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Running Head: NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING AND EMOTIONS

Explaining the effects of exposure to negative campaigning: The mediating role of  
emotions

Silvia Russo

## Abstract

I analyzed the role of emotional reactions to negative campaigning as mediators of the link between exposure to negative messages, evaluations of candidates, and voting behavior. In an experimental study ( $N = 103$ ) I found that exposure to issue-based negative messages from the outparty provoked anxiety, which increased selective exposure to political information that, in turn, improved the outparty evaluation; and exposure to person-based negative messages from the inparty provoked aversion, which negatively influenced inparty evaluation. Finally, the evaluations of candidates significantly predicted vote choices.

*Keywords:* negative campaigning; emotions; Affective Intelligence; candidates evaluations; voting behavior

In the last decades, political campaigns have seen candidates engaged in attacking their opponents just as often as presenting their own standing on political issues (Lau & Rovner, 2009). However, it is not clear to date if such strategy is effective and the results of studies on negative campaigning are often mixed (Lau & Rovner, 2009). This inconsistency may be due to a vague definition of negative campaign. Research showed that the persuasive effects of negative messages are moderated by their relevance: Relevant vs. irrelevant negative messages provide much more useful information about unfavorable outcomes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In the political field, messages attacking the opponent on specific political issues are considered politically relevant, while attacks focusing on personal characteristics are considered as politically irrelevant (Brooks & Geer, 2007). The former, but not the latter, give useful information about the political negative consequences of supporting a candidate (Fridkin & Kenney, 2008). On the contrary, person-based negative messages are often perceived as unfair, and thus “may create more negative feelings toward the sponsor, rather than the target” (Garramone, 1984, p. 251). Previous research has often confirmed that, compared to issue-based appeals, person-based appeals result in more negative evaluations of the source and an increased likelihood to vote for the target (e.g., Budesheim, Houston, & DePaola, 1996; Carraro & Castelli, 2010). On the contrary, some authors found null or even positive effects of issue-based messages on the source and negative effects on the target (Fridkin & Kenney, 2004, 2008).

In addition, partisanship plays a moderator role on the effectiveness of negative political messages. Voters tend to react differently if negative messages are delivered by an inparty candidate (a candidate sharing the same political ideology of the voter) or by an outparty candidate (a candidate with a different political ideology). For example, Matthews and Dietz-Uhler (1998) observed that voters identifying with the political party of the attacker rated him less favorably after viewing negative advertisements, disliking that a member of

their group engaged in a disapproved tactic. The authors explained this finding referring to the black-sheep effect, a form of extremity in the evaluation of ingroup members that occurs to preserve a positive social identity (e.g., Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988).

Based on the Affective Intelligence theory (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000), I advanced and empirically tested an alternative interpretation for the effects of negative campaigning: Emotional reactions to negative messages may—at least in part—affect voters' political preferences by modifying their political information search.

### **Emotion in Politics: The Affective Intelligence Theory**

The Affective Intelligence theory (Marcus et al., 2000) posits relationships between the tenor of messages, the emotional reactions to those messages, and the behavioral consequences of the emotions. According to this theory, people respond to political situations via a dual system of emotional appraisal: the disposition system and the surveillance system. The disposition system guides most of our daily lives by stimulating learned patterns of behavior. When habits successfully match with the current action, we experience enthusiasm, which leads people to rely on preexisting preferences (Brader, 2006). In electoral campaigns, enthusiast voters become more involved and more inclined to rely on heuristic cues (mainly party identification). The disposition system includes also feelings of aversion (e.g., anger), typically generated by familiar and unfavorable stimuli. Given that aversion is a form of moral disapprobation provoked by unjust or illegitimate events, it reinforces the desire to react against the cause of a negative stimulus or to punish those who could control or moderate the stimulus (DeRivera, 1981). In a political campaign, aversion should have direct but negative effects on the evaluation of candidates (Steenbergen & Ellis, 2006).

The second system, the surveillance system is activated by novel or threatening events; it alerts us about the inappropriateness of our ongoing behavior, and shifts our attention to the new or threatening stimuli. The emotional expression of the surveillance

system activation is anxiety. Anxiety stimulates the desire to more fully understand and analyze the source of a potential threat, promotes active learning, reasoned thought, and decreasing reliance on habits and dispositions (Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Marcus et al., 2000). Consistent with empirical evidences showing that anxiety leads to heightened interest in, and focus on, the threatening stimuli (e.g., MacLeod & Matthews, 1988), in electoral campaigns anxiety may cause a fundamental change in people's political thinking. Instead of relying on party identification and other heuristics, anxious voters should interrupt their habitual behavior and engage in an effortful information processing due to an increased vigilance (Marcus et al., 2000).

In spite of the large attention emotions gained in political research (Westen, 2007), we know very little about the role played by emotions in negative campaigns. Only a few studies specifically addressed emotional reactions to negative messages (e.g., Chang, 2001; Kiss & Hobolt, 2012), but they typically overlooked the different content dimensions and voters' and candidates' political affiliation. A few years ago, in an experimental study (Russo, 2011), I found that, in line with the literature on the black-sheep effect, participants expressed more intense aversion when exposed to person-based attacks delivered by an inparty candidate than when the same candidate proposed issue-based attacks. I also found that issue-based messages elicited high levels of anxiety, but only when they were delivered by an outparty candidate, thus confirming the idea that issue-based negative messages were perceived as threatening information. Based on these results, I considered emotions as potential explanations for the controversial effects produced by exposure to negative campaigns.

