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## The subjective group dynamics in negative campaigns

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(Article begins on next page)

Running head: SUBJECTIVE GROUP DYNAMICS IN NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNS

The subjective group dynamics in negative campaigns

### Abstract

I relied on the subjective group dynamics framework to analyse the derogation of inparty candidates involved in negative campaigns. In an experimental study (dynamic simulation of an electoral campaign,  $N = 118$ ), I found that participants downgraded the inparty candidate (both in terms of evaluation and vote choice) more when he ran a person-based negative campaign than when he ran an issue-based negative campaign. This effect was significant for participants with high levels of political identification only. Overall, the findings revealed that political candidates, as members of significant social groups, are not exempt from the forms of extremity in evaluations typically observed in other social groups.

*Keywords:* Subjective group dynamics; Negative campaigns; Political identification

Negative campaigns, i.e. electoral campaigns in which candidates attack their opponents just as often as they present their own standing on political issues, are widely spread across the world (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995). Even if candidates often resort to negative messages with the purpose of damaging the public image of their opponents, empirical results on their persuasive effects are mixed (cf. Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007). In fact, there is some evidence that negative campaigning can backfire (e.g., Carraro, Gawronski, & Castelli, 2010). In this study, I relied on the subjective group dynamics theory (e.g., Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Henson, 2000; Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Martinez Taboada, 1998; Pinto, Marques, & Paez, 2016) to analyse the derogation of inparty candidates involved in negative campaigns.

### **Subjective Group Dynamics Theory**

The subjective group dynamics theory (SGDT) is based on the social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel, 1981) and on the idea that people derive much of their self-concept from their membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For this reason, they are motivated to uphold a favourable view of the ingroup as a whole by differentiating the ingroup from the outgroup and by supporting adherence to generic prescriptive norms, i.e. norms related to universal values and standard of behaviour that apply to both ingroup and outgroup. The basic idea of SGDT is that deviant ingroup members (those who oppose generic prescriptive norms) represent a threat to the subjective validity of positive intergroup differentiation and to a positive social identity (Marques et al., 1998).

According to the SGDT, one way to face this threat is the devaluation of the deviant ingroup member (cf. black sheep effect, Marques, Robalo, & Rocha, 1992; Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988), as an attempt to re-establish the positivity of the ingroup

(Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988). In other words, the devaluation the deviant ingroup members signals that the undesirable behaviour should not be taken as a reflection of the characteristics of the entire group. In this way, people could preserve their positive self-concept via the protection of the subjective quality of the ingroup and of positive intergroup differentiation (Marques et al., 1998). The violation of a generic norm creates uncertainty about the ingroup superiority by reducing the fit between the ingroup and the superordinate group (cf., Marques, Abrams, & Serôdio, 2001). A recent meta-analysis on the extremity effects in the evaluation of group members confirmed that “group-based motives are relevant to evaluation, and that most norm-violating behaviours engender negative evaluations of ingroup members” (Bettencourt et al., 2016, p. 65).

Norm-violating ingroup members represent a threat to the positive image of the ingroup as they jeopardize the ingroup reputation. Building on previous research indicating that people are generally unaffected by threats in identity-irrelevant domains (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; Harter, 1986), a few studies investigated the moderating role of ingroup identification in relation to extremity effects. For example, Branscombe and colleagues (1993) found that a disloyal ingroup member was negatively evaluated by participants with high identification with the ingroup but not by participants with low levels of identification. Other studies reached the same conclusion that identification with the ingroup moderates the extent to which group members react to a threat to the ingroup (cf., Castano, Paladino, Coull, & Yzerbyt, 2002; Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997; Hutchison, Abrams, Gutierrez, & Viki, 2008): The stronger the identification with the ingroup, the stronger the rejection of the deviant (Coull, Yzerbyt, Castano, Paladino, & Leemans, 2001).

### **Negative Campaigns and Group Dynamics**

In this study, I build on the idea that political groups may constitute significant sources of social identity. Since political identification affects political evaluations and behaviours just as other forms of group identification (e.g., Greene, 1999; Huddy, 2001; Pacilli, Rocco, Pagliaro, & Russo, 2016), I suggest that the subjective group dynamic framework could be of high relevance to uncover the conditions under which negative campaigns backfire.

