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**Fifty Years of Negativity:**  
An Assessment of Negative Campaigning in Swedish  
Parliamentary Election Campaigns 1956-2006

**Gustav Gidenstam,**  
MSc in Politics and Communication

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**The Author can be contacted at: [gustavgidenstam@gmail.com](mailto:gustavgidenstam@gmail.com).**

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# **Fifty Years of Negativity: An Assessment of Negative Campaigning in Swedish Parliamentary Election Campaigns 1956-2006**

**Gustav Gidenstam**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study is to advance the literature on negative campaigning by analyzing how the Swedish political parties have made use of negative campaigning in parliamentary election campaigns from 1956 to 2006. The main hypotheses tested, using a multi-method approach combining quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis, concern the assumption that processes of modernization and mediatization has lead to an increase in negativity and personal attacks. The key findings are: First, contrary to popular belief, there is no support for the claim that negative campaigning has been on the rise in Sweden; nor have trait attacks become more common. Instead, substantial temporal variability in the levels of negative campaigning is detected, and recent elections are conversely associated with the lowest levels of negative campaigning. Second, it is evident that negative campaigning differs across communications channels, with substantially higher levels in election debates than in election manifestos. It is also found that left-wing parties, across both communication channels, are those engaging most in negative campaigning, while support for higher negativity among oppositional parties is only found in campaign manifestos. Third, when comparing the election debates in 1982 and 2002, both continuities and changes are identified. It is suggested that contextual factors (including the personalities of individual candidates and the issues on the agenda) as well as certain aspects of mediatization (such as the altered role of the journalist) and the professionalization of political parties might all be part of the explanation for the different levels of negative campaigning found in 1982 and in 2002.

## INTRODUCTION

Election day is often described as a celebration of democracy, yet without being preceded by election campaigns, where political alternatives are clearly presented to the voters, the democratic importance of the day diminishes (Strömbäck, 2013). During these campaigns, when political communication reaches its climax, the main goal for political parties is to convince the electorate that their alternative is preferable to all others and to maximize their number of votes (Benoit, 1999: 500; Esser and Strömbäck, 2012; Fridkin and Kenney, 2012). It is assumed that candidates try to achieve this by rational decision-making (Damore, 2002: 670; Riker, 1996); parties and candidates consequently face the decision of whether to attract voters by emphasizing their own merits or by highlighting the perceived weaknesses of their opponents – a decision theoretically interpreted as a choice between positive and negative campaigning. All election campaigns are comprised of a combination of both positive and negative appeals (Lau and Rovner, 2009: 186), but negative campaigning is a concept that has attracted substantial scholarly attention, especially in the American academic literature.

Negativity has a long tradition of being closely associated with political rhetoric (Coole, 2000). Discussions about its existence can be traced back to 350BC and the writings of Aristotle (Elmelund-Præstekær and Mølgaard Svensson, 2011), and scholars have concluded that negative campaigning has always been an inherent part of American democratic discourse (Mark, 2009; Swint, 2006). However, during the last few decades, researchers and pundits have increasingly focused their attention on the proposed increase in, and democratic destructiveness of, negative campaigning (Benoit, 1999; Brooks, 2006; Fridkin and Kenney, 2012; Geer, 2012, 2006; Kaid and Johnston, 2001). Until recently, the American bias has been overwhelming, but a small and growing number of studies have started to investigate negative campaigning in the European multiparty context as their focus (see, for example, Holtz-Bacha, 2001; Walter and van der Brug, 2013; Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010; Walter, 2014, 2013). Research on negativity in the Scandinavian countries has been essentially non-existent (Hansen and Pedersen, 2008: 408), but in the last few years, studies have been devoted to the case of Denmark (Elmelund-Præstekær and Mølgaard Svensson, 2014; Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011a, 2010). Research mentioning negative campaigning in Sweden, on the other hand, can be primarily found in broader studies (Bjerling, 2007; Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2002; Håkansson, 1999; Vigsø, 2004). Surprisingly few studies have focused on how Swedish election campaign communication has evolved (Brandorf, *et al.*, 1996: 2), even though Sweden has, like most Western democracies, gone through major

transformations in terms of how citizens relate to party politics (Dalton, 2004, 2004; Norris, 2011, 1999), what role the media plays in society (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008) and how parties organize their campaign organizations (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Nord, 2009; Norris, 2000). These developments are all likely to affect election campaign communication in general, and the use of negative campaigning in particular.

This is why this study will supplement and develop the election campaigning literature by targeting the extent to which the use of negative campaigning has changed in contemporary Swedish parliamentary election campaigns by using a combination of quantitative content analysis (on the election debates and election manifestos from 1956 to 2006) and qualitative thematic analysis (on the election debates from 1982 and 2002). Sweden is a particularly interesting case when studying negative campaigning considering that the majority of theories are derived from America. As recognized by Granberg and Holmberg (1988: 3): 'Among the western democracies, Sweden and the United States are about as different as any two political systems.' However, pundits and experts have started to raise questions about the political parties' use of, and the possible increase in, negative campaigning in Swedish election campaigns (see, for example, Brandel, 2010; Röstlund, 2014; Strömbäck, 2010; Sunesson, 2010). The aim of this study is thus to, first, further the knowledge about negative campaigning in Sweden. Such a study is scientifically relevant, since it is crucial to understand the politically transformative processes associated with mediatization and modernization, and it is societally relevant, since the results are of interest to journalists, pundits and citizens, who often voice preconceived ideas about the increase in negativity (Hansen and Pedersen, 2008). Second, it is also relevant to expand the negative campaigning literature in non-American contexts in order to test some of the hypotheses about negative campaigning that have been claimed to be universally applicable.

This study proceeds in four chapters. Chapter two provides the theoretical framework for this study, including a discussion on definitions of negative campaigning before stating the hypotheses to be tested in the analysis. Chapter three, on research design, presents the methodological and empirical considerations, including the operationalizations of the key concepts. Chapter four, the analysis chapter, first presents descriptive statistics on the temporal trends in negative campaigning as well as the results from binary logistic regression analyses. Thereafter, using qualitative thematic analysis, the 1982 election debate, notable for the highest level of negative campaigning, is compared to the 2002 election debate, conversely distinguished by the lowest level of negative campaigning, in order to further examine the different contextual factors affecting the level of negativity. Finally, some concluding remarks are provided together with suggestions for further research.

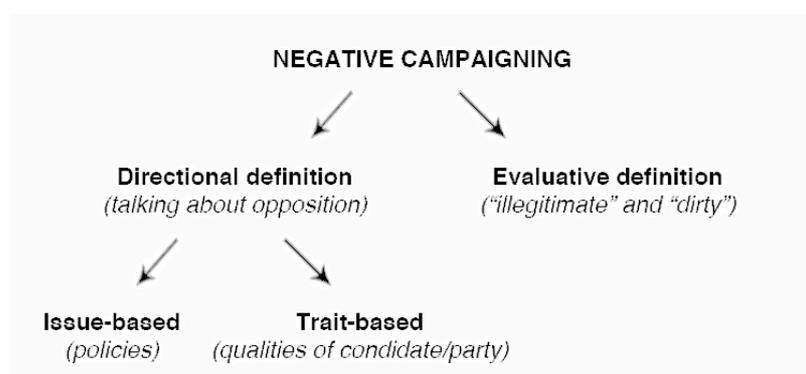
## NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING IN A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This chapter provides the theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis. The structure will be as follows: First, the ambiguities over how to define negative campaigning are discussed before specifying the definition used in this study. Second, the negative campaigning literature is briefly discussed, focusing on why Sweden is a particularly interesting case. Third, the hypotheses tested in the analysis are presented, before the chapter concludes with a summary of the aim of this study.

### What is negative campaigning?

Negative campaigning is a concept used in many different spheres by journalists, pundits, politicians and voters, although no consensus exists regarding a definition of the term (Walter, 2013). The majority of academic research complies with a directional definition, where negative campaigning is seen as any criticism directed at an opponent, or in other words, communication that ‘attacks the other candidate personally, the issues for which the other candidate stands, or the party of the other candidate’ (Surlin and Gordon, 1977: 93). In this view, negative campaigning is interpreted as the opposite of positive campaigning, which instead is understood as when a candidate promotes the qualities, records or policies of their own party (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010). Furthermore, within the directional definition, it is common to distinguish between issue-based and trait-based attacks. The former refers to

**Figure 1: Classification of Definitions of Negative Campaigning**



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*Source:* Classification modeled from Lau and Pomper (2004), Lau and Rovner (2009), Walter and Vliegenthart (2010) and Walter (2013).

*Note:* For a classification of how negative campaigning has been operationalized in empirical studies, refer to Lau, Sigelman and Rovner (2007).

criticism targeting the policies of the opposing candidate or parties, whereas the latter focuses on the character of the opponent or the opponent's party. The directional definition, therefore, does not include any qualitative assessment of whether the criticism is legitimate or fair, only that it is campaign communication directed at the rival (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010; Walter, 2013).

The second definition of negative campaigning, applied by a limited number of scholars, is the evaluative, or normative, definition, where negative campaigning is seen as synonymous with illegitimate and dirty politics (Ansolabehere, *et al.*, 1994; Jamieson, 1992). This qualitative interpretation thus finds more resemblance with the use of the term in popular discourse, where it has been recognized that, generally, negative campaigning is assumed to be 'unfair, dishonest, irrelevant, or manipulating' (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010: 442). See Figure 1 for an overview of different definitions.

However, there are clear advantages to using the directional definition in academic research. Importantly, it has been recognized that negative and positive campaigning should not be interpreted as 'good' and 'bad' campaigning practices, since positive campaigning can also bend the truth (Jamieson, *et al.*, 2000). The directional definition, therefore, avoids many of the difficulties that are associated with how to interpret and operationalize the evaluative definition of negative campaigning (Walter, 2013): what one party considers illegitimate might, quite naturally, be considered legitimate by another. It therefore assures higher reliability compared to the evaluative definition. Conversely, a limitation of the directional definition is that it fails to incorporate qualitative differences in negativity since no distinction is made between legitimate critique and vicious lies (Ridout and Franz, 2008: 159). Hence, some have argued that the directional definition of negative campaigning is too broad and fails to reflect how voters interpret negativity, and that it needs an additional dimension, namely 'incivility' (Brooks and Geer, 2007; Mutz and Reeves, 2005).

Owing to definitional ambiguities and unstipulated conceptualizations of negative campaigning, the aggregated body of research has often failed to be cumulative, since scholars often refer to different concepts of negative campaigning (Brooks, 2006; Richardson, 2001; Sigelman and Kugler, 2003). However, the definition applied in this study, unless otherwise stated, will be restricted to the academically more reliable directional definition, where negative campaigning refers to any criticism directed at the opponent.

## **Negative Campaigning in a Comparative Perspective**

Politicians tend to take credit for everything that is considered positive, and attempt to avoid taking the blame for all that is bad, instead accusing the opposition for being the ones responsible (Hood, 2010; Weaver, 1986). However, the decision to go positive or negative is theoretically interpreted as based upon two distinctive cost-benefit calculations. Positive campaigning, on the one hand, can provide a possibility for candidates and parties to explain their own policies to undecided voters (Skaperdas and Grofman, 1995: 50). It is also associated with the risk of not being able to communicate these policies in an appealing manner (Damore, 2002: 671). Negative campaigning, on the other hand, can reduce the support for the opponents and potentially increase the support for the initiator of the attack (Skaperdas and Grofman, 1995: 50). People also tend to have stronger emotional responses to negative messages than to positive ones, thus making negative statements more memorable (Lau, 1985). Furthermore, negative campaigning can ‘provide leverage over campaign agendas’ (Damore, 2002: 671; see also McCombs and Shaw, 1972). However, there are also important drawbacks to the decision to go negative. First of all, criticizing the opposition does not automatically increase the support for the party or candidate initiating the attack. Instead, people might distance themselves from politics if candidates are engaging in too much conflict (Ansolabehere, *et al.*, 1994; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997), and journalists and pundits can even decide to decry an offensive and antagonizing campaign (Damore, 2002: 671).

Furthermore, the cost-benefit calculation for negative campaigning is somewhat different in a multiparty setting, compared with a two-party one. First, attackers must remember ‘the shadow of the future’ (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010: 139). Since single majority governments are rare in multiparty systems, parties must keep in mind that they might have to form a coalition government after the election, and an aggressive campaign may make that harder (Walter, 2014: 312–313; Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2006). Second, negative campaigning might also be less efficient since weakening the opponent is not automatically positive for the initiator of the attack. The benefit might instead be gained by another party (Hansen and Pedersen, 2008; Walter, 2014). These are possible explanations for why comparative studies have found the level of negative campaigning lower in the European context than in the United States (Hansen and Pedersen, 2008; Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2006; Walter, 2013).

However, even though the number of studies devoted to negative campaigning outside the United States has grown in recent years, the American bias ‘has led to a one-sided development of the theory’ (Walter, 2013: 2). Seen from an international political campaigning perspective, the United States is not a typical case (Plasser and Plasser, 2002;

Swanson and Mancini, 1996) and more attention should thus be devoted to negative campaigning in a multiparty context, since political institutions affect ‘political parties’ use of the strategy’ (Walter, 2013: 2).

Sweden is a particularly interesting case when studying negative campaigning, since both the political system and the media system are significantly different from those in the United States (Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; Hallin and Mancini, 2004). For example, the United States has a federal and presidential system and two major political parties, whereas Sweden is a unitary state with a parliamentary system and, currently, eight political parties represented in the national parliament. Furthermore, the United States has a candidate-centred first-past-the-post electoral system, whereas Sweden has a proportional, party-centred electoral system (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006: 132). Hallin and Mancini (2004) classify the Swedish media system as a prototypical example of the ‘democratic corporatist model’, implying that, historically, the media has been closely tied to the state and political actors. The United States, on the other hand, is considered a prototypical example of the ‘liberal model’ characterized by an independent, highly commercial media driven by market mechanisms. However, according to Hallin and Mancini (2004), these models have become less distinguishable in recent decades, since the features from the liberal model have become more global because of globalization, secularization and modernization. Yet it is reasonable to assume that negative campaigning is more common in a political system characterized by two polarizing political candidates and an independent media, rather than a multiparty system where the media is under strong influence of the political actors.

Nevertheless, negative campaigning has not attracted a lot of academic interest in the Swedish context, even though some notable exceptions exist (Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2002; Håkansson, 1999; Strömbäck, *et al.*, 2009). One reason for this might be that Swedish election campaigns are associated with journalist-driven media rather than political advertising (Grusell and Nord, 2010; Johansson and Grusell, 2013), and political ads have often been linked to negative campaigning (Freedman and Goldstein, 1999). However, it is clear that negative campaigning is something that is of concern to Swedish voters. Since the 1960s, a considerable part of the Swedish electorate (between 40 and 60 per cent) considers politicians to engage in too much ‘party squabble’ (Oscarsson and Holmberg, 2011: 15). Previous studies have also found that negative campaigning is a common strategy in Swedish election campaigns (Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2002; Håkansson, 1999; Strömbäck, *et al.*, 2009). Still, we know relatively little about how the Swedish political debate has developed over the years (Brandorf, *et al.*, 1996: 2; Elmelund-Præstekær and Mølgaard Svensson, 2014), and especially in recent elections.

### **Transformation of Election Campaigns: A Rise in Negativity?**

There are reasons to believe that the extent to which negative campaigning is used by the political parties in Sweden might have changed during the last decades. Many scholars have suggested that election campaigning in Western democracies is going through a process of modernization (Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001; Esser and Strömbäck, 2012; Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Negrine, 2008; Norris, 2000; Swanson and Mancini, 1996). This can be seen in a broad transformation of society (Inglehart, 1997; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Norris, 1999), where citizens are reformulating their relationship to the political parties, reflected by lower levels of traditional political involvement (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011, 1999). This modernization process is also linked to a simultaneous commercialization and explosive expansion of the media, which can also lead to a ‘mediatization of politics’ (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008) where the political spheres, and its ‘political logic’, is ‘colonized’ by a new ‘media logic’ (Meyer and Hinchman, 2002). These transformations have led to a rapid modernization of election campaigns, implying increasing professionalization, or scientification, of election campaigning techniques (Norris, 2001; Plasser and Plasser, 2002). Sometimes this process is described as an Americanization (Bowler and Farrell, 2000; Hallin and Mancini, 2004), where political parties ‘take cues from their counterparts in the United States’ (Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 4), since America is considered the world leader in modern campaigning techniques (Scammell, 1998).

There is a common understanding that negative campaigning has increased in the United States in recent years (Benoit, 1999; Geer, 2012, 2006; Kaid and Johnston, 2001), even though this has been questioned by some scholars (Buell and Sigelman, 2008; Lau and Pomper, 2004). Still, practically ‘everyone agrees that the amount of negative campaigning in contemporary campaigns [in the United States] is extensive’ (Fridkin and Kenney, 2004: 174). When European parties professionalize, they are expected to adopt American practices and advice from political consultants (Bowler and Farrell, 2000), leading to a rise in negativity. Furthermore, negative campaigning is by its very nature conflictual and, therefore, much more likely to get attention in the news than positive campaigning, since it appeals to reporters and editors driven by a media logic (Pedersen, 2011; Ridout and Smith, 2008). Negativity is thus also expected to rise when politics becomes increasingly mediatized.

During the last decades, ‘the political communication system in Sweden and the patterns of interaction between political actors, the media and the citizenry have changed considerably’ (Strömbäck and Nord, 2008: 103). The political parties have become more professionalized (Åsard, 1989; Asp and Esaiasson, 1996; Nord, 2009, 2007, 2006, 2001) and the media has grown in importance (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2012; Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006).

Sweden has also followed the general Western democratic trajectory of reduced party affiliations among citizens (Nord, 2007; Oscarsson and Holmberg, 2008; Weibull, *et al.*, 2012). As a result, election campaigns are likely to have grown in importance since they can affect voters who remain undecided until right before election day (Pettersson, *et al.*, 2006; Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2002). Hence, parties have become more inclined to run offensive campaigns, which are often associated with higher negativity (Walter, 2013; Mair, *et al.*, 2004). These transformations all suggest that negative campaigning might have increased.

However, recent studies in the European context (Elmelund-Præstekær and Mølgaard Svensson, 2011; Holtz-Bacha, 2001; Walter, 2013) and older studies in Sweden (Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2002; Håkansson, 1999) have not found evidence for the suggested increase in negative campaigning. Instead, certain contextual features have been proposed as possible explanations for temporal variability in negative campaigning. These include, for example, the issues debated, the role of journalists and the character of individual politicians (Elmelund-Præstekær and Mølgaard Svensson, 2014; Håkansson, 1999). Yet owing to the political and media transformations discussed above, it is still crucial to test the following hypothesis:

*H1: Negativity hypothesis. The level of negative campaigning has increased in Sweden.*

Another process associated with the mediatization of politics and the decline of party affiliations in Western Europe, is the personalization, or ‘presidentialization’, of politics (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2006; Mughan, 2000). In the conventional view of a parliamentary election, the personalities of the candidates are ‘totally irrelevant in situations where party systems have been shaped by deep and historically rooted antagonisms that all but monopolize the battle for public office’ (Mughan, 2000: 1). However, when these historical cleavages are reformulated, coupled with the ongoing mediatization, there is ‘heightened focus on individual politicians and a diminished focus on parties, organisations and institutions’ (Walter, 2013: 5). The two-party system in the United States has fostered a candidate-focused campaign culture with high levels of trait attacks – in other words, negative campaigning that is directed at the character of the candidate or the party, rather than the political policies (Walter, 2013). The personalization is also recognized as one of the features of the global modernization, or Americanization, of campaign techniques (Esser and Strömbäck, 2012; Swanson and Mancini, 1996). The same transformations that propose that the level of negativity in Swedish elections would increase also suggest that the level of trait attacks is likely to rise. Even though Sweden is characterized by a party-centred political discourse, previous studies on personalization and presidentialization of politics in Sweden have found that the personalities of the candidates have grown in importance (Aylott, 2005;

Nord, 2001; Sundström, 2009), while some studies have provided mixed results (Bjerling, 2012). The second hypothesis is therefore:

*H2: Personalization hypothesis. The level of trait attacks has increased in Sweden.*

### **Determinants of Negative Campaigning**

The two hypotheses (H1 and H2) presented in the previous section are the main hypotheses that will be tested when analyzing the longitudinal changes in negative campaigning in Sweden. However, the previous research on negativity has found a number of determinants of negative campaigning – that is, hypotheses about when candidates tend to go negative (Peterson and Djupe, 2005; Skaperdas and Grofman, 1995). Hypotheses three to five (H3-H5) will be included in order to better understand the dynamics of negative campaigning in Sweden.

Many studies of negative campaigning have assumed that the level of negativity is similar in different channels of communication (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010: 143). However, political actors have different goals when communicating in different channels of communication (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011b). Some channels might serve the purpose of presenting the party's own platform (election manifestos), while others might be better for interactions with other candidates and parties (election debates) (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010: 143). Negativity should therefore be higher in channels where politicians exercise little control over the message, and when there is a debate format (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010), even though previous studies suggest that one can expect correlation in negativity between political parties' communication channels (Ridout and Franz, 2008). Hypothesis three is therefore:

*H3: Communication channel hypothesis. The level of negativity is higher in channels with a debate format (e.g. election debates) than in channels with a non-debate format (e.g. election manifestos).*

One of the most well-established findings in negative campaigning research is that oppositional candidates are more negative than incumbent candidates (Kahn and Kenney, 1999; Lau and Pomper, 2001). Incumbents often talk about their own performance during the recent term, while challengers are forced to talk about 'future deeds and promises' or to 'criticize the incumbent's record' (Hansen and Pedersen, 2008: 411). Some scholars even claim that the opposition must be critical, since the deliberative process requires the contender to describe 'the flaws and shortcomings of current policies' (Mayer, 1996: 441) and to convince the electorate why a transfer of power is necessary (Dahl, 1989; Geer, 2006; Holtz-Bacha and Mazzoleni, 2004). The fourth hypothesis is consequently:

*H4: Incumbency hypothesis. Parties in opposition use negative campaigning to a greater extent than do parties in government.*

The final hypothesis that will be included in this study suggests that ‘the more ideologically extreme a party is, the more it disagrees with other parties on political issues’ (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010: 142). The reason for this is that a party further out on the ideological spectrum is assumed to disagree with a greater number of policies than would a party positioned in the middle of the same spectrum. Some extreme parties might even consider themselves an antithesis to the established parties (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010: 142). The fifth hypothesis is thus:

*H5: Ideology hypothesis. Parties on the left- and the right-wing fringes are more negative than parties in the centre of the traditional left/right dimension.*

### **Aim of Study and Research Question**

The negative campaigning literature has primarily focused on campaigning in the United States, and the goal of this study is thus, in part, to develop the literature on negative campaigning by providing one of the first longitudinal studies of negative campaigning in Sweden. This study is relevant since, in recent years, pundits, journalists and citizens have voiced concern about negative campaigning in Sweden (see, for example, Brandel, 2010; Röstlund, 2014; Strömbäck, 2010; Sunesson, 2010). It is also imperative to test the hypotheses of the determinants of negative campaigning in a new setting, since these hypotheses have been claimed to be universally applicable to all democracies. The goal is therefore to, possibly, work against ‘the tendency implicitly to presume that political communication research findings from one society (normally one’s own) are applicable everywhere’ (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995: 75). The overarching research question that this study attempts to answer is therefore:

*RQ: To what extent has the use of negative campaigning changed in contemporary Swedish parliamentary election campaigns?*

In order to investigate this question, some particular aspects of change were chosen and presented as hypotheses during the course of this chapter (see summary in Table 1). The two main hypotheses concern the temporal change in political parties’ use of negative campaigning in Sweden and the possible rise of negativity and trait attacks. These hypotheses will be complemented by three hypotheses on the determinants of negative campaigning in the hope of providing further insight into the character of negative campaigning in Sweden.

**Table 1: Summary of Research Question and Hypotheses**

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**Research question:**

RQ: To what extent has the use of negative campaigning changed in contemporary Swedish parliamentary election campaigns?

**Main hypotheses:**

H1: Negativity hypothesis. The level of negative campaigning has increased in Sweden.

H2: Personalization hypothesis. The level of trait attacks has increased in Sweden.

**Secondary hypotheses:**

H3: Communication channel hypothesis. The level of negativity is higher in channels with a debate format (e.g. election debates) than in channels with a non-debate format (e.g. election manifestos).

H4: Incumbency hypothesis. Parties in opposition use negative campaigning to a greater extent than do parties in government.

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*Note:* All hypotheses have proven significant in the United States, and to some extent in the European context. H3 to H5 are not the only hypotheses about the determinants of negative campaigning, but drawing from existing research in Denmark (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010; Hansen and Pedersen, 2008) and the Netherlands (Walter and Vliegthart, 2010; Walter, 2013), these hypotheses were deemed the most important to test on the Swedish case. Data accessibility also influenced the hypotheses selection process.

## **Research Design**

This chapter presents the research design and the methodological considerations taken to answer the research question about the use of negative campaigning in Sweden. The analysis applies a multi-method approach, drawing on the strengths of both quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis. The structure of this chapter is as follows. First, both content and thematic analysis are described while providing reasons for why these are appropriate methods for this study. Second, the data selection and operationalizations are discussed, as well as the analytical tools applied to understand the data.

### **A Multi-Method Approach**

As with most research of political messages, this study will analyze quantitative data gathered through content analysis (Graber and Smith, 2005), which is ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from text (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use’ (Krippendorff, 2004: 18). It is recognized as a research method suited to descriptions and the systematic mapping of changes and trends (Hansen, *et al.*, 1998; Riffe, *et al.*, 2005). It is therefore an appropriate methodology when trying to describe the character of, and the longitudinal change in, negative campaigning in Sweden.

Specifically, content analysis has at least three strengths that make it suitable for this project. First of all, it allows for high degrees of reliability, thus making it easier to test previous results and allowing for cumulative research (Riffe, *et al.*, 2005: 26–28). Second, it is a method that is unobtrusive in its nature, preventing the researcher from confounding the data (Weber, 1990: 10) and third, it is a method that enables the analysis of a large body of text (Krippendorff, 2004: 13–15), in this case election campaign communication from 1956 to 2006. Conversely, content analysis is sometimes mistakenly described as an ‘objective’ research method (Berelson, 1952: 18), but content analysis is a technique with clear subjective elements since the researcher highlights certain aspects of the text (Hansen, *et al.*, 1998: 95). This is why all considerations should be based upon the theoretical framework. Another limitation with quantitative content analysis is that it cannot explain causation or tell what the counted frequencies actually mean. Instead, it is the researcher who has to re-assemble the quantified features of the texts and to interpret their implications (Hansen, *et al.*, 1998: 98).

This project was initially piloted using content analysis on campaign news coverage in Swedish newspapers, used as a proxy for overall campaign tone. The conclusion from this pilot study was that content analysis was indeed an appropriate research method for

analyzing trends in negative campaigning, even though the choice to only study campaign coverage instead of other channels of communication could be seen as a limitation, since the information in these articles was filtered by journalists (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010), thus lowering the validity of the results. Campaign coverage is, indeed, an important level of political communication, especially in mediated democracies such as Sweden, where most people get their campaign information from the media (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2012; Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008). However, this study will instead base the analysis upon data gathered through the use of content analysis within the Party Influence on Public Opinion (POP) project, administered by the primary researchers Esaiasson and Håkansson (2009). This dataset allows for the systematic analysis of all campaign manifestos (1902-2006) and broadcasted election debates (1932-2006), which would otherwise be impossible within the limits of this project. However, in order to empirically ground the ideology hypothesis, the time frame will be limited to 1956 to 2006.<sup>1</sup>

A second conclusion in the pilot study was that the analysis would, ideally, be supplemented by a qualitative research method in order to overcome some of the limitations of content analysis, such as only providing the ‘big picture’ (Deacon, *et al.*, 2007: 119), and to be able to get a deeper understanding of the texts (see, for example, Bauer, *et al.*, 2000; Brannen, 2008). This study will therefore adopt a multi-method approach, to be able to also draw on the strengths of thematic analysis, recognizing that a ‘qualitative study can be used to help explain the factors underlying the broad relationships that are established’ in the quantitative research (Bryman, 2008: 61).

Thematic analysis is recognized as ‘a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 78). It moves beyond the counting of words in content analysis (Guest, *et al.*, 2012: 10) and can be both inductive and deductive (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2008). It involves the analysis of classifications or ‘themes’ (Alhojailan, 2012: 10), which are ‘in the data which the researcher has identified as important to his or her interpretation’ (King, 2004: 257). The major strength of thematic analysis that it is flexible and allows for a deep reading of data, including both explicit and implicit meanings (Namey, *et al.*, 2007: 137). Although some have claimed it lacks academic rigour, since there are few guidelines on how to undertake thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 97), thematic analysis serves as an appropriate methodology in this

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<sup>1</sup> The classification of Swedish parties into left, right, and centre parties was based on the Comparative Manifesto Project, 1956-2006 (Volkens, *et al.*, 2013). The election years 1948 and 1952 were excluded from the analysis and the data for the 2010 election has not yet been released.

study, since it will, primarily, be used to provide a further understanding of the results from the quantitative data analysis.

Alternative approaches for this project could have been to use visual analysis of campaign posters (would create overlap with Håkansson, Johansson and Vigsø, forthcoming; Johansson, forthcoming) and televised political ads (these are still rare in Sweden), surveys distributed to politicians and campaign workers (who would probably downplay their use of negative campaigning since it can be looked down upon) or interviews with citizens on how they perceive the parties' campaign communication (which would be problematic since negativity is often over exaggerated). However, a systematic analysis of election news coverage, ideally from 1956 to 2006, would have been ideal to get a better understanding of negative campaigning in a mediated democracy. Yet it is reasonable to assume that a large proportion of Swedes are watching election debates and that the level of negativity in these debates is also reflected in the election news coverage (Ridout and Franz, 2008).

### **Methodological and Empirical Considerations**

The quantitative analysis is used to assess negative campaigning in election campaign communication by the Swedish parties represented in the national parliament in 17 national elections between 1956 and 2006.<sup>2</sup> The analysis only includes campaigns from first-order elections and not any second-order elections such as local or regional campaigns (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), since the parliamentary elections are treated as the elections where the most is at stake by the Swedish parties and voters (Johansson, 2006a).

The units of analysis are restricted to the main parties' election campaign manifestos, which, according to Anglo-Saxon tradition, is the starting point for next term, and televised closing election debates, which presents the party leaders with a final opportunity to address the voters before election day (Brandorf, *et al.*, 1996: 3–4).

The coding units will be the individual message statements or appeals (Brandorf, *et al.*, 1996: 4), where a new unit was recorded every time a new actor, new issue, new perspective or new evaluation was mentioned (Håkansson, 1999: 231). These are thus consistent with Krippendorff's recommendation to 'define units of description as the smallest units that bear the information needed in the analysis' (2004: 100). The units of particular interest for this

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<sup>2</sup> Parties represented in the Second Chamber (1956-1970) before the amendment to the Instrument of Government that reconstituted the Riksdag to a unicameral assembly.

study are statements tapping into the campaign tone; in other words, appeals that carry any reference to criticism delivered by a party or candidate (Walter and Vliegthart, 2010).

As in most previous research (see, for example, Walter, 2013: 9), negative campaigning is dichotomously measured (1 = negative, 0 = positive or neutral) as the number of negative appeals as part of the total number of appeals. This variable was operationalized by combining the variables *message level* (v7) and *reality valence* (v8); all statements carrying negative descriptions about other parties were coded as negative appeals (1), otherwise positive or neutral (0 – see Appendix for codebook). This coding was employed instead of a scale variable (see Kahn and Kenney, 1999), since the increased variation would result in lower reliability and lower validity when using the directional definition of negative campaigning.

Trait attacks were measured (1 = trait attack, 0 = issue or other statement) as the number of appeals targeted at the character of the individual candidate or the candidate's party as part of the total number of appeals. The variable was operationalized by combining the variables *actor valence* (v10) and *mentioned actor* (v9); all statements carrying negative valuations about parties or party leaders were coded as trait attacks (1), otherwise (0). To include a more refined measure, personal trait attacks was also measured using the number of trait attacks directed at individual politicians as part of the total number of appeals. The variable was operationalized in the same way as for trait attacks, yet only including negative valuations about individual party leaders (1), otherwise (0). These categories should thus be exhaustive, mutually exclusive and independent (Crowley and Delfico, 1996: 18). For more information on the POP dataset, refer to Brandorf, *et al.* (1996) or Håkansson (1999).

Without reliability, 'content analysis measures are useless' (Neuendorf, 2002: 141). However, the reliability measures for the Party Influence on Public Opinion (POP) project are not reported for each year, but the intra-coder reliability (calculated for 12 variables) for both manifestos and debates in 1994 ( $n=50$ ) were on average 95 per cent, and the inter-coder reliability (12 variables) for manifestos and debates 1948-1994 were on average 80 per cent (Håkansson, 1999: 66–67), which is acceptable (Lombard, *et al.*, 2002: 592; Riffe, *et al.*, 2005: 151). The reliability for individual variables are not presented, but Håkansson (1999: 67) mentions that the main variables used in this study, for example *sender* (v4), *reality valence* (v8) and *mentioned actor* (v9), are associated with the highest reliability in the dataset, thus above 80 per cent. Inter-coder reliability for selecting the unit of analysis is

unfortunately not reported. In total 26,942 appeals were included in the dataset: 14,457 appeals from election debates and 11,485 from election manifestos.<sup>3</sup>

The hypotheses presented in the theoretical chapter will be analyzed through a combination of descriptive statistics and binary logistic regression analysis (Agresti and Finlay, 2009), following a similar route as taken in Elmelund-Præstekær (2010).

The thematic analysis will be applied as a continuation of the quantitative analysis, namely by providing an in-depth analysis of two particular election debates in order to study the contextual factors that might be associated with the general trends in negative campaigning. The years 1982 and 2002 were selected because they stood out with significantly different levels of negativity, therefore providing interesting access points for understanding continuities and changes in the Swedish parties' use of negative campaigning. Election manifestos were not included in the thematic analysis owing to the limited variation in negativity found in the quantitative data.

The thematic analysis was conducted following the steps provided in Braun and Clarke (2006), yet since a primarily deductive approach was taken, the themes and codes were identified early on. In this study, the themes are, to a large extent, extracted from Benoit's theory of campaign discourse (see, for example, Benoit, 1999), and identified as when candidates are: i) attacking their opponents, ii) acclaiming themselves, iii) defending themselves when attacked, and iv) talking in general terms about the past, the present or the future (McKinney and Carlin, 2004: 217). Since this study investigates negative campaigning, the first theme is the most interesting for further analysis. The steps followed were: i) to familiarize and transcribe the data from the videos of the televised debates found online (Sveriges Television, 2002, 1982), ii) to search for the themes, and iii) analyze the specific themes and relate them to theories and previous research, before iv) producing the final report (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87).

## **Fifty Years of Swedish Negativity**

This chapter will present the results from the analysis of the use of negative campaigning in contemporary Swedish parliamentary election campaigns. The structure is as follows. First, the quantitative analysis of election debates and party manifestos from 1956 to 2006 will be

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<sup>3</sup> By year (debates/manifestos): 1956 (879/404); 1958 (725/279); 1960 (888/344); 1964 (1027/413); 1968 (802/659); 1970 (834/374); 1973 (689/375); 1976 (921/422); 1979 (1016/708); 1982 (779/546); 1985 (1241/601); 1988 (961/812); 1991 (1528/1014); 1994 (1159/851); 1998 (1157/1019); 2002 (311/1283); 2006 (540/1381).

presented, using descriptive statistics as well as binary logistic regression analysis. Second, the televised election debates from 1982 and 2002 are thereafter thematically analyzed to better understand continuities and changes in Swedish parties' use of negative campaigning.

### **Trends in Negative Campaigning in Sweden 1956-2006**

Negative campaigning is a considerable part of Swedish election campaign communication, even though positive campaigning seems to be the predominant rhetorical strategy. Studying Figure 2 reveals that the level of negative appeals, as a percentage of the total number of appeals, has varied between 11.3 per cent (2002) and 50.2 per cent (1982) in closing election debates, with an average of 34.2 per cent for the entire period between 1956 and 2006. The level of negativity in campaign manifestos, on the other hand, varied between 1.0 per cent (2006) and 20.1 per cent (1960), with an average of 5.9 per cent for the entire period. From these descriptive statistics, we can thus initially conclude that the negativity hypothesis (H1) is rejected since there is no evidence of an increase in negativity during the time of study. Instead, it appears that the level of negative campaigning in closing election debates, in fact, has decreased since the 1980s, and in particular when studying the elections in 2002 and 2006.

Additionally, the results from binary logistic regression models in Table 2 also support the rejection of the negativity hypothesis (H1). Instead, there is a statistically significant negative over-time trend for both closing election debates (model 1) and election manifestos (model 3), even though the more refined model for election debates (model 2) indicates that the findings are only statistically significant for the period 1998-2006, compared with 1956-1968.<sup>4</sup> It also becomes evident that ever since the elections between 1956 and 1968, the level of negativity has been lower in election manifestos (model 3). These findings are thus congruent with other studies in the European context (Elmelund-Præstekær and Mølgaard Svensson, 2011; Holtz-Bacha, 2001; Walter, 2013) and older studies in Sweden (Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2002; Håkansson, 1999) that have presented evidence of temporal volatility in the level of negativity, but no indication that the general level of negative campaigning has been increasing. The rise in negative campaigning thus seems to be a solely American phenomenon (Geer, 2012, 2006), even though it has caused academic discussions in the United States as well (Buell and Sigelman, 2008; Fridkin and Kenney, 2012; Lau and

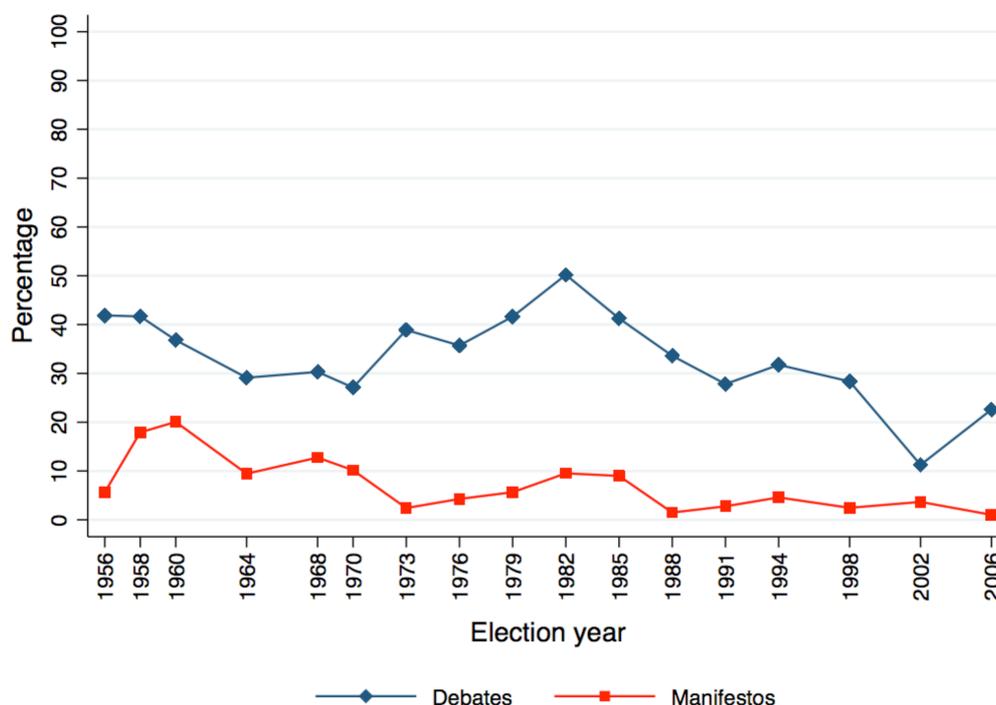
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<sup>4</sup> The odds of negative statements in the election debates in the period 1998-2006, compared to the debates in the period 1956-1968 while controlling for all explanatory variables, are multiplied by a factor of .619. In other words, it decreases by 38.1 per cent.

Pomper, 2004). Furthermore, the drastic downturn in negative campaigning notable for the 2002 election is also described by Vigsø in his study on election campaign posters: ‘One thing which was striking in the 2002 campaign was the absence of negative campaigning, which has been present in earlier elections and which has received much public criticism’ (2004: 221). On the contrary, election in 1982 has previously been recognized as an election characterized by a particularly polarizing and negative ideological debate (Esaiasson, 1990: 278–284). These two elections will be more closely analyzed in the following thematic analysis.

Moving to the personalization hypothesis (H2), which infers that the level of trait attacks would have increased in Sweden, Figure 3 indicates that trait attacks have been only a minor part of the total number of appeals presented in election manifestos, possibly except for 1958-1968 when the proportion was around or above 10 per cent. The level of trait attacks was lowest in 1998 (1.1 per cent) and highest in 1960 (16.3 per cent), with an average over the entire period of 4.4 per cent. Overall, trait attacks have been more common in closing

**Figure 2: Amount of Negative Campaigning in Election Campaigns 1956-2006**



*Source:* Original dataset Party Influence on Public Opinion (POP) 1956-2006 (Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2009). *Note:* Graphs show percentage of total number of appeals by year. Percentage is not weighted for party size; refer to Appendix for statistics on negative campaigning per party.  $N$  (debates) = 15,457,  $N$  (manifestos) = 11,799,  $N$  (total) = 27,256.

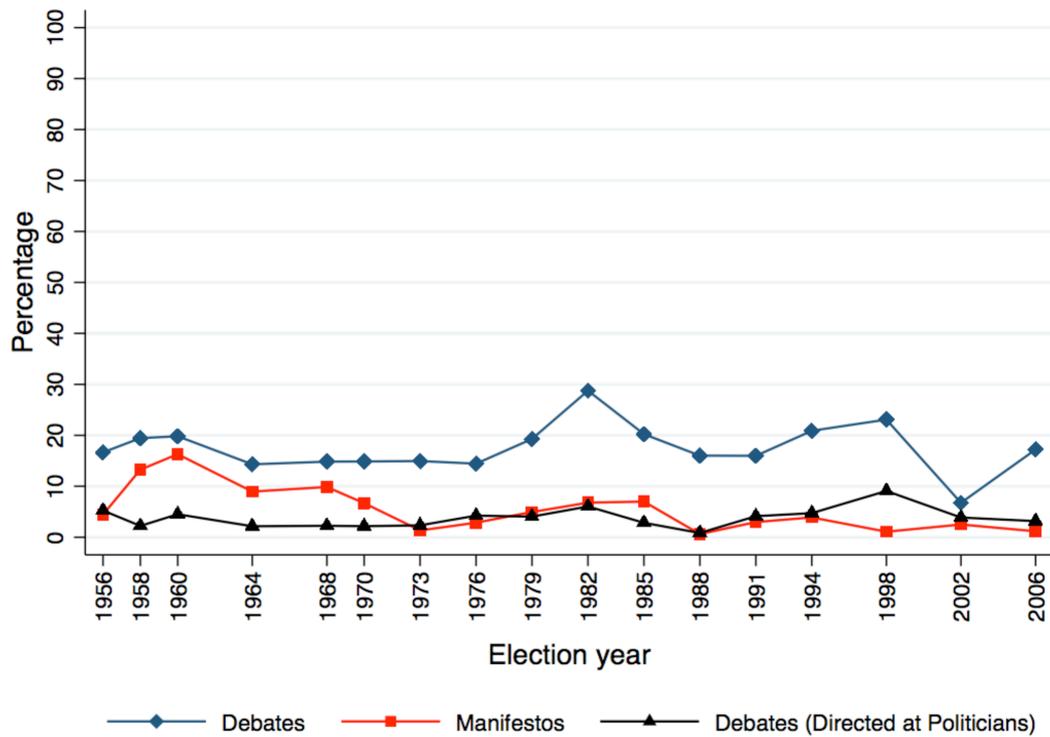
election debates. The average for the entire period was 18.0 per cent, and, once again, 1982 stands out as the year with the highest level of trait attacks (28.8 per cent) and 2002 as the year with the lowest level (6.8 per cent). The correlation (Pearson's  $r$ ) between negative campaigning and trait attacks among all election campaign statements, for the entire period of study, is 63.8 per cent, thus indicating that the variables are related but not inseparable. Figure 3 includes the proportion of trait attacks directed at individual politicians, which has been a stable but almost negligible feature of election debates (an average of 3.8 per cent), with a variation between 0.8 per cent (1988) and 9.1 per cent (1998). Trait attacks directed at specific politicians are virtually non-existent in campaign manifestos and therefore not included in the analysis.

These findings are supported by the results from the binary logistic regression models presented in Table 2, where the only significant result (on a 95-per cent level) is a small positive trend in terms of trait attacks directed at individual politicians in election debates.<sup>5</sup> However, this is probably a result of the comparatively high proportion of personal trait attacks in the 1998 election debate, which is the year that stands out from an otherwise surprisingly timeless absence of personal trait attacks. We can thus conclude by rejecting the personalization hypothesis (H2). *See Table 3 overleaf.*

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<sup>5</sup> The odds of personal trait attacks in the election debates, while controlling for all other explanatory variables, are multiplied by a factor of 1.013 for every one-year increase in the election year variable, thus offering an increase of 1.3 per cent. Going from one election to the next, if the term is 4 years, thus implies an increase in the odds by 5.3 per cent.

**Figure 3: Amount of Trait Attacks in Election Campaigns 1956-2006**



*Source:* Original dataset Party Influence on Public Opinion (POP) 1956-2006 (Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2009).

*Note:* Graphs show percentage of total number of appeals by year. Percentage is not weighted for party size; refer to Appendix for statistics on trait attacks per party.  $N$  (debates) = 15,457,  $N$  (manifestos) = 11,799,  $N$  (total) = 27,256.

**Table 2: Estimated Odds Ratios of Negative Appeals in Debates and Manifestos**

Independent variable:	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	Negative appeals		Negative appeals		Negative appeals		Negative appeals		Trait attacks (debates)	Trait attacks – politicians
Time (1956-2006)	.991** (.002)	–	.960*** (.008)	–	1.005 (.008)	–	1.013* (.006)	–		
Time (ref. 1956-1968)										
1970-1982	–	1.131 (.117)	–	.443** (.121)	–	–	–	–		
1985-1994	–	.919 (.002)	–	.270*** (.057)	–	–	–	–		
1998-2006	–	.619*** (.082)	–	.171*** (.074)	–	–	–	–		
Incumbency	1.104 (.127)	1.101 (.099)	.707 (.126)	.715* (.106)	1.038 (.126)	1.323 (.218)				
Ideology (ref. = center parties)										
Left wing	1.629** (.064)	1.603** (.277)	3.456* (1.770)	3.677* (1.936)	1.316** (.110)	1.228 (.175)				
Right wing	1.296 (.260)	1.274 (.267)	2.151 (1.036)	2.131 (1.108)	1.201 (.201)	.990 (.183)				
<i>N</i>	15457	15457	11485	11485	15457	15457				
Log pseudo likelihood	-9804.612	-9778.625	-2263.999	-2250.815	-7269.248	-2498.721				
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.013	.015	.084	.090	.003	.007				

Source: Original dataset Party Influence on Public Opinion (POP) 1956-2006 (Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2009), modified to include incumbency and ideology.

Note: Binary logistic regression models with cluster-robust (parties) standard errors in parentheses. Independent variable is negative campaigning (1 = negative; 0 = positive). Left-wing parties: the Left Party, the Social Democratic Party. Centre Parties: the Centre Party, the Green Party, the Liberal Party. Right-wing parties: the Moderate Party, New Democracy. Analysis replicated from Elmelund-Præstekær (2010: 149), for full table of results from the binary logistic regression models, refer to Appendix. \*\*\* =  $P < .001$ , \*\* =  $P < .01$ , \* =  $P < .05$ .

Now, when comparing the level of negativity in different communication channels (H3), it is evident that negative campaigning is more common in election debates than in manifestos. The average of negative appeals is 34.2 per cent in debates and 5.9 per cent in manifestos,

and the difference is consistent and statistically significant for the entire period.<sup>6</sup> We can thus conclude that there is support for hypothesis 3. It seems true that, as claimed by Håkansson (1999: 84), different communication channels serve different purposes for the parties. Election manifestos have the function of being official documents for the anticipated politics for the next term. Thus manifestos tend to emphasize the party's own ideas rather than engaging in polemics with the opposition. At the same time, it is unsurprising that debates are leading to higher levels of confrontational arguments, since it encourages direct comparisons with the policies and ideas presented by the other political contenders (Håkansson, 1999: 84). These findings are thus congruent with previous studies (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010) and it seems likely that when 'politicians have full control over the message, they might feel less inclined to conduct negative campaigning, and instead focus more on political issues and their own achievements' (Walter and Vliegenthart, 2010: 445).

Before moving on to hypotheses 4 and 5, it is notable that the findings from Elmelund-Præstekær (2010) are also seen in Table 2. The models of negativity for election manifestos have a better fit than the models for election debates (compare Pseudo  $R^2$  for models 1-2 and 3-4). This is an indication that communication in manifestos is more consistent and less affected by contextual factors, since it is a medium entirely controlled by the party in question, whereas election debates are shaped by the individual politician presenting the party line, and the interplay with other politicians and journalists (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010: 149).

H4 suggested that the governing parties tend to use negative campaigning to a lesser degree than the opposition. The logistic regression models presented in Table 2, however, indicate that a statistically significant (on a 95-per cent significance level) negative association exists only for incumbency on negative appeals in the refined binary logistic regression model for manifestos (model 4). Yet no such statistically significant association is found between incumbency and negativity in election debates or in the smaller model for manifestos.<sup>7</sup> The incumbency hypothesis (H4) is therefore partly supported, even though the evidence is rather weak: incumbent parties tend to be less negative in election manifestos, whereas no

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<sup>6</sup> The level of negative campaigning in election debates and election manifestos are significantly different on a 99.9-per cent significance level for the entire period of study, except for 2002 when it is on a 99-per cent significance level (two-sample  $t$ -test).

<sup>7</sup> When running the binary logistic regression models without the ideology dummies, there is a negative association between incumbency and negative campaigning, yet it is only significant (on a 95-per cent significance level) for election debates, not for election manifestos. The reason for this is probably that the Social Democratic Party has been in government for the majority of elections included in the study and when including the dummy for left parties (the Left Party and the Social Democratic Party), then the effect of the Social Democratic Party is already controlled for.

significant difference is found within election debates. The strong results from Denmark (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010), the Netherlands (Walter and van der Brug, 2013) and the United States (Fridkin and Kenney, 2004; Kahn and Kenney, 1999) are thus not found in Sweden.

H5 stipulated that parties further out on the traditional left/right spectrum will engage in more negative campaigning than will parties in the centre of the spectrum. The results do, indeed, support the conclusion that left- and right-wing parties engage more in negative campaigning in comparison with centre parties. There is, indeed, a general trend that being a left-wing, or a right-wing, party increases the likelihood of negative campaigning, compared to being a centre party (the odds ratios in model 1-4 are all positive). However, the difference between right-wing and centre parties is not statistically significant in any of the models, which, on the other hand, is the case for the difference between left-wing and centre parties across all models (on a 95-per cent significance level for manifestos and 99-per cent significance level for debates). The odds for left-wing parties engaging in negative campaigning in election debates is 1.6 times the odds for centre parties, and the odds for left-wing parties are approximately 3.5 times the odds of centre parties in campaign manifestos. We can thus conclude that we have found partial support for the ideology hypothesis (H5). It seems that left-wing parties are most likely to engage in negative campaigning, yet there is no significant difference between right-wing and centre parties. These results are thus similar to the findings in election debates in Denmark, yet there seems to be a difference for election manifestos, which conversely tend to be more negative among Danish right-wing parties (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2010).

In sum, the results from the assessment of negative campaigning in Sweden from 1956 to 2006 made us reject the negativity hypothesis (H1). There is, in fact, no evidence of a rise in negativity. On the contrary, it seems that the use of negative campaigning has been lower in recent election campaigns. The personalization hypothesis (H2) was also rejected. The communication channel hypothesis (H3) was supported, whereas there was only partial support for the incumbency and the ideology hypotheses (H4-H5).

However, for both negative campaigning and trait attacks, 1982 stands out, with the closing election debate with the highest proportion of negativity, whereas the election debate in 2002 was the one with the lowest negativity. In the following section, these two election debates will therefore be further analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. The analysis will focus only on the election debates, since the level of negativity in election manifestos has remained relatively consistent since, at least, 1973. The main aim of the thematic analysis is to shed light on the continuities and changes in the Swedish parties' use of negative campaigning,

and to analyze the contextual factors that might explain the high level of negativity in 1982, and the low level of negativity in 2002.

### **A Comparison Between the Election Debates in 1982 and 2002**

Elmelund-Præstekær and Mølgaard Svensson concluded their longitudinal study on negative campaigning in Denmark by suggesting that in order to get a better understanding of negative campaigning one should include the qualitative study of specific elections, targeting, among other things, 'key candidates, party leaders and the political history in which the campaign took place' (2014: 238). The comparison between the 1982 and 2002 closing election debates will therefore follow these recommendations and be structured according to: i) continuities in terms of issues debated, ii) discontinuities in terms of issues debated, iii) the structure of the debates and the role of the journalist, and, lastly, iv) the character of individual politicians.

Swedish election campaigns tend to be thematically similar, with a strong emphasis on employment, social welfare and the economy (Oscarsson, 2013), which can also be seen in the 1982 and 2002 debates. One typical quote from the 1982 debate comes from Olof Palme, former prime minister and party leader for the Social Democratic Party, who accuses the incumbent government of reckless economic policies:

Palme: Did we get a better society when we got a right-wing government? When you ask that question, then at least I think about the increasing unemployment, the record-high price increases, and the decrease in production. It has, quite simply, become worse. And many think like this: the right-wing parties got their chance in 1976. They got their chance three years later. They failed the task. It is time for a change – for something new. But all those who have believed in the right-wing governments, they ask themselves: what will happen with a new social democratic government? We believe that employment is this election's most important issue.<sup>8</sup>

This provides a classic example of how issue-based negative campaigning is used to describe the incumbent government's policies, before providing information about one's own party's priorities through positive campaigning. Olof Palme later provided an even more accessible example of how deeply intertwined positive and negative campaigning can be:

Palme: When we had a Social Democratic government we had a balanced budget – the state had no foreign loans. It is through your economic misgovernment that we now have record-high foreign loans and record-high budget deficits.

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<sup>8</sup> All quotes are the author's translation from the original election debate transcripts in Swedish.

The government's past policies were also a theme serving as the basis for negative campaigning in the 2002 closing election debate. Similarly, Bo Lundgren (party leader for the Moderate Party) accused the incumbent government and Prime Minister Göran Persson (party leader for the Social Democratic Party) of being responsible for a deterioration of the Swedish business climate:

Lundgren: That is what is so terrible. During your time as a prime minister, Göran Persson, the number of entrepreneurs has decreased and companies are moving out of Sweden – jobs are disappearing. You have no policies that can provide increased employment.

No, in the last few years, if you compare the numbers, 1,000 additional companies each year have gone bankrupt. One must not mess around like that. You have done so with the budget figures. Do not attempt to do it in the debate.

Accusations by oppositional candidates criticizing the government's past or present policies can be found in both election debates. Some have even argued that the role of the opposition during an election campaign is to try to convince the voters why a transfer of power is necessary, and why they can provide that important change (Dahl, 1989; Holtz-Bacha and Mazzoleni, 2004). It would thus suggest that it is an inherent feature of all democracies (Geer, 2006; Mayer, 1996).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the last quote by Bo Lundgren provides a rare example of a trait attack in the 2002 election debate. When he accuses Prime Minister Göran Persson or his party for having manipulated the budget, he also shows that even in those elections that are recognized as relatively free from negative campaigning, in a multiparty system recognized for a consensus-oriented political culture (Bjerling, 2012: 111), there are still trait attacks.