### **Goals and Hypotheses**

The main goal of this study was to identify the psychosocial processes accounting for the effects of exposure to negative messages. I focused on the role of emotions as mediators of the link between exposure to person- vs. issue-based

negative messages and candidates evaluation. Based on the literature above, I advanced two hypotheses.

Issue- vs. person-based negative messages coming from an outparty source should provoke anxiety (cf. Russo, 2011) which should lead to a higher interest in the political informational environment. Increased information search should lead to reconsider one's own political preference by upgrading the evaluation of the outparty candidate and downgrading the evaluation of the inparty candidate (Hp1).

Person-based negative messages coming from the inparty should provoke aversion and/or reduce enthusiasm. Conversely, issue-based messages from the inparty should reduce aversion and/or foster enthusiasm (cf. Matthews & Dietz-Uhler, 1998; Russo, 2011). Aversion and enthusiasm should have opposite effects on candidates evaluations: While the former should lead to downgrade the inparty candidate by lowering his/her evaluation, the latter should be positively related to it. Similarly, I expected aversion to increase outparty evaluation and enthusiasm to decrease inparty evaluation (Hp2).

## **Method**

**Participants and procedure.** One hundred and three US students from Rutgers University (49.51 % women; mean age 21.06) participated in this study. All participants were recruited from undergraduate political science classes and received extra credit for their participation. They completed the task individually in a computer lab.

The entire study was conducted as a computer-based campaign simulation based on a between-subjects quasi-experimental design and performed using Lau and Redlawsk's (1997) Dynamic Process Tracking Environment (DPTE, see also Russo, Mirisola, & Roccato, 2014 for a similar procedure). I created a fictitious campaign environment filled with changing information in the form of newspaper-style headlines that, if selected, linked to the associated information texts. Headlines were quickly changing on the computer screen so that

participants who wished to read the full texts were forced to be selective in their choice of messages. While dynamically presenting the campaign information, the DPTE unobtrusively tracked participants' information selection and reading behavior. Participants were asked to play the role of a voter during an election in which two fictitious candidates (a Republican and a Democrat), were running for president. They were instructed to prepare to cast a vote in the upcoming election by using information available to them on the dynamic information board.

After completing a pre-questionnaire, participants were instructed about the system and taken through a trial run. Given that previous research showed that negative campaigning strategies should be studied not in isolation, but rather focusing on the synergistic nature of one candidate's own campaign with that of the opponent (e.g., Houston, Doan, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 1999), participants have been randomly assigned to different experimental conditions. Based on a between-subject 2 (inparty strategy: positive vs. negative) X 2 (outparty strategy: positive vs. negative) design the experimental conditions were as follows: (a) a control condition (none of the candidates go negative),  $n = 27$ ; (b) only the inparty candidate going negative,  $n = 25$ ; (c) only the outparty candidate going negative,  $n = 29$ ; (d) both candidates going negative,  $n = 22$ . To determine whether the candidates were inparty or outparty, I combined information about political affiliation of participants (Republican or Democrat) with candidates' affiliations.

During the simulation, political and personal information about each candidate as well as endorsements, polls, and non-political information scrolled down on the computer screen in random order. In the control condition both candidates were attributed 12 positive messages (i.e., messages focused on the source's stance on political issues), while in the experimental conditions the candidate going negative

was attributed 4 issue-based, 4 person-based negative messages, and 4 positive messages. 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; messages' full texts are available upon request).

In the middle of the campaign, a poll appeared on the screen, asking participants to rate their emotional reactions to the campaign. Once they answered the questions, the campaign started again from the point where it was interrupted. At the end of the campaign, participants voted and completed a questionnaire.

### Measures

**Dependent variables.** Once the campaign simulation was over, participants casted a vote. They were free to either choose one of the candidates or decide not to vote. Given that only 6 participants did not vote, I collapsed into the same dependent variable the responses of the participants who chose not to vote and of those who voted for the outparty candidate (coded as 0; 1 = voted for the inparty candidate). Participants' evaluations of the candidates were coded on a 100-point scale.

### **Independent and mediating variables.**

*Selective exposure to negative messages before the poll.* Four selective exposure indexes have been computed. Based on the negative messages read by the participants, I created a summed index of issue-based negative messages coming from the outparty and the inparty candidate, and of person-based negative messages coming from the inparty and the outparty source. To control for individual propensity to read information during the campaign each index was divided by the total number of information opened during the campaign (multiplied by 100 for easier numerical interpretation).

*Emotions towards the campaign.* Based on Marcus and colleagues (2006), in the pre-experimental questionnaire and in the middle of the campaign participants rated on 100-point

scales how much politics made them feeling angry, anxious, afraid, bitter, enthusiast, hopeful, hateful, proud, resentful, and worried. After checking for dimensionality, I computed three mean indexes of aversion, anxiety, and enthusiasm reported before and during the campaign. To keep under control individual baseline emotions, I used emotions' residual-gain score estimate computed as the residual of emotions reported during the campaign on emotions reported before the campaign.

*Selective exposure to political information after the poll.* I computed an index summing all the political information opened during the second part of the campaign divