding task, and research increasingly focuses on how party communication assists voters in forming

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opinions (Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu, 2016; Seeberg, 2018; Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010). Although much party communication aims to undermine a rival party's reputation in the public (Lau and Pomper, 2004; Nai and Walter, 2015), research rarely focuses on this central aspect of party competition. This is also true for the accelerating body of research on voters' evaluations of political parties' issue-handling competence, so-called issue ownership (Egan, 2013; Jennings and Green, 2017; Seeberg, 2017), which mostly studies how a party can beef up its own issue ownership (see, e.g. Dahlberg and Martinsson, 2015; Stubager and Seeberg, 2016; Walgrave et al., 2009) rather than study the effects of rival party attacks. Yet, adopting the lens of negative campaigning research to study the phenomena of issue ownership attack is likely to be particularly relevant. Negative campaigning is perhaps one of the most distinctive features of contemporary election campaigns (Lau and Pomper, 2004; Nai and Walter, 2015), and issue ownership attacks can be detrimental to a party's electoral success. The literature provides several case studies—for example, Bill Clinton in the US (Holian, 2004), Tony Blair in the UK (Norris, 1997), and Anders Fogh Rasmussen in Denmark (Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen, 2004)—showing how competing actors attacked their way into office by using negative campaigning toward their rivals' issue reputations.

To take a first step to more systematically understand if a party can undermine a rival party's issue ownership, this article analyses to what extent a party's negative campaigning toward a rival party undermines the rival's reputation in the public for issue-handling capacity without backlash effects on the sponsor party. Such attacks often come in connection to a negative policy development such as increasing crime in which the party aims to make voters blame the rival party for the problem and its poor performance (Seeberg, 2018; Thesen, 2013). Hence, in order to deepen the understanding of the effects of negative campaigning on a rival party's issue ownership, the article innovates analytically by keeping problems and negative campaigning apart in order to investigate how they go together. Whereas the negative policy development makes a party's negative message more relevant and therefore should increase the influence of the message on the rival's issue ownership, we also expect that negative campaigning makes a negative policy development more relevant for voters' competence evaluations of the rival party.

In this way, the article makes three contributions: (1) It studies how a party can undermine voters' evaluations of a rival party's competence; (2) it brings together two prominent research agendas on negative campaigning and issue ownership to understand the effects of party communication on voter evaluations; (3) it advances an increasing scholarly interest in disentangling the influence of party communication and the policy development on voter evaluations (Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu, 2016; Seeberg, 2018). To make these contributions, we extend on the increasing number of non-US studies of negative campaigning (Dolezal et al., 2016; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008; Pattie et al., 2011; Ridout and Walter, 2015; Walter et al., 2014) and triangulate evidence from four original survey experiments on the issues of health care, immigration, the economy, unemployment benefits, agriculture, and rural development in the diverse settings of Denmark, Australia, and the US.

Taking on this task has important implications for our account of the mass-elite linkage. If a party can alter the connection between a rival party and voters—as expressed in the issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996)—the mass-elite linkage appears more fluid than often portrayed in the sense that voters can be persuaded to party defection. Moreover, against the idea of representative democracy, the mass-elite linkage comes out as quite

elite-driven in the sense that parties tell voters what to think more than the other way around.

Undermining a Rival Party's Issue Ownership

In his seminal piece on issue ownership, Petrocik (1996: 826) considers issue ownership as the "critical constant" between elections. As recent studies confirm (Seeberg, 2017), issue ownership certainly has a highly stable long-term component—over time, the same party tends to be considered more competent to handle an issue by the voters. However, this does not mean that issue ownership cannot fluctuate in the short run (and even the longer run) and, at times, temporarily change hands (Egan, 2013; Petitpas and Sciarini, 2020; Stubager, 2018; Walgrave et al., 2009). Even if just temporary, such deviations from the long-term pattern may as demonstrated in case studies (see, e.g. Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen, 2004; Holian, 2004) be electorally consequential and send the incumbent party out of office because of a decline in voters' evaluations of its issue-handling competences. These potential short-term fluctuations in issue ownership are the starting point of this study.

A common characteristic of issue ownership research is that it is primarily concerned with what a party can do to beef up its own issue ownership rating (see, e.g. Dahlberg and Martinsson, 2015; Stubager and Seeberg, 2016; Walgrave et al., 2009 a noteworthy exception is Tresch et al., 2013). This focus comes at the neglect of looking at what a party can do to hit its rival party's issue ownership rating at a time where short-term issue ownership changes due to attacks are common and highly consequential for electoral outcomes (Arndt, 2014; Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen, 2004; Holian, 2004; Norris, 2001). This leaves a partial account of what forms a party's issue ownership since any vote-seeking party can be expected to work hard to impede its rival party's standing in the electorate.

Recently, the concept of issue ownership has been much debated (Lefevere et al., 2017; Stubager, 2018; Walgrave et al., 2012). We follow Stubager (2018) and focus on "competence issue ownership" rather than "associative issue ownership" as the former concept comes closer to the initial idea of issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996): While voters for instance may associate the issue of immigration spontaneously with a far-right party ("associative issue ownership"), they nevertheless see the main center-right party as most competent in actually handling the issue ("competence issue ownership"). By focusing on the latter, we also distinguish our study from Tresch et al. (2013), who study if parties can steal rival parties' associative issue ownership.

In terms of competence, research on the sources of issue ownership finds that a party acquires issue ownership primarily through continuously strong performance on the issue (Green and Jennings, 2011; Stubager and Seeberg, 2016). This also means that a negative policy development such as increasing crime as well as blame for bad performance from, for example, rival parties can come in the way, and this is exactly what we will focus on in the following. Our focus on how parties' blame-oriented communication influence rival parties' issue ownership departs from most previous work not only by focusing on the rival party (Egan, 2013; Stubager and Seeberg, 2016; Walgrave et al., 2009), but more specifically also by going into the content of the party communication and how this play together with the actual policy development: we distinguish positive and negative communication (see below). Pioneering work on a rival party's influence on issue ownership by Tresch et al. (2013) only looks at messages as such even if such messages may have very different impact depending on the actual content, like positive versus negative, and

does not take the policy development into account although it is the basis of party performance and competence evaluations. By drawing on the literature on negative campaigning, we take the next step below.

Which Messages Matter and When?

In order to advance our knowledge on what a party can actually say to undermine its opponent's issue ownership, and within the framework of communication intended to harm the opponent, we naturally draw on prominent research on the effects of political parties' negative campaigning (Nai and Walter, 2015).

Negative Campaigning

Research on the effects of political parties' negative campaigning is abundant, and there is evidence that this type of communication affects a wide range of phenomena and attitudes, from turnout to electoral results, from voters' ambivalence to their cynicism (e.g. Lau and Pomper, 2004; Nai, 2014). Although so far not concerned with the issue ownership of a rival party, scholars of negative campaigning have developed a strong account of how and when a party's campaigning against an opponent affects the opponent's electoral fortunes and its overall perception by the electorate (Fridkin and Kenney, 2004; Lau and Pomper, 2004; Pinkleton, 1997). Yet, even if issue ownership is a major ingredient in the vote choice (Meguid and Belanger, 2008), the latter does not reduce to the former (Stubager et al., 2018). Analytically, the concept of issue ownership is attractive because it offers more clarity to the study of the effects of issue-based negative campaigning because it evaluates the effects at the issue level and not at the aggregate vote choice. Even if the literature on negative campaigning has primarily been developed in a US context, an emerging comparative research agenda suggests that it may also apply to European parliaments with high party discipline and, therefore, presumably less focus on persons and more focus on what the party can offer (Dolezal et al., 2016; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008; Nai and Walter, 2015; Pattie et al., 2011; Ridout and Walter, 2015; Walter et al., 2014).

To put it simply, "going negative" against your rivals entails attacking them instead of advocating your own strengths and ideas, so-called "positive campaigning" (Nai and Walter, 2015). There are two types of negative campaigning attacks. On the one hand, *issue-based* attacks, also called "policy" attacks (Benoit, 2015), are framed around the idea that the rival's performance or program on specific policies is bad or harmful. On the other hand, *person-based* (or *character*) attacks are framed toward the rival itself and are aimed at degrading the rival's character, personality, values, or behavior. In this article, we focus on issue-based attacks because of the nature of the dynamics studied here. Our goal is to show through which messages a party is able to reduce voters' perceptions of its rival's capacity to handle specific *issues*; negative messages stressing the rival's shortcomings on those issues thus seem the natural candidate for our study.

Issue-based negative messages provide reasons for voters to disregard the rival party and, generally, degrade the perception of that party's capability to handle the issue at stake. Although the overall net effect of negative campaigning on electoral outcomes is still questioned (Lau et al., 2007), there is evidence that a sponsor's negative messages are an effective way to reduce voters' positive feelings for the target party (Arceneaux and Nickerson, 2010; Pinkleton, 1997). We extend these results by expecting that a sponsor's

issue-based negative messages are effective in reducing the target party's issue-handling reputation among voters on those issues.

> Hypothesis 1: An issue-based negative message towards a target party decreases the target party's issue-handling competence.

Negative versus Positive Campaigning

Instead of attacking the rivals' record on an issue, a party can also advance its own strengths at handling the issues (positive campaigning). Although positive campaigning is the opposite of negative campaigning, a party's positive campaigning might also influence a rival's issue ownership. Even without explicitly communicating about the rival party, positive messages might indirectly reduce positive evaluations of the opponent by simply shifting the positive focus toward the sponsor of the message. Yet, as a cue to the voter's party evaluations, negative messages convey a direct appeal to voters to disregard the rival party's issue-handling and can therefore be expected to be more effective than positive messages (advocating for the sponsor's qualities, see also Fridkin and Kenney, 2004). Moreover, existing research points toward a "negativity bias" according to which "people are more reactive and attentive to negative news than they are to positive news" (Soroka and McAdams, 2010: 2–3). This perception bias acts in the way that "negative information may be more likely than comparable positive information to be noticed and processed, thereby having the opportunity to get its message across" (Lau and Pomper, 2002: 47). This generates our second expectation:

> Hypothesis 2: An issue-based negative message decreases the target's issue-handling competence more strongly than an issue-based positive message.

No Backlash Effects of Negative Campaigning

Negative messages are potentially a risky business, and they may not immediately benefit the attacking party (sponsor) even if they depress voters' faith in the target's competences. Because voters tend generally to dislike negativity, attacks can backfire and end up hurting the sponsor party more than the target. Such "backlash effect" (Roese and Sande, 1993) may take place if voters perceive the negative campaigning as ungrounded, inappropriate, or simply vile. Negative messages in this perspective are thus seen as a gamble where a party dares to discredit a rival party, and it collects the payoffs only if voters buy the argument. If voters do not buy the argument, then the sponsor's credibility is called into question. Indeed, there is evidence of such backlash effects (Fridkin and Kenney, 2004; Hitchon and Chang, 1995; Pinkleton, 1997).

However, in our case, we do not expect negative messages to backfire against the sponsor of the message. First, such backlash effects might be substantially more likely for character attacks than for issue attacks (Budesheim et al., 1996; Carraro et al., 2010); our models test for the effects of the latter, and thus, backlash effects should be minimal.[1] Second, and perhaps even more importantly, when negative messages backlash, they are more likely to harm the "warmth" associated with the source (how much we find it likable) and not its perceived competence (how much we think the source is competent to handle its tasks; Carraro and Castelli, 2010). Here, we focus on the sponsor's perceived competence (at handling the issues at stake), which should only be marginally affected by backlash effects because of the sponsor's use of

issue-based negative messages. Finally, if voters lose faith in the target party's competences, they may turn to the sponsor instead and increase their faith in this party's competences. This may also take place in a multiparty system with many other parties to turn to because the sponsor through its negative campaigning draws voters' attention to this party as the first alternative to the target party. This counteracts a backlash effect and makes a negative net-effect unlikely. This is our third expectation:

> Hypothesis 3: An issue-based negative message toward a target party does not decrease the sponsor's issue-handling competence (no backlash effect).

Negative Campaigning and the Policy Development

A party's attacks on a rival party's issue-handling competence often come in connection to a negative policy development on the issue such as an increasing crime rate or surgery waiting list (Seeberg, 2018; Thesen, 2013). The mission of the attacking party (sponsor) is to define how the public perceives of this development (Boin et al., 2009). Ultimately, a major goal of the sponsor's communication is to make the public blame the target party for the problems and leave a poor performance evaluation of the target party (Marsh and Tilley, 2009). Although much party competition centers on problems and how to define how bad and urgent the problem is (Baumgartner et al., 2011; Seeberg, 2018), this is not reflected in the broader literature on the effect of party communication on public opinion formation (see, e.g. Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010) or on the effects of negative campaigning more specifically (see, e.g. Nai and Walter, 2015). At the same time, information about problems and a party's performance in tackling the problems has been shown to be central to voters' perceptions of parties' issue ownership. For instance, Green and Jennings (2011) show that a party's issue ownership is particularly exposed to change when a party is in office because here, it is held to account for problems that emerge. Yet, this research on problems and issue ownership is rarely connected to party communication. Hence, we take a first step to fill this void.

Within the framework of negative messages, factual information about the policy development on the issues at stake has the potential to increase the *relevance* of the attack; given that such attacks are more likely to provide substantive reasons for voters to be suspicious about the target (Fridkin and Kenney, 2011), relevant (or "useful") attacks are more likely to alter the evaluative judgments of those who are exposed to them. To the contrary, irrelevant attacks (i.e. unsupported by actual problems) are more likely to simply be dismissed as shrill or senseless. This echoes research in cognitive psychology showing that relevant messages are more likely to persuade and change opinions (e.g. Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). This is our fourth hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 4: An issue-based negative message decreases a target party's issue-handling competence more strongly when accompanied by information about a negative policy development.

To be sure, whether a factual information is "relevant" or not is in the eye of the beholder, which is something that we are not able to assess (or manipulate) in our experiment. The point we are trying to make here is that political messages (attacks, in this case) that are accompanied by factual information are more likely to be effective, because they are more likely to be perceived as relevant or legitimate. In this sense, our fourth hypothesis

can be seen as a nod to the developing literature on fact-based political communication (e.g. Allen and Stevens, 2018) and, beyond that, the increasing importance of exposure to "fake news" instead of hard facts for the development of political cynicism and decreasing efficacy (e.g. Balmas, 2014).

Previous research would actually suggest a two-way street between issue-based negative message and information about a negative policy development in the sense that the latter not only influences the impact of the former, but the former also influences the impact of the latter. Research on the economy, for instance, shows that parties can influence how voters perceive of the economy and the extent to which they blame the incumbents for a negative policy development (Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu, 2016; Seeberg, 2018). This is because policy developments oftentimes are neither clearly bad nor unambiguously good—the crime rate might, for instance, be increasing but only slowly and less so than in neighboring countries—which makes the description of the development open for debate (Boin et al., 2009). Here, party communication helps voters form an opinion. Hence, the analysis will look at the two-way interaction between issue-based negative message and information about a negative policy development.

As party communication is usually carefully crafted to be immediately persuasive on voters compared with plain and rough information about a policy development, we expect to see that rival party communication makes a greater impact on the influence of a policy development on voters' assessments of the party than vice versa. Moreover, the argument that information about a negative policy development enhances the impact of negative campaigning implies that negative campaigning unaccompanied might not have a discernible effect. Hence, H1 (on the general effect of negative campaigning) might therefore not gain much support and H2 (negative vs positive campaigning) might only be true when negative campaigning is accompanied by information about a negative policy development.

Four Experiments across Six Issues in Three Countries

The four hypotheses are tested in four survey experiments on the issues of unemployment benefits, agriculture, and rural development in Denmark in 2016, the economy in Australia in 2017, and the issues of health and immigration in the US in 2017 and 2018. This design provides a very diverse setting in which to test the argument. Hence, if the findings from the empirical analysis are consistent across issues and countries, this offers a solid base for evaluating the strategies. The conclusions then apply for three very different political systems, namely, the US presidential two-party system, the federal Australian system, and the Danish parliamentarian multiparty system as well as two issues, agriculture and immigration, on which right-wing parties have issue ownership according to previous research, two issues, unemployment benefits and health care, on which left-wing parties have issue ownership, and two issues, the economy and rural development on which no party has a clear issue ownership (Egan, 2013; Petrocik, 1996; Seeberg, 2017).[2] Moreover, as the year following the inauguration of US President Trump might be considered rather unusual (Nai et al., 2018), we replicate our 2017 US experiment in late 2018.

Another reason for selecting these countries is that it allows a test of the hypotheses on a well-known case of negative campaigning in the US (see, e.g. Lau and Pomper, 2002, 2004) and cases of limited knowledge on negative campaigning in Denmark (see Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008) and Australia. Hence, our case selection reflects the increasing interest in negative campaigning beyond the US (Dolezal

et al., 2016; Nai and Walter, 2015; Pattie et al., 2011; Ridout and Walter, 2015; Walter et al., 2014). As noted by Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2015: 748), the multiparty context such as in Denmark or Australia is clearly the one most parties in the Western world find themselves in, and Denmark and Australia are therefore a natural point of departure in order to move beyond the US. At the same time, our analysis of the US ensures an accumulation of knowledge around negative campaigning on a much-researched case. Issue ownership research is similar in the sense that it has been and still is prominent in the US (see, e.g. Petrocik, 1996; Egan, 2013) and only came to Denmark lately (see, e.g. Stubager, 2018; Stubager and Seeberg, 2016). Research on negative campaigning in Denmark indicates that it is much less common than in the US (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008). The Australian case is important because it adds another example outside the US—and a case that is related to, but at the same time clearly different from, the Danish one. Like Denmark, Australia features a multiparty system, but one that much closer resembles the Westminster two-party system with the historic dominance in the Australian parliament of two opposed camps (Labor and the Liberals/Nationals coalition) and a multitude of scattered small parties. While similar on several regards, the three cases investigated in this article diverge quite substantially in terms of electoral systems (PR open list for Denmark, Alternative voting for Australia (Karp et al., 2018), and Single-Member Plurality for the US); also as a result, the fragmentation of the party system diverges quite substantially, as shown, for instance, by the different number of "effective" number of competing parties in the three cases (Denmark = 5.6, Australia = 3.4, US = 2.1; Gallagher, 2014). The political culture across the three countries is also radically different, as illustrated, for instance, by the different share of female MPs (Denmark = 39.1, Australia = 24.7, US = 17.8; Gallagher, 2014). Although our analysis is not interested in country differences per se, Denmark and Australia provide an important contrast case to the US that allows to test if the effect of negative campaigning applies across varying contexts.

The Danish survey uses a nationally representative sample (N = 1513)[3] collected by a Danish polling company, Epinion, between 24 October and 3 November 2016 through a web survey (see section I in the Online Appendix). In this period, Denmark had a single-party, right-wing minority government led by the Liberals ("Venstre"). For each of the three strategies, the main opposition party, the Social Democrats ("the sponsor") attack the Prime Minister party, the Liberals ("the target"). Hence, we focus on the two main parties on the center-left and center-right (like in the Australian case, see below). This implies that we leave the remaining parties in the Danish (and Australian) multiparty system to future studies. Even if this limits the analysis of multiparty dynamics, the inclusion of a multiparty system to the analysis (and a federal, multiparty system in Australia with two dominant parties) in addition to a presidential, two-party system, such as the US, is important for the generalizability of the results: the analysis of the multiparty systems in Denmark and Australia reveals if an attack by, for example, the large center-left mainstream party impacts voters' evaluations of the large center-right mainstream party. This is important because a lack of clarity of responsibility in multiparty systems makes it harder for voters to identify which party is to blame (Hobolt et al. 2013). To maintain external validity of the experiment and to make sure that the hypothesis test focuses on the target party's issue-handling competence, the experimental conditions in Denmark are set up around three policy reforms which the newly elected Liberals government enacted in the autumn of 2015 and spring of 2016, that is, 6–12 months before our survey was fielded.

The first US survey was collected through the web, between 22 November and 6 December 2017, using the Amazon MTurk (N 1310).[4] The data are unweighted. As Clifford et al. (2015) demonstrate, the MTurk sample can be used to study public opinion formation through experiments. In this period, the Republicans had the presidency and a majority in both chambers of the US Congress. In the survey, the Democrats ("the sponsor") attack the Republicans ("the target") on the issue of immigration, which the Republicans own, and vice versa on the issue of health care on which the Democrats have issue ownership (Seeberg, 2017).

The second US survey was also collected through the web, in August 2018, via Amazon MTurk (N 1800). This survey replicates the experimental design used during the first MTurk survey in late 2017. In this case as well, Democrats ("the sponsor") attack the Republicans ("the target") on the issue of immigration, which the Republicans own, and vice versa on the issue of health care. Much has happened in the US in recent years in terms of health care (most notably, the failed attempt to "repeal and replace" Obamacare) and immigration (most notably, incertitude surrounding the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, the fate of children of illegal immigrants separated from their parents upon arrival in the US, and the construction of the wall at the border between the US and Mexico), and having two surveys on these issues separated by approximately a year ensures that the answers are not overly contingent upon the immediate news context.

The Australian survey comes from the Australian Voters Experience study (Karp et al., 2018),[5] conducted in 2016 by the Electoral Integrity Project (Harvard and Sydney University) in collaboration with the Australian Election Commission to measure the attitudes of the electorate. The data set comes from an online three-wave panel survey administered before and after the Australian federal elections of 2 July 2016. Respondents were selected from a representative pool of Australian voters by the polling institute SSI, who conducted the surveys. Data were gathered in three waves, respectively, in late June (1 week before the election), early July (in the 1–2 weeks after the election), and again in late August/early September (1.5–2 months after the election). The initial sample (Wave 1) has 2139 valid observations, whereas Waves 2 and 3 have, respectively, 1838 observations (86% retention) and 1543 observations (84% retention). Overall, 72% of observations in Wave 1 are still present in Wave 3. The experiment was embedded in the third wave. Randomly selected subsamples of respondents were exposed to one of the following four mock campaign messages: (1) a negative message where Bill Shorten, leader of the main opposition party (Labor), criticized the Liberals' handling of the country's economy; (2) that same negative message complemented with relevant real-world information (the fact that ratings agency Standard and Poor's lowered Australia's credit rating outlook to negative), (3) that same real-world information on its own, or (4) a positive message from Labor.

In the Danish and US surveys, respondents participate in a random order in each of the experimental conditions (three issues in Denmark and two in each of the US studies; see Figures A1–A4 in the Online Appendix for an overview). Each of these experimental conditions has a separate control group (except the second US study). Background information about the respondents in each control and treatment group across the experiments is provided in Table A14–A21 in the Online Appendix. When including these background variables to the analysis, the results do not change substantively (reported in Tables A12 and A13 in the Online Appendix). Moreover, the treatment and control groups appear to be balanced as the background variables are poor predictors of respondents' assignment

		Denmark	US (I)	US (II)	Australia
	POS vs. CONTROL	X	X	X	X
H1/H3	NEG vs. CONTROL	X	X	X	X
	PROBL vs. CONTROL		X		
	NEG (with PROBL) vs. CONTROL	X	X		
H2	NEG vs. POS	X	X	X	X
	NEG (with PROBL) vs. POS	X	X		
	PROBL (with NEG) vs. PROBL		X		
H4	NEG (with PROBL) vs. NEG	X	X		

Figure 1. Overview of the Experiments.
An "X" means that the experiment covered this condition. "POS" refers to positive campaigning, "NEG" refers to negative campaigning, and "PROBL" refers to information about real-world problems. The Danish experiment is conducted on three issues, the US(I) and (II) experiments are conducted on two issues, and the Australian experiment is conducted on one issue each. For more details, see Figures A1–A4 in the Online Appendix.

to the treatment and control groups (see Table A23 in the Online Appendix where the Wald chi-square tests for model fit are insignificant in seven out of eight cases).

In the hypothesis test, we stack the data from all of the surveys and estimate the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models with fixed effects where the panels are issues in the experiments. The four experiments do not all cover each of the conditions that we use to test the hypotheses. As Figure 1 shows, the experiments in Denmark and Australia and one of the experiments in the US cover almost all conditions. The main exception is that we cannot test information about a negative policy development versus the control in Denmark. The second experiment in the US adds additional evidence on the key hypotheses, namely negative campaigning versus position campaigning and campaigning versus the control. Taking this latter bonus experiment out does not change the results (see Table A8 in the Online Appendix). Importantly, the main results do not change substantially when taking out one issue at a time or testing the hypotheses on one experiment at a time (see Tables A4–A21 in the Online Appendix). Unsurprisingly, the level of statistical significance decreases due to the low number of observations in each sample.

Stimuli Material

Like many other experiments on the influence of party communication on voters (Dahlberg and Martinsson, 2015; Morisi, 2018; Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010; Stubager and Seeberg, 2016; Walgrave et al., 2009), respondents receive a mock news item as stimuli material in each experimental condition. The news item conveys either (1) a negative message from the sponsor without information about a negative policy development, (2) information about a negative policy development but no negative message (only in the US), (3) a negative message together with information about a negative policy development (not in Australia), (4) a positive message without information about a negative policy development. The news item is a simple text with no professional layout, and the respondents receive a short intro before the text telling them that they will receive "a text with statements about [. . .] from leading figures of the [. . .] party." Hence, although we

cannot strictly control for this, we aim to avoid that the respondents find the source non-credible or biased and that this influences their party evaluations.

The negative campaigning messages in the mock news items reflect true statements made by Danish and Australian members of parliament and US legislators, and the information about the negative policy development uses true figures and graphs together with policy experts presenting the data (see the questionnaire in sections I–IV in the Online Appendix). As mentioned, the negative campaigning in Denmark comes in connection to a government reform, which is briefly mentioned in the stimuli material. To avoid that it is the government's legislation that affects the results in Denmark and not the sponsor's communication, the control group also receives this information about the government reform.

To give an example of a negative message, respondents in the first US study receive a mock news item with a title and a statement in this case by a Republican criticizing the Democrats on health:

> Republicans criticize Democrats for poor performance on the issue of healthcare coverage for the poor
>
> Political parties are often evaluated on how they handle problems. On the issue of healthcare coverage for the poor, a leading figure from the Republican party recently criticized the Democrats for their poor performance: "Despite the Democrats' continued promises to end this, many people are still without health insurance and the richest Americans still live much longer than the poorest. The Democrats are simply not doing enough to fight inequality in health conditions and life expectancy. The Democrats do not understand the current issue of healthcare coverage for the poor, and how this affects social relations and economic prospects in the US. The Democrats have proven unable to tackle the problem."

In the mock news item with a positive message, respondents receive a very similar set up but here, the "Republicans praise their performance on the issue of health care coverage for the poor" in the title, and in the statement, the Republican praises his party's efforts and emphasizes their ability to handle the issue.

Importantly for the results of the experiment, the respondents do appear to receive and understand the stimuli—on a 0–1 scale (1 most negative), they rate the negative messages .63–.82 and the positive (1 most positive) .58–.71. This suggests that the stimuli works, but it is not artificially strong (in which case ratings would be closer to 1). They also perceive the information about the negative policy development correctly and agree that the unemployment rate remains at an unchanged high level in Denmark, the use of pesticides in Danish agriculture have increased, and so on (see Table A22 in the Online Appendix).

Measures

Each stimuli text ends with the same set of questions on the dependent variable. Respondents evaluate on a 10-point scale (recoded 0–1 where 1 is positive) the issue-handling competence of the sponsor and the target (Social Democrats and Liberals in Denmark, Republicans and Democrats in the US, Liberals and Conservatives in Australia), respectively, using the following question: "How do you think [party] handle problems on [issue] in [country]?" (0 very poorly, 1 very well, don't know). The measure reflects the classic issue ownership measure by focusing on a party's ability to handle problems on an issue (Petrocik, 1996; Stubager, 2018). However, it departs from the prevalent question
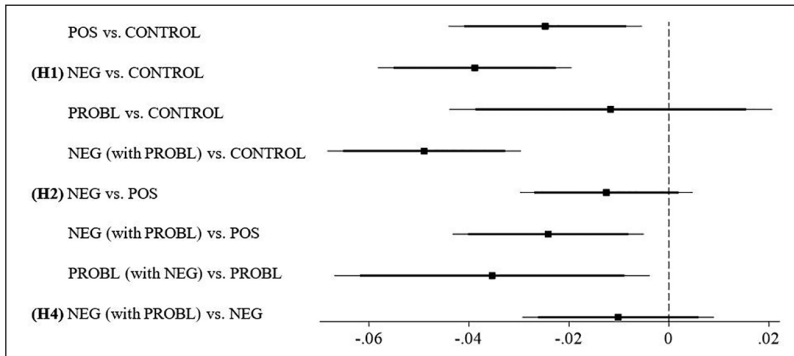
Figure 2. Evaluation of the Target Party.
Figure 2 is based on Table A1 in the Online Appendix. The markers represent standard OLS regression coefficients that each estimates the difference in the mean-issue handling competence score for two groups of respondents. The whiskers give a 95% confidence interval. "POS" refers to positive campaigning, "NEG" refers to negative campaigning, and "PROBL" refers to information about real-world problems. The dependent variable is respondents' evaluations of the target party's issue-handling competence.

format by not asking respondents to choose a preferred party among the alternatives. Instead, and as in other survey analyses, a continuous measure is adopted to offer more analytical leverage (Dahlberg and Martinsson 2015; Stubager and Seeberg, 2016; Walgrave et al., 2009).

Findings

The test of the four hypotheses in the four experiments is shown in Figures 2–4 where each marker represents a standard OLS regression coefficient that estimates the difference in the mean issue-handling competence score for two groups of respondents—a stimuli group versus a control group or a stimuli group versus another stimuli group. The whisker gives a 95% confidence interval. If the marker is to the right (left) of the vertical, non-effect zero-line, and the whisker escapes this vertical line, the issue ownership score for the party has increased (decreased) in a statistically significant way.

In support of H1, the top-second marker in Figure 2 is solidly to the left of the vertical line suggesting that when voters are exposed to a sponsor's issue-based negative message toward a target party, the target party's issue ownership on that specific issue decreases. Yet, the top marker in Figure 2 is almost as far to the left as the top-second marker indicating that a positive message has largely similar effects on the target party's issue ownership. The fifth marker from the top confirms that the effect of a negative message is larger than the effect of a positive message, but the difference is not statistically significant. This counters H2.

Turning to the cocktail of a negative messages and a negative policy development (H4), the top-fourth marker in Figure 2 indicates that when voters are exposed to a sponsor's issue-based negative message toward a target party in conjunction with a negative policy development, the target party's issue ownership on that specific issue decreases. Comparing the top-second and top-fourth markers, the effect of negative messages appears to increase in conjunction with a negative policy development. Yet, the bottom marker reveals that this difference is not statistically significant. This rejects H4. Yet, the cocktail with a negative policy development has more power compared with just a
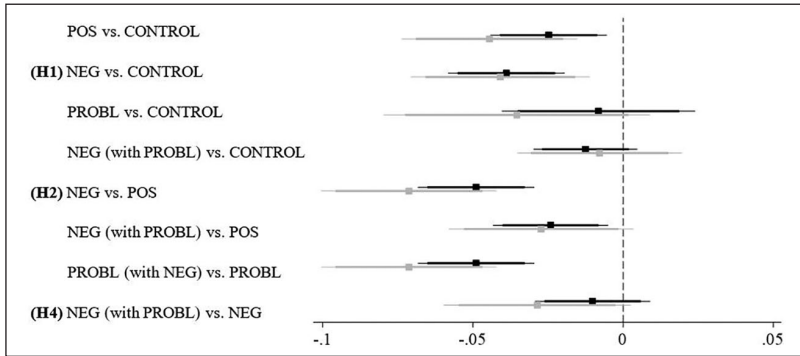
Figure 3. Evaluation of the Target Party among Target Supporters.
Figure 3 is based on Table A2 in the Online Appendix. The markers represent standard OLS regression coefficients that each estimates the difference in the mean-issue handling competence score for two groups of respondents. The whiskers give a 95% confidence interval. "POS" refers to positive campaigning, "NEG" refers to negative campaigning, and "PROBL" refers to information about real-world problems. The dependent variable is the evaluations of the target party's issue-handling competence among target supports (gray) and all respondents (black).

negative message. Whereas the effect of a plain negative message does not exceed that of a positive message, a negative message combined with information about a negative policy development has greater impact than a positive message as indicated by the top-sixth marker.[6] Insofar as a negative message tends to be tied to a negative policy development, this points to the influence of a sponsor's negative message on a target party's issue ownership.

Our analysis does not allow us to test a positive message accompanied by information about a negative policy development. If such information also amplifies the impact of a positive message, we may exaggerate the greater impact of a negative message compared with a positive message. Yet, based on previous research (Thesen, 2013), it appears most likely that a party will try as far as possible to be associate with a positive development and make sure that a negative policy development gets associated with the rival. Hence, a positive message together with information about a negative policy development might happen but it appears less likely, and this dampens concerns that we are overestimating the impact of negative campaigning.

When voters are exposed only to a negative policy development without accompanying party communication, this does not systematically lower their evaluations of the target party. This is visible from the top-three marker where the whisker crosses the vertical line. However, adding a party's negative message to this information about a negative policy development has the largest impact on the target's issue ownership, and the extra effect of receiving the cocktail with a negative message is statistically significant as revealed by the bottom-second marker.[7] This suggests that voters are persuaded by a sponsor's negative message to hold a target party accountable for a negative policy development.

In sum, the results indicate that negative messages are an important tool for a party that seeks to undermine a rival party's issue ownership in the eyes of the voters. Such messages seem to work mostly in concert with a negative policy development. Whereas an attack undermines a target party's issue ownership, the size of the effect should not be
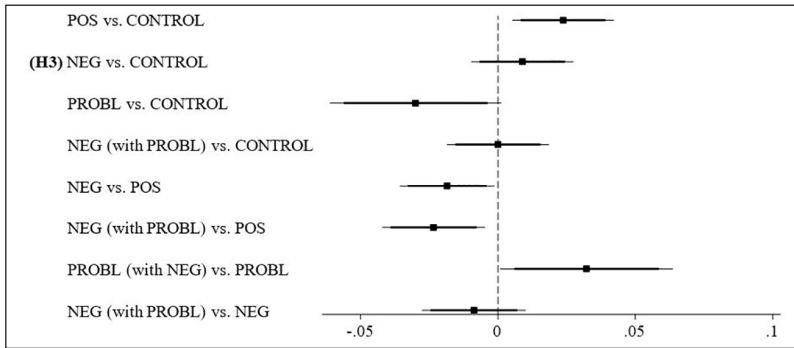
Figure 4. Evaluation of the Sponsor Party.
Figure 4 is based on Table A3 in the Online Appendix. The markers represent standard OLS regression coefficients that each estimates the difference in the mean-issue handling competence score for two groups of respondents. The whiskers give a 95% confidence interval. "POS" refers to positive campaigning, "NEG" refers to negative campaigning, and "PROBL" refers to information about real-world problems. The dependent variable is respondents' evaluations of the sponsor party's issue-handling competence.

exaggerated. The negative-message-negative-policy-development-cocktail decreases voters' evaluations of the target party with 5% points on the 0–1 scale. A 5% change probably rarely changes who owns the issue unequivocally. But if an issue ownership is closely divided between two parties, it can nevertheless make a difference in who has a stronger reputation on the issue and which party is on the way down on the issue. Yet, the more plausible interpretation is perhaps that this is a modest effect in most circumstances. This squares well with existing research, which shows that issue ownership in most cases belongs clearly to either left parties or right parties and is fairly stable over time (Seeberg, 2017). That said, it is worth remembering though, that we study only the one-off effect in an experiment and not the repeated multi-channel communication of a political party. Hence, we most likely underestimate the true effects.

A key follow-up question is if the sponsor is able to make supporters of the target party lower their issue ownership evaluation of the target party. Much work on partisanship and motivated reasoning (e.g. Bisgaard, 2015) suggests that this is unlikely, so this would really be a sign that a negative message has power. Importantly, Figure 3 suggests that a sponsor's negative message does not only speak to supporters of the sponsor, but reaches also the supporters of the target party (those that indicate that they will vote for the target party if an election took place tomorrow). The gray markers indicate target party supporters' evaluations of the target party. These are as far to the left of the vertical line as the black markers (for all respondents) if not a little further. Hence, the main take away from Figure 3 is the large degree of overlap of the gray and black markers, which suggests that a negative message hits the heart of the target party.

Finally, the results do not show backlash effects and therefore lend support to H3. Whereas information just about a negative policy development undermines the sponsor's issue ownership, negative messaging improves more than depresses voters' evaluations of the sponsor as indicated by the right-of-center top-second marker in Figure 4. Yet, the improvement is not statistically significant. Unsurprisingly, a positive message provides more immediate reasons for voters to improve their evaluations of the sponsor, and the top-maker is further to the right than the top-second marker on a negative message. Interestingly, it seems that the sponsor is able to make the information about the negative

policy development a concern for the target party more than the sponsor and the information about a negative policy development no longer has a negative effect on the sponsor party when accompanied by the sponsor party's negative message.