Elmelund-Præstekær and Mølgaard Svensson (2014) also suggest that one of the contextual factors that has influenced the variability in the levels of negative campaigning in Denmark is the amount of conflict regarding important issues debated during election campaign. The 1982 parliamentary election is rather atypical in this regard, since one particularly polarizing topic was intensely discussed during the entire election campaign, namely, 'wage-earner funds' or 'the employee funds' debate (Esaiasson, 1990: 278–284; Oscarsson, 2013: 274), originating in the proposal on 'collective share-holding funds financed by special payroll and profits taxes' (Pontusson and Kuruvilla, 1991: 779). This topic alone is considered one of the key reasons for the Social Democratic Party's electoral defeat in 1976, and it was also one of the most debated issues in 1982 and 1983 (Gilljam, 1988: 225–226). The wage-earner fund question was debated for a considerable amount of time in the debate in 1982 (mentioned in

13.6 per cent of all the statements). For example by Thorbjörn Fälldin, Prime Minister and party leader for the Centre Party, and Ulf Adelsohn, party leader for the Moderate Party:

Fälldin: The most disastrous proposal is the one about collective wage-earner funds. Politicians and trade unionists will gradually take over Swedish industries. The Centre Party consistently refuses the introduction of these collective wage-earner funds. The Social Democrats have, throughout the election campaign, spread smoke screens around their proposal. I wonder: why are you trying to force socialism on the Swedish people? Why not, instead, say that this is socialism and we stand for it?

Adelsohn: Do not believe what they are saying. They lie. And above all, do not let these lies persuade you to vote for the wage-earner funds.

Adelsohn's quote provides a typical example of a trait attack that was leveled at the Social Democrats from the political right during the 1982 election campaign (Esaiasson, 1990: 278). The 2002 election had its own controversial issue, namely, integration (mentioned in 7.4 per cent of all the statements), resulting from the news story where representatives of the Moderate Party were caught on tape speaking in racist terms about immigrants (Johansson, 2006b). Yet the discussion was not as polarizing as the wage-earner funds debate, since all parties quickly dissociated themselves from all racist rhetoric.

It has been suggested that the character of Swedish election campaigns has gone from being primarily an ideological battle between left and right, during the 1970s and 1980s, to a fight about trustworthiness and issue ownership, after 1998 (Oscarsson, 2013: 271–273). In this regard, the issue of wage-earner funds is typical of the time. However, one reason for the voters' and pundits' raised concern about negativity might be that the acceptance of negative campaigning is higher when the debate is over ideological issues. In such a political climate, voters are looking for the alternative best resembling their own beliefs. However, in a political climate where voters are primarily concerned about who is most capable of running the country, negative campaigning might be considered unworthy for professional statesmen who should not engage in dirty arguments with the opposition.

The reoccurrence of the wage-earner funds discussion in the 1982 debate, however, highlights another important difference between the two elections. Even though the 1982 debate is more than half an hour longer than the one in 2002, the number of different issues debated is lower than in 2002. One reason for this might be the different structures of the debates, and the new role of the journalists (Håkansson, 1999). In 1982, the journalist Lars Orup's function was to act as a moderator with the main goal of keeping each participant's speaking time to 22 minutes. Yet in 2002, journalists Stina Lundberg and Erik Fichtelius went beyond moderating, engaging in the debate by asking questions and selecting the topics

for discussion. Furthermore, in the 1982 debate, the structure allowed for longer duels, where the candidates were allowed to respond to attacks and accusations. In 2002, the moderators often intervened and steered the discussion back to policy issues by asking follow-up questions. The debate in 1982 allowed for as many as three or four replies, leading to a discussion back and forth between two candidates, whereas the number of replies often was limited to one or two in the 2002 debate, which could potentially circumvent small 'spirals of negativity' (Damore, 2002: 677).

One could thus argue that an increasing mediatization might not cause more conflict in politics as expected when considering how the media logic favors disagreement and stories where two sides can be juxtaposed against each other (Pedersen, 2011; Ridout and Smith, 2008). A counterforce at work when the media has grown in importance might be 'media interventionism' or the 'media's discretionary power' (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2011: 35). This refers to 'the extent to which the media are capable of playing a formative role in shaping the agenda of election campaigns' (Semetko, *et al.*, 1991: 3). In the 2002 debate, the moderators often asked yes and no questions, prohibiting the politicians from engaging in heated arguments, since insufficient time was given to accuse or denounce other parties:

Journalist: We do not take the floor here Gudrun Schyman. We will change topic and talk about the economy. Swedes have the highest taxes in the world. Let us have a quick question around the table. Should the overall tax burden be reduced. Yes or no?

Leijonborg: Absolutely.

Olofsson: Yes.

Lungren: Of course.

Svensson: Yes.

Eriksson: No, I do not think that is possible.

Schyman: Right now we need to get in those taxes...

Journalist: Yes or no. What did you say?

Schyman: The taxes are interrelated with what we need the money for...

Journalist: Yes or no.

Schyman: Right now we will not lower the taxes.

Persson: Not during the term we have in front of us.

This thus suggests that mediatization and negative campaigning ‘may be moderated by journalism cultures, political news cultures, and political communication cultures’ (Strömbäck and Dimitrova, 2006: 44). It is clear the Swedish journalists have become more critical and assumed a larger role in election debates (Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2002). They have thus followed the global trend of increasing intervention in their reporting on politics (Esser, 2008).

Furthermore, as the moderators chose the topics in 2002, some issues were discussed even though a considerable consensus existed. Swedish foreign policy has often been signified by broad unity and consensus (Bjereld, 2007), even though some topics still have caused controversy, such as the possibility of a NATO membership. Yet when, in 2002, debating the possibilities of the United States or the United Nations going into Iraq, or when discussing the international distribution of resources and inequality, the differences between the parties were rather small compared to the more traditional ideological debates. The great variety of issues debated in 2002 could thus have lowered the overall level of negative campaigning as compared to 1982, when both the left and the right constantly steered back the discussions to the traditional conflict lines around, for example, how to improve the Swedish economy. Similarly, Esaiasson and Håkansson have suggested that the introduction of a new journalism culture, guided by a pathos to critically question political leaders in society’s service, has led to a decrease in conflict: ‘Politicians have always been prone to criticize each other and the journalists’ effort has been to significantly curb this instinct’ (2002: 172, author’s translation).

One final aspect that has been suggested as a possible cause of variability in negativity is the character of individual politicians (Elmelund-Præstekær and Mølgaard Svensson, 2014). Olof Palme is a recognized polemic agitator (Wikström, 2007) and the politician who, more than any other, imprinted the 1982 election campaign (Esaiasson, 1990: 282), and, possibly, the political climate in Sweden in the 1970s and 1980s:

Palme: You have almost suffered a meltdown. What the question is about is that the technological progress is just so rapid that a lot of jobs are being replaced. Therefore, manufacturing jobs will disappear quickly if we do not invest boldly in the future. The wage-earner funds can, in fact, create many new jobs. And when you say that there will be no new jobs in the public sector, what you are saying to all those women working there, what you are saying to all the elderly being cared for, it is a sign of what I consider a pretty brutal worldview.

Olof Palme's polemic rhetoric even caused some of the other participants to complain during the 1982 election debate:

Fälldin: But it is actually reasonable to ask you to discuss more specifically the policy you want to implement. You are not supposed to use all the time to criticize others.

Adelsohn: We will not resort to that sort of emotional language, but will attempt to speak on issues of substance, Olof Palme.

Compared to the debate in 2002, it is evident that the Social Democratic party leader at the time, Göran Persson, was less confrontational. However, at that point, he had then been prime minister since 1996; in the debate he assumed the role of experienced statesman (Vigsø, 2004: 66). Similarly, Bo Lundgren, party leader for the Moderate Party, which became the second largest party in the election, was also less confrontational compared to his predecessor in 1982, Ulf Adelsohn. It is impossible to determine if these are mere coincidences of the people elected at the time, or if this is an expression of a deeper change. It could, in fact, potentially be an indication of the professionalization, or mediatization of politics, where political consultants have grown in importance and have succeeded in teaching the politicians of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that they should 'not dissent or create controversies, they should toe the party line, and they should remain "on message"' (Negrine and Lilleker, 2002: 310). The modernization, or Americanization, of election campaigning, with its growing professionalization, could thus help politicians to steer the discussions away from conflict that could easily be blown out of proportion in the media.

In sum, this comparison between the elections in 1982 and 2002 has suggested that the issues debated, as well as the structure of the debates and the role of the journalists, and the character of individual politicians, might be part of the explanations for the variability of negative campaigning in Swedish parliamentary election debates. Since it is impossible to check for other confounding variables in this qualitative analysis, these factors are, however, only provided as mere suggestions for the processes at work that might be reflected in the variability in the use of negative campaigning. More research is thus needed to understand the political rhetoric and the use of negative campaigning by the Swedish parties.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study set out to investigate negative campaigning in Sweden. The research question guiding this undertaking was: *To what extent has the use of negative campaigning changed in contemporary Swedish parliamentary election campaigns?* In short, the empirical results suggest that, first, contrary to popular belief there is no evidence for the claim that the use of

negative campaigning among Swedish political parties has increased between 1956 and 2006. Instead, substantial variability in the levels of negative campaigning was recognized, where recent elections, on the contrary, were associated with the lowest levels of negative campaigning. Similarly, no evidence for an increase in trait attacks was found. They were, in fact, an almost negligible part of Swedish parties' election campaign communication.

Second, similar to previous studies, support was found for the claim that negative campaigning differs across communication channels, where substantially more negativity is expressed during closing election debates than in campaign manifestos. Previous research has also suggested that oppositional parties use negative campaigning to a greater extent than do parties in government. This was only partially supported since an association was found for election manifestos, yet no evidence was found among election debates. Furthermore, it also became evident that left-wing parties, across both communication channels, engage in the most negative campaigning.