Previous research showed that negative messages could cause a backlash effect against the source (Budesheim, Houston, & DePaola, 1996; Garramone, 1984; Roddy & Garramone, 1988). However, other studies showed that going negative in some cases does not affect (and even improve) the evaluations of the candidates who adopt such strategy (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991; Kaid, 1997; Schultz & Pancer, 1997). Overall, even if empirical findings suggest that negative campaigns have a net backlash effect on the attacker, “it does not do so decisively enough to support the conclusion that attacks exact a significantly greater toll on attackers than on their targets” (Lau et al., 2007, p. 1183).

This puzzling scenario indicates that the backlash effect of political attacks might be conditional rather than pervasive. Previous research suggested that two main factors might moderate the effects of political negative messages, i.e. the content of the messages and the membership of the source. In accordance with the need to avoid a broad definition of negative campaigning (Richardson, 2001), research showed that differentiating between issue-based and person-based political attacks is essential to understand when a backlash effect is likely to occur. Issue-based negative messages, i.e., attacks bearing criticisms on political issues, are typically judged as fair attacks; on

the contrary, person-based negative messages, i.e., attacks focused on personal characteristics of the opponent, are in contrast with social norms that prescribe fairness in interpersonal relations and are mostly evaluated as unfair play (Stevens, Sullivan, Allen, & Alger, 2008). In other words, attacking the opponent on personal issues is a norm-violating behaviour, whereas attacking on issue-based topics is a norm-consistent behaviour in electoral campaigns.

The second factor is related to membership, i.e., the political affiliation of the candidate and of voter. Matthews and Dietz-Uhler (1998) observed that voters identifying with the sponsor candidate's political party (i.e., inparty candidate) rated the sponsor less favourably after viewing negative advertisements, disliking that a member of their own group engaged in a disapproved tactic. More recently, Carraro and Castelli (2010) fine-tuned these results, showing that the preference for the inparty candidate almost disappeared when s/he used a person-based negative campaign compared to when s/he used an issue-based negative campaign. These results are in line with the social psychological research presented above showing that, when people are categorized into groups, the evaluations of their own and other groups are often biased. However, it could be argued that, in the highly competitive context of electoral campaigns, one way to assure the superiority of the ingroup is through winning the election. For instance, one possibility could be that highly identified voters would be concerned with achieving the group success by supporting their candidate independently from his/her campaign strategy (Morton, Postmes, & Jetten, 2007).

### **The Present Study**

In the present study, I relied on the subjective group dynamics framework to analyse the derogation of inparty candidates involved in negative campaigns. To the

best of my knowledge, this is the first study that takes simultaneously into account three key factors to explain extremity effects in this context: The content of the campaign, i.e. issue- vs. person-based; the membership of the source, i.e. inparty vs. outparty candidate, and the group identification, i.e. political identification with the party. I reasoned that, if political groups are significant sources of social identity, the derogation of norm-violating inparty candidates (attacking the opponent on personal issues) should reflect voters' motives to maintain a positive image of their own party. These motives should be stronger among highly identified partisans. Therefore, I anticipated that voters would downgrade the inparty candidate more when he runs a person-based negative campaign than when he runs an issue-based negative campaign. I expected this effect to be significant for voters with high levels of political identification only. Finally, I also investigated whether the downgrading of the inparty candidate would be reflected both at an attitudinal (i.e., evaluation) and at a behavioural level (i.e., vote choice).

I also aimed to overcome some of the limitations of the traditional experimental procedures used to investigate the effects of negative campaigning. Three common problems jeopardize the ecological validity of previous research. First, participants are typically exposed to only one or two advertisements or messages (cf., for example, Brooks & Geer, 2007; Clinton & Lapinski, 2004), with a dramatic simplification of the real-world dynamics of electoral campaigns. Second, the controlled environment of laboratory settings usually gives subjects no choice but to be exposed to negative messages; hence, people are likely to pay more attention to the messages presented by the experimenter than they would do in their everyday life (Sigelman & Kugler, 2003). Third, asking participants about their reaction right after having been exposed to political messages might induce them to reflect more deeply or differently about the

messages than they usually do (Arceneaux & Nickerson, 2005). In this study, I used the Dynamic Process Tracing Environment (DPTE, Redlawsk & Lau, 2009), a computer-based platform that allows simulating fictitious campaign environments in a dynamic fashion. Participants were presented with a great amount of information in the form of newspaper headlines, and could click on the title to read the correspondent full text (more details on the procedure are provided below). In this way, participants were provided with an environment rich of information, they freely selected the information they want to read, and they evaluated the candidates at the end of the entire electoral campaign.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Design**

A sample of 118 Italian eligible voters (49.2% women;  $M_{age} = 37.03$  years,  $SD = 14.42$ ) participated in this study, structured following a 2 (Inparty vs. Outparty) X 2 (Person-Based vs. Issue-Based campaign) design, with the first factor varying within and the second factor varying between participants. All participants were recruited using a quota sampling procedure (the sample was equally divided as concerns gender and age—young people, under 45 years, and old people, over 45 years) and their participation was voluntary. They completed the task individually in their home guided by trained interviewers.

Based on Redlawsk (2001, 2002), I used the DPTE to create a fictitious campaign environment. All participants were asked to play the role of a voter during an election in which a right-wing and a left-wing candidate ran for the open seat of their city mayor. The two candidates, while fictitious, were designed to represent a realistic ideological spectrum for their respective political positions. Participants were instructed to prepare



to cast a vote in the upcoming election by using the information available on the dynamic information board<sup>1</sup>. They have been randomly assigned to one of the following experimental conditions: (a) person-based negative campaign environment ( $n = 53$ , 49.1% women;  $M_{age} = 37.66$ ,  $M_{political\ orientation} = 3.91$ ); (b) issue-based negative campaign environment ( $n = 65$ , 49.2% women;  $M_{age} = 36.52$ ,  $M_{political\ orientation} = 4.12$ ).

### **Procedure and Materials**

The entire study was conducted as a computer-based experiment. The DPTE (Redlawsk & Lau, 2009) was used to present all information and to collect all data. After completing a pre-experimental questionnaire assessing their interest in politics, partisanship, political identification, and past voting behaviour, participants were instructed about the system functioning and their task, and were taken through a two-minute trial run of the dynamic information board. After the trial, they looked at the picture of the fictitious candidates and read a brief description of their political career and party orientation. Before the beginning of the simulated campaign, participants evaluated the candidates based on these first descriptions.

During the experiment, participants were presented with a series of quickly changing headlines: Political and personal information about each candidate was available as well as endorsements, polls, and non-political information<sup>2</sup>. A total amount

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<sup>1</sup> Participants read the following text: "Imagine you just moved in a new city. In a few weeks, the elections for the city mayor will take place. The mayor in office cannot be re-elected. There are two new candidates, but you do not know anything about them. During the electoral campaign, voters usually have a lot of information available coming from different sources (newspapers, friends, TV, internet, associations, the candidates themselves, and so on). Nobody can pay attention to all this information, and this is the case in this electoral campaign as well. You need to choose which information to read. As in the trial, you will see some headings scrolling down the screen. To read the full text, you can click on the heading and it will open up. If you are not interested in a heading, let it scrolling down and do not click on it".

<sup>2</sup> Political information about the candidates included their stands on political issues relevant for a city mayor race (e.g., stands on traffic, kindergartens, social housing, youth centers, and drug control). Personal information included candidates' socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, religion,

of 92 pieces of information scrolled down on the computer screen in random order during the campaign simulation. Each piece of information appeared twice on the screen. Information titles had the appearance of a newspaper headline and, when a participant clicked on it, the corresponding full text appeared in a new window. While the full text was read, the scrolling continued in the background creating a cost in terms of missed information and mimicking the dynamic nature of election information flow. The information available during the campaign was the same in both the experimental conditions; the only difference concerned the content of negative messages. Out of the 92 pieces of information, 14 person-based negative messages (equally divided between messages coming from the inparty and the outparty candidate) were available in the person-based negative environment, while 14 issue-based negative messages (again equally divided between the two sources) were available in the other experimental condition. The nature of the messages was already disclosed in their headlines, so that participants had a first hint on their content (i.e., whether the attack was focused on political or personal issues; some samples of the messages are reported in the Appendix). While dynamically presenting information related to the electoral campaign, the system unobtrusively tracks the information selection and reading behaviour of the participants. At the end of the campaign, which lasted about 10 minutes, participants evaluated the candidates and voted. They were thanked and debriefed.

This procedure allowed me to investigate the effects of negative campaigns on the derogation of the inparty candidate on two levels. First, I looked at the general effect

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family, job experience). Endorsements related candidates to both political parties and associations (e.g., trade or consumers associations). Polls gave general information about the race (e.g., expected turn out rates). Finally, non-political information was related to a variety of topics, ranging from fictitious current events (e.g., a ferryboat sinking in India) to cinema news (e.g., the premières at the Cannes film festival). The full texts of these pieces of information are available from the author.

of the campaign environment (person-based vs. issue-based negative campaign), i.e., the effect of the experimental manipulation. Second, I analysed whether this effect was explained by the exposure to person-based negative messages delivered by the inparty candidate.

### **Measures**

**Political identification.** Three 9-category items from Barreto and Ellemers' (2000) identification scale (e.g. "I'm a very good example of right/left-wing voter") were used to assess political identification. Based on  $\alpha = .71$ , I computed a political identification index by averaging the answers to these items.

**Evaluations of candidates.** Participants evaluated the candidates twice on a scale ranging from 0 (very negative evaluation) to 10 (very positive evaluation), the first time right before the campaign began ( $T_0$ ) and the second once the campaign was over ( $T_1$ ). I used participants' political orientation (reported on a 10-point left-right axis) to recode the evaluations of the right-wing and the left-wing candidates into evaluations of inparty or outparty candidate. More specifically, participants who reported a score lower or equal to 5 were considered left-wingers, whereas participants who reported a score higher or equal to 6 were considered right-wingers.

**Vote choice.** At the end of the campaign simulation, participants expressed their vote choice. They could either indicate one of the two candidates or decide not to vote. To obtain a balanced dependent variable, I aggregated the participants who voted for the outparty candidate ( $n = 8$ ) and those who decided not to vote ( $n = 22$ ). I created a dichotomous variable contrasting the vote for the inparty candidate (1) vs. vote for the outparty candidate or the decision of not voting (0).

**Exposure to negative messages.** To get a better understanding of the effects of negative campaigns, I also analysed participants' exposure to negative messages. I created four measures of exposure: (a) person-based negative messages delivered by the inparty candidate, (b) person-based negative messages delivered by the outparty candidate, (c) issue-based negative messages delivered by the inparty candidate, (d) issue-based negative messages delivered by the outparty candidate. All of them were computed as the sum of the messages accessed and read by the participants during the entire campaign.

### Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations among all the variables are reported in Table 1. The means for the evaluations of the inparty and outparty candidates at  $T_0$  and  $T_1$  are in line with the idea that people tend to like inparty members more than outparty members, as suggested by the ingroup favoritism (e.g., Tajfel, 1970). Party identification was not related to the candidates' evaluations at  $T_0$  but it was significantly associated with the candidates' evaluations at  $T_1$  and the vote choice. The stronger the political identification of the participant, the higher the evaluation of the inparty candidate at  $T_1$  and the probability of casting a vote for him. Similarly, the stronger the political identification, the lower the evaluation of the outparty candidate. These associations support the claim that ingroup favoritism is accentuated among highly identified members, even in the political context (Green, 1999). In relation to participants' exposure to negative messages, descriptive statistics revealed that participants tended to read issue-based messages more often than person-based messages. I found no significant associations between participants' political

identification, evaluations of the candidates, and vote choice and the number of messages opened during the campaign.

To test the hypotheses, I examined if the evaluations of candidates and the vote choice were affected by the experimental conditions, participants' level of political identification, and their interaction. Even if a pre-test showed no likeability difference between the pictures and profiles of the fictitious candidates<sup>3</sup>, based on Meffert et al. (2006) in all the following analyses I controlled for the evaluations of the inparty/outparty candidates reported before the beginning of the campaign ( $T_0$ ). I standardized all the independent variables entered in the models, and I coded the experimental manipulation as +1 (person-based attacks) and -1 (issue-based attacks). The results of the moderated regression models (Process, Model 1, Hayes, 2013) are reported in Table 2. Both the evaluations of candidates at  $T_0$  significantly predicted the evaluations at  $T_1$ . As expected, the experimental manipulation had a negative effect on the evaluation of the inparty candidate but not on the evaluation of the outparty candidate, such that the inparty candidate was evaluated more negatively when he presented person-based messages than when he presented issue-based messages, whereas the evaluation of the outparty candidate was unaffected by the type of negative campaign. The negative effect on the evaluation of the inparty candidate was further qualified by the level of political identification, as suggested by the significant interaction term. Simple slopes analysis showed that the person-based negative campaign (vs. issue-based negative campaign) led to a lower evaluation of the inparty candidate among highly identified (+1 *SD*) participants ( $M = 5.56$  in the person-based

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<sup>3</sup> I asked 57 psychology students to rate the candidates' pictures and profiles in terms of attractiveness and competence, on scales from 1 to 10. To avoid party biases in their evaluations, I masked the information related to the party affiliation of the candidates. I found significant differences between the two candidates neither for attractiveness,  $t(56) = .30, p = .76$ , nor for competence,  $t(56) = -1.03, p = .31$ .

campaign,  $M = 7.27$  in the issue-based campaign), *simple slope* =  $-.86$ ,  $t(113) = -3.32$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95%, CI  $[-1.368, -0.345]$ , but not among participants with low levels of political identification ( $-1 SD$ ), *simple slope* =  $-.13$ ,  $t(113) = -.52$ ,  $p = .60$ , 95%, CI  $[-0.640, 0.373]$  ( $M = 5.57$  in the person based-campaign,  $M = 5.83$  in the issue-based campaign). In line with the SGDT, this analysis showed that high identifiers tended to like the inparty candidate less in the person-based than in the issue-based campaign condition. Low identifiers did not report statistically different likeability rates in the two campaign conditions.

In relation to participants' vote choice (third column, Table 2), the results indicated that the evaluation of the inparty candidate at  $T_0$  had a positive significant effect on the probability of voting for this candidate. The negative effect of the experimental manipulation indicated that being in a person-based negative campaign environment reduced the chance to cast a vote for the inparty candidate, whereas the positive effect of political identification suggested that high identifiers tended to vote more for the inparty candidate than low identifiers did. Even though the interaction term between political identification and the experimental manipulation only approached statistical significance ( $p = .08$ ), the simple slope analysis indicated that the person-based negative campaign (vs. issue-based negative campaign) reduced the probability of voting for the inparty candidate (probability  $.70$  vs  $.95$ ) for highly identified participants (*simple slope* =  $-1.06$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95%, CI  $[-1.883, -0.229]$ ) but not for low identified participants (probability  $.64$  vs  $.72$ , *simple slope* =  $-.16$ ,  $p = .58$ , 95%, CI  $[-0.747, 0.419]$ ). These findings are in line with the idea that a person-based campaign environment might have detrimental effects on the likelihood of voting for the inparty candidate, either pushing voters away from the polls or pushing them towards the rival

candidate. Again, this negative effect seems to work especially for highly identified voters, even though this last finding should be interpreted with caution.

Results from this first analysis thus showed that a campaign environment in which candidates attack each other on personal issues led high identifiers to downgrade the inparty but not the outparty candidate. It could be argued that participants in the person-based campaign environment tended to downgrade the inparty candidate because of a successful strategy of the opponent, i.e., a persuasive effect of the opponent's negative campaign. However, according to the SGDT, this effect should be driven by the anti-normative behaviour of the ingroup member, i.e. inparty candidate delivering person-based negative messages. I tested a moderated mediation model (Process, Model 14, Hayes, 2013), in which the effect of the experimental manipulation on the evaluation of the inparty candidate was explained (mediated) by the number of person-based messages from the inparty, and the effect of this latter variable was moderated by the level of political identification. Figure 1 reports the results of this analysis and shows that being in the person-based campaign environment had a positive effect on the number of person-based negative messages delivered by the inparty candidate that participants read. In addition, the negative effect exerted by exposure to person-based negative messages coming from the inparty candidate on his evaluation was significant for highly identified (+ 1 *SD*) participants, *simple slope* = -0.75,  $t(112) = -2.67$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI [-1.304, -0.192], but not for those with low (- 1 *SD*) level of political identification, *simple slope* = 0.08,  $t(112) = 0.21$ ,  $p = .84$ , 95% CI [-0.581, 0.716] (see Figure 2). Consistent with this, the indirect effect (using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to compute 95% confidence intervals) of the experimental manipulation on the inparty evaluation was significant for participants with high levels of political

identification – effect =  $-.51$ ;  $SE = .23$ , 95% CI [ $-0.989$ ,  $-0.070$ ] – but not for those with low levels of political identification – effect =  $.05$ ,  $SE = .23$ , 95% CI [ $-0.479$ ,  $0.460$ ].<sup>4</sup>

Overall, these results support the idea that the negative effect of the person-based campaign environment on the evaluation of the inparty candidate is explained by the inparty anti-normative behaviour, namely the use of person-based negative messages. The downgraded evaluation of the inparty candidate was observed only among highly identified participants, supporting the claim that the rejection of deviant members should be stronger when ingroup identification is higher (Coull et al., 2001).

### Discussion

The aim of the current research was to examine the derogation of inparty candidates in the context of negative campaigning. Building on Stevens and colleagues' (2009), who showed that person-based negative messages are perceived as less fair than issue-based negative messages, I hypothesized that exposure to person- vs. issue-based negative messages delivered by an inparty candidate would worsen his evaluation. Moreover, based on the idea that people's political identity is one of the bases of their social identity (Greene, 1999; Huddy, 2001), I expected this effect to be significant for highly identified participants only. The results revealed that highly identified voters participating in an electoral campaign in which candidates attack each other on personal issues (vs. a campaign in which they criticize the opponent's stand on political matters) tended to downgrade the inparty candidate for using such a strategy. Moreover, the

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<sup>4</sup> I tested the same model with the other measures of exposure (person-based negative messages from the outparty, issue-based negative messages from the inparty, and issue-based negative messages from the outparty). Neither the direct effects of exposure nor the interactions terms reached statistical significance in all the models tested. As a control, I also used the same model to predict the evaluation of the outparty candidate. Political identification was the only predictor that had a significant negative effect ( $b = -0.71$ ,  $SE = .18$ ,  $p < .001$ ), beyond the effect of the evaluation of the candidate at  $T_0$  ( $b = 0.54$ ,  $SE = .18$ ,  $p < .01$ ).



number of person-based negative messages delivered by the inparty candidate during the electoral campaign mediated this effect.

The findings lent support to the hypotheses showing that an inparty candidate engaging in a communication strategy that breaks the social norms prescribing fairness in interpersonal relationships is downgraded by his own constituency, especially by the highly identified partisans. Even if the present study did not provide direct evidence about this, based on the subjective group dynamic theory, this derogation could be interpreted as a signal that partisans refuse the candidate's behaviour to be a reflection of their entire political ingroup, plausibly to maintain high their own self-concept. In general, these findings confirmed that social psychological frameworks could be fruitfully applied to the political domain.

In relation to the political communication strategy, this study conveys two main messages. First, person-based negative campaigns may be ineffective in persuading low identified voters. This is relevant when considering that, in many political contexts, electoral campaigns are tailored to the undecided voters who are especially prone to campaign persuasion (e.g., Hillygus & Jackman, 2003), and that undecided voters typically show low levels of political identification (e.g., Kosmidis & Xezonakis, 2010). This study showed that low identified voters were relatively impervious to attacks on personal issues or, more precisely, they considered these attacks equivalent to the issue-based ones. In other words, neither their evaluation of the inparty candidate nor their vote choice were affected by the campaign environment that they experienced.

Second, person-based negative campaigns may also have serious negative effects on the most loyal partisans on whom candidates typically count on. This is interesting for two main reasons. First, since in Western democracies general and

presidential elections are often won by a slender margin (Roccatto & Zogmaister, 2010), even small shifts in voting preferences may have decisive, direct effects on the election's results. Second, the disinvestment of the most partisan citizens from the electoral campaign could be indirectly detrimental on the election's result, in that it would plausibly prevent them for engagement and activism in the campaign. Candidates running for election should then avoid person-based attacks in favour of the more informative and correct criticisms on political issues.

The main strength of this study was the adoption of a complex experimental procedure (the DPTE, Redlawsk & Lau, 2009). The advantages of this method mainly concern the possibility to examine participants' selective exposure to negative messages, the "here today, gone tomorrow" flowing information, and, most importantly for the present research, the availability of a great amount of information. Previous experimental studies on the effects of negative campaigns were based on forced exposure to very few information (mostly negative) about the dislikeable candidate. In this study, participants were free to read negative messages along with a great amount of positive or neutral information regarding the competing candidates. This is especially important today given that the contemporary post-broadcast era is characterized by a proliferation of information and media choices (Prior, 2007).

In this experiment, I simulated a two-party system by introducing two candidates only. This choice allowed me to simplify the experimental procedure and to gain results comparable with those from previous studies on the topic. However, in future research it would be interesting to explore whether the extremity effects in the evaluation of candidates can also be observed in multi-party systems, in which many short-lasting parties typically compete in the political arena (see for instance Corbetta, Cavazza, &

Roccatto, 2009). It could be argued that parties are perceived as less entitative (i.e., less inalterable and with more permeable boundaries) in multi-party systems than in bipolar systems. If this is the case, we should expect less extremity in the evaluation of candidates as previous research showed that ingroup derogation emerge only when the groups are entitative and central to the participants' self-images (Lewis & Sherman, 2010). Similarly, it would be interesting to examine if similar effects emerge when candidates are part of broader political coalitions. Future studies performed by considering different political systems and testing the potential moderating role of the perception of entitativity will lead to a better understanding of this phenomenon.

Another interesting line to follow in future studies is related to the role played by electoral polls. A long tradition of studies in political science and social psychology focused on a variety of effects exerted by the information provided by the polls on people's vote choice, such as the "bandwagon" effect and the "underdog effect" (e.g., Mehrabian, 1998). In a research on the moderating factors of the black-sheep effect, Marques et al. (2001, Study 3) found that participants derogated ingroup deviants more when there was uncertainty vs. certainty about the ingroup superiority. Future studies addressing the interactive effect between exposure to person-based negative messages and to polls showing the inparty candidate as the winner vs. loser of the political competition would be very interesting.

### **Conclusion**

This research helped us to understand the extent to which extremity effects may be observed in the political domain. The findings revealed that political candidates, as members of significant social groups, are not exempt from the forms of extremity in evaluations typically observed in other social groups (Marques et al., 1998). This is

particularly relevant in the electoral context: Considering that the ultimate goal of candidates is to persuade voters to choose them, the current research allowed me to advance some suggestions to politicians in order to direct their communication strategies. The use of person-based negative messages showed to produce a backlash effect among highly identified partisans. Running an electoral campaign based on personal attacks may have serious detrimental effects for candidates by alienating their most loyal voters.

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## Appendix

Two examples of person-based negative messages

1. “He didn’t deserve his degree”

*In La Repubblica front page a harsh attack of Bianchini on Carli<sup>5</sup>*

Today La Repubblica reports a harsh attack of Bianchini on Carli: “Carli talks nonsense even when talking about issues he is supposed to be competent on. People who say he bought his university degree are clearly right. If a person buys his own degree, he is obviously not an honest and competent person. For Carli, words as ‘honesty’ and ‘competence’ don’t have any value: He just uses them to lie to voters”.

2. “He used to be drunk and involved in fight when he was young”

*From La Repubblica: Carli attacks Bianchini:*

From today edition of La Repubblica, Carli’s attack to Bianchini: “Some of Bianchini’s friends said that, when completely drunk, he was involved in a fight in a pub. He was unhurt but his rival was hospitalized for a month. Bianchini’s past tells us that he is nothing good for our present”.

Two examples of issue-based negative messages

1. “He will make public transportation worse”

*La Repubblica reports that Bianchini attacked Carli’s political program*

Yesterday La Repubblica reported that Bianchini affirmed: “If Carli will be elected he will reduce the investment in the public transportation service. Is this a good solution to

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<sup>5</sup> “La Repubblica” is one of the major Italian newspapers; Bianchini and Carli were the names attributed to the fictitious candidates running in the campaign.

handle the public transports company' budget troubles? Not at all. That's only a way to favor those citizens who can afford and maintain a car, to all the others cost".

2. "Italians are not priority"

*First page in La Repubblica, Carli attacks Bianchini*

First page in La Repubblica, Carli attacks Bianchini: "If Bianchini will be elected, he will turn his back to his fellow citizens. Bianchini wants all immigrants to have access to council houses. If we are talking about houses built on Italians' money, a city mayor should not put Italians aside".

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between all the variables used in the study

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Experimental group	-0.10	1.00	-.05	-.06	.08	-.25**	.08	-.22*	-	-	-	-
2. Political identification	4.52	1.59	-	.14	.01	.23*	-.35***	.22*	.14	.10	-.07	-.02
3. Inparty evaluation T <sub>0</sub>	5.76	2.06		-	-.07	.39***	-.10	.29**	.19	.18	.01	-.07
4. Outparty evaluation T <sub>0</sub>	4.58	2.21			-	-.01	.26**	-.08	.04	.05	-.10	-.04
5. Inparty evaluation T <sub>1</sub>	6.13	2.23				-	-.26**	.76***	-.12	-.08	.11	.11
6. Outparty evaluation T <sub>1</sub>	3.08	2.07					-	-.34***	-.10	-.12	.00	.17
7. Vote for inparty	0.75	0.44						-	-.13	-.16	.15	-.04
8. Person-based messages from inparty <sup>a</sup>	2.13	1.73							-	.53***	-	-
9. Person-based messages from outparty <sup>a</sup>	2.43	1.91								-	-	-
10. Issue-based messages from inparty <sup>b</sup>	3.26	2.12									-	.44***
11. Issue-based messages from outparty <sup>b</sup>	3.11	1.76										-

*Note.* The experimental group is coded as 1 = person-based negative campaign, -1 = issue-based negative campaign.