These results do not change substantively when controlling for a host of confounders (Tables A12 and A13 in the Online Appendix), when excluding one issue from the experiments at a time (see Tables A4–A11 in the Online Appendix), or when testing the hypotheses in one country at a time (Tables A14–A21 in the Online Appendix). Hence, our results do not hinge on any one particular issue in our experiments, but apply across our test cases. Across six issues in Denmark, Australia, and the US, the results suggest that a party can use negative campaigning—in particular in conjunction with a negative policy development—to undermine a rival party's issue ownership. Based on recent research (Stubager, 2018: 357–358), we would expect to also see an effect if we analyzed associative issue ownership rather than competence issue ownership. This is particularly the case because this study is concerned with the impact of blame and criticism and not party positions or voters' positional agreement with the parties (Lefevere et al., 2017: 125). Yet, research on associative issue ownership indicates that this version is more stable and therefore harder to change (Tresch et al., 2013). Hence, the impact might be somewhat weaker.

Conclusion

This study of six issues in Denmark, Australia, and the US is among the first to analyze how a party can undermine a rival party's issue ownership. The study indicates, in accordance with our expectations, that a party can use negative messages to undermine a rival party's issue ownership. While this remains just an experiment in which voters are exposed to a carefully crafted message by a party without any debate or counter-arguments from the rival party like in many situations in actual politics, and respondents are asked to assess the parties immediately after the message, it is noteworthy that a party can change voters' evaluations of the rival party through a quite short and simple one-off negative message and even on salient issues on which voters probably already have a fair amount of information. We even see an impact on the issues of rural development and agricultural reform, which featured prominently in Danish politics when the survey was collected. Yet, in an actual political setting, the negative message from the sponsor toward the target party most likely triggers a defense message from the target party or even a counter-attack, and the experiment may therefore exaggerate the actual effect of the initial message. At the same time though, in an actual political setting, the sponsor will most likely not just throw a negative message once but persistently repeat its message through multiple channels of communication during its election campaign which suggests that the experiment underestimates the effect. Hence, even if the experiment revealed only a limited effect of negative campaigning, it might still be electorally consequential in close elections if the negative campaigning concerns highly salient issues.

As the experiment is carried out in the very different settings of Denmark, Australia, and the US, it suggests that the same mechanism might operate in many other political systems as well. Moreover, the analysis does not suggest that the results only apply to certain types of issues, as the study provides evidence on issues on which the target party traditionally holds and does not hold issue ownership as well as on issues on which no party clearly has issue ownership.

As our analysis mainly focused on mainstream parties on the center-left and center-right, an important topic for future research is to what extent negative messages are equally useful for a mainstream party to attack a niche party and vice versa. Since niche parties such as environmental or far-right parties mainly have issue ownership on one particular issue, we anticipate that the theoretical model might need to be developed in order to take such variation into account. Furthermore, more aggressive campaigns have been shown to be particularly likely for more "niche" or "extreme" parties (Nai, 2018). Hence, voters may only respond to the party communication on issues on which the niche party actually has a reputation to be attacked.

Our result is significant to issue ownership research for several important reasons. Contrary to previous issue ownership research on the impact of party communication (Egan, 2013; Tresch et al., 2013; Walgrave et al., 2009), our analysis reveals that there are several communication paths to follow when aiming at a rival party's issue ownership, namely, negative and positive messages. Moreover, our analysis adds important external validity to previous experimental work on the drivers of issue ownership (Tresch et al., 2013; Walgrave et al., 2009) by locating the hypothesis testing in a real-world setting using stimuli material reflecting actual statements and true graphs for the information about the policy development. Even with limited clinical control settings, we find an effect. Hence, our study boosts emerging evidence that parties can undermine a rival party's issue ownership through communication. Bridging previously separate literatures on negative campaigning and issue ownership therefore offers a fertile ground to advance our understanding of the mass-elite linkage.

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Supplementary Information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.
Contents

Notes

1. Studies of backlash effects of negative campaigning in a multiparty context outside the US either report mixed or conditional findings (Morisi, 2018), or find an effect (see, e.g. Pattie et al. 2011). Yet, since Pattie et al. (2011) do not distinguish issue-based attacks from person-based attacks, it is hard to draw any implications for our study.
2. The control groups in the Danish and US (I) studies indicate issue ownership in the samples. On health in the US, the Democrats are as expected rated higher than the Republicans (.57 vs .26). On immigration in the US, Democrats are surprisingly rated higher than Republicans (.53 vs .35). This counters previous research and probably reflects that Liberals are over-represented in the US (I) survey (see Table A14 in the Online Appendix). On unemployment in Denmark, Social democrats are as expected rated higher than the Liberals (.42 vs .34). On agriculture in Denmark, Social democrats are surprisingly rated higher than the Liberals (.46 vs .37). The explanation might be that the agricultural reform, adopted 6 months before the survey, received a lot of criticisms from experts and opposition parties. On rural development in Denmark, Social democrats are rated equal to the Liberals as expected (.40 vs .42).
3. Twenty-four respondents were excluded because of non-compliance. The median time spent on the survey is 9 minutes.
4. The median time spent on the survey is 5 minutes. The completion rate is 93%.
5. The full information material, data set, and report can be downloaded from the Electoral Integrity Project website, at https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/the-australian-voter-experience/.
6. This result holds for the US (I) experiment and the Danish experiment, but not the Australian experiment (see Tables A19 in the Online Appendix).
7. This result is mainly driven by the US (I) experiment and not the Australian experiment (see Tables A20 in the Online Appendix).

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