Third, the conclusion from the qualitative thematic comparison of the 1982 and 2002 closing election debates was that both continuities and changes in the use of negative campaigning could be identified. Negative campaigning has always been part of Swedish election campaigns, but it was suggested that contextual factors, and certain aspects of mediatization and the professionalization of political parties, could potentially explain the variation between the two election debates. One such factor is the issues on the agenda, where the polarizing wage-earner funds discussion might have been one of the key causes of the particularly negative tone in 1982. It was also recognized that the independence of journalists, and the growth of media interventionism, could potentially be a partial explanation for the lower negativity in the 2002 election, since the active role of critical journalists might lead to less heated debates and, consequently, less negative campaigning. One last suggestion for why the level of negative campaigning may vary substantially between elections was the character of individual politicians: Olof Palme largely set the polemic tone for the 1982 debate, whereas the politicians in 2002 seemed to be less conflict-oriented.

Even though the five decades of Swedish politics under study have showed great variability in the level of negative campaigning, it does not seem likely that negativity would disappear in the future. It should be noted that even in the 2002 election, marked by the lowest level of negative campaigning, roughly 10 per cent of all statements were negative. Some have, fittingly, argued that '[a]t the root of all politics is the universal language of conflict' (Schattschneider, 1960: 2). Still, voters and pundits in Sweden have expressed worries about negative campaigning, which they consider damaging in a political culture based on agreement and consensus building. Conflict and negativity is then seen as an obstacle when

searching for the 'right policies' and the 'objective truth' (Håkansson, 1999: 218). What it all comes down to might, therefore, be what role emotions and conflict should ideally play in the political sphere (compare, for example, Habermas, 1974; and Mouffe, 1999). It is possible that citizens refrain from conflict and party squabble, whereas politicians and consultants can see above the heated debates and, therefore, consider negative campaigning an important part of the political communication toolbox. Although this study has not dealt with the effects that negative campaigning have on democracy, which spurred substantial academic debate in the United States (Brooks, 2006; Fridkin and Kenney, 2012; Lau and Pomper, 2004), it should still be recognized that the 'lack of differentiation between political opponents raises concerns for the democratic process' (Holtz-Bacha and Mazzoleni, 2004: 4) and negative campaigning can, in fact, be useful in crystalizing political differences. One important aim of journalists and academics should, therefore, be to bring the two different views of negative campaigning closer, to engage in a discussion of why politicians use negative campaigning and why voters tend to see it as something bad.

This study has advanced our understanding of the use of negative campaigning in Sweden, and contributed to the literature on the determinants of negative campaigning. To further these topics, a few issues would be particularly interesting to consider. One of the limitations of this study is its narrow focus on election debates and campaign manifestos. Future research should, in order to get a better sense of differences in negative campaigning across communication channels, study for example election posters, political ads and online communication. Furthermore, it would be interesting to compare the results from this study with a longitudinal assessment of the amount of negativity in the election news coverage in Sweden. Such a study would allow for an important analysis of how journalists report, and possibly filter, negative campaigning.

More importantly, based on the ideas about the permanent campaign (Blumenthal, 1980), another contribution to the study of negative campaigning would be to analyze the tone in political communication over an entire term and not in a short period of time before election day. It is possible that there has been a shift in the political discourse where political parties and candidates are constantly in campaign mode, trying to win short-term battles evident in the steady stream of opinion polls. An overall increase in negativity, seen over the term, could potentially be a reason for why citizens think that there is more conflict in politics today than before.

Finally, one particularly interesting topic for further research in the Swedish context would be to study the Social Democratic party, which is signified by the highest level of negative campaigning during the entire period of study. It is, in fact, rather surprising that the party

using the most negative campaigning is also the party that has been in government for the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One reason for this might be, as was exemplified by Olof Palme in 1982, that the Social Democratic Party to a large extent has set the tone for the debate in Sweden. A second reason could be that the party's tone is a result of the party's origin in the dialectic relationship between workers and capital, thus enabling politicians to always have a natural enemy in the right-wing parties.

In the end, although negative campaigning can be traced back to the very first democratic thinkers, it is evident that the literature on negative campaigning is still in its infancy. Most people would agree that election campaigns are fundamental features of all representative democracies. Maybe it is time to realize that negative campaigning is an essential part of all election campaigns.

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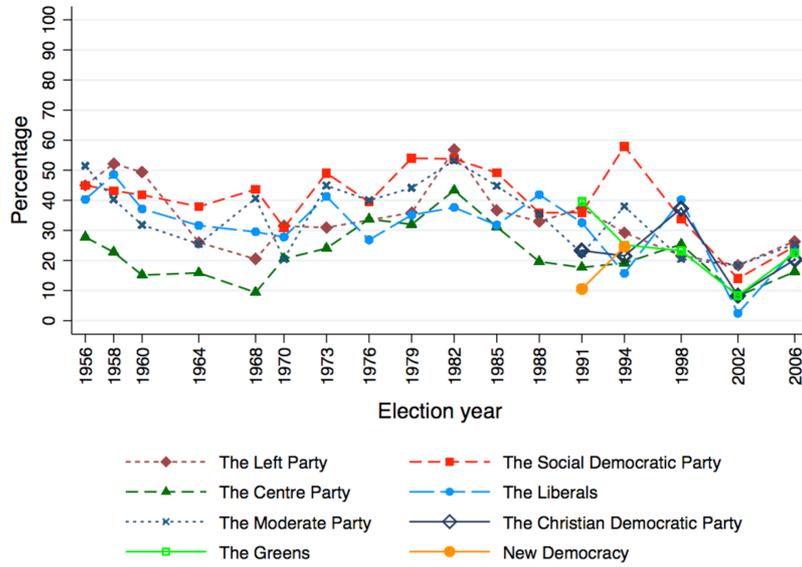
## APPENDIX

Table I: Summary Statistics

Variable (range):	Debate 1982		Debate 2002		Debates 1956-2006		Manifestos 1956-2006		
	Mean:	N:	Mean:	N:	Mean:	N:	Mean:	N:	
<i>Dependent variables:</i>									
Negative campaigning (0-1)	.502 (.500)	779	.113 (.317)	311	.342 (.474)	15457	.059 (.236)	11799	
Trait attacks (0-1)	.288 (.453)	779	.068 (.251)	311	.180 (.384)	15457	.044 (.206)	11799	
Trait attacks individual politicians (0-1)	.060 (.238)	779	.039 (.193)	311	.038 (.192)	15457	.000 (.018)	11799	
<i>Independent variables:</i>									
Time (1956-2006)	1982 (0)	779	2002 (0)	311	1979 (14.20)	15457	1986 (15.00)	11799	
Incumbency (0-1)	.312 (.464)	779	.161 (.368)	311	.189 (.391)	15457	.192 (.394)	11799	
Ideology (1-3)	1.625 (.740)	779	1.875 (.653)	311	1.744 (.743)	15457	1.855 (.681)	11799	

Source: Original dataset Party Influence on Public Opinion (POP) 1956-2006 (Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2009), modified to include incumbency and ideology.

**Figure I: Amount of Negative Campaigning Per Party in Election Campaigns 1956-2006**



*Source:* Original dataset Party Influence on Public Opinion (POP) 1956-2006 (Esaiasson and Håkansson, 2009).

*Note:* Graphs show percentage of total number of appeals by year.  $N$  = Debates 15,457, manifestos 11,799.

**Table II: Summary of Binary Logistic Regression Analysis of Negative Appeals in Debates and Manifestos 1956-2006**

	<b>Model 1</b> Negative appeals (debates)	<b>Model 2</b> Negative appeals (debates)	<b>Model 3</b> Negative appeals (manifestos)	<b>Model 4</b> Negative appeals (manifestos)	<b>Model 5</b> Trait attacks (debates)	<b>Model 5</b> Trait attacks directed at politicians (debates)
	<i>B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>
Time (cont.)						
Time (ref. 1956-1958)						
1970-1982	-.009** (.003)	.991	-.041*** (.009)	.960	.005 (.004)	.013* (.006)
1985-1994	-.085 (.115)	.919	-.085 (.115)	.919	-.085 (.115)	.919
1998-2006	-.481*** (.132)	1.101	-.346 (.178)	.707	.038 (.121)	1.323 (.165)
Incumbency	.099 (.115)	1.104	-.346 (.178)	.707	.038 (.121)	1.323 (.165)
Ideology (ref. = center parties)						
Left wing	.488** (.064)	1.629	1.240* (.512)	3.456	.275** (.084)	1.228 (.143)
Right wing	.259 (.201)	1.296	.766 (.482)	2.151	.249 (.157)	.990 (.185)
Constant						
<i>N</i>	15457	15457	11485	11485	15457	15457
Wald $\chi^2$	112.41***	152.47***	31.89***	668.60***	12.85*	21.44***
Correctly classified	65.78%	65.78%	94.42%	94.42%	81.98%	96.16%
Log pseudo likelihood	-9804.612	-9778.625	-2263.999	-2250.815	-7269.248	-2498.721
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.013	.015	.084	.090	.003	.007

Source: Original dataset Party Influence on Public Opinion (POP) 1956-2006 9(Esaïsson and Håkansson, 2009), modified to include incumbency and ideology.

Note: Binary logistic regression coefficients (*B*) with cluster-robust (parties) standard errors in parentheses. Independent variable is negative campaigning (0 = positive; 1 = negative). \* =  $P < .05$ , \*\* =  $P < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $P < .001$ .

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