<sup>a</sup> Statistics are reported for participants in the person-based negative campaign condition ( $n = 53$ )

<sup>b</sup> Statistics are reported for participants in the issue-based negative campaign condition ( $n = 65$ )

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$



Table 2. Moderated regression models predicting the evaluations of the inparty/outparty candidates and vote for the inparty candidate as a function of the experimental manipulation and participants' political identification.

	Inparty evaluation T <sub>1</sub>	Outparty evaluation T <sub>1</sub>	Vote for inparty T <sub>1</sub>
Inparty evaluation T <sub>0</sub>	.78(.18)***	-	.67(.25)**
Outparty evaluation T <sub>0</sub>	-	.54(.17)**	-.22(.26)
Experimental group (1 = person-based negative campaign)	-.50(.18)**	.09(.17)	-.61(.26)*
Political identification	.36(.18)	-.71(.17)***	.57(.26)*
Experimental group*political identification	-.36(.18)*	.13(.17)	-.45(.26)^
$R^2$	.26	.19	.26
$\Delta R^2$ due to the interaction	.03 $F(1,113) =$ 3.96*	.00 $F(1,113) =$ 0.57	.03 $\chi^2(1) =$ 3.15^

*Note.* Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients for inparty/outparty evaluation and logistic regression coefficients for inparty vote (standard errors in parentheses). For inparty vote Nagelkerke  $R^2$  is reported.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \* $p < .05$ , ^  $p < .10$

## Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Moderated mediation model predicting the evaluation of the inparty candidate as a function of experimental condition (person- vs. issue-based negative campaign), exposure to person-based negative messages from the inparty candidate, and political identification. Unstandardized regression coefficients (standard errors in parentheses). \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

*Figure 2.* Moderating effect of political identification on the link between exposure to person-based negative messages delivered by the inparty candidate and the inparty evaluation.

Figure 1

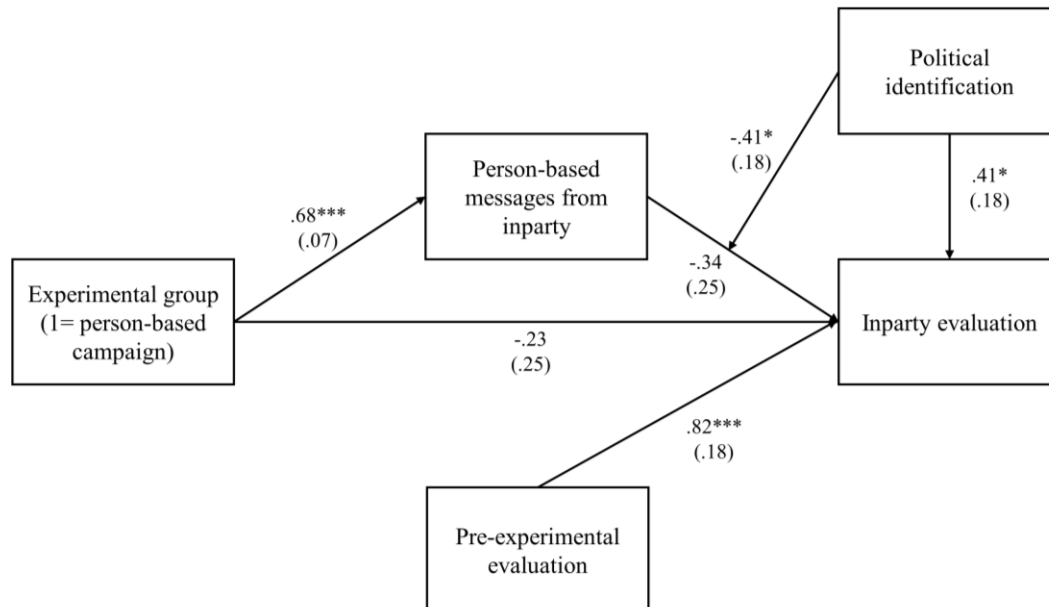


Figure 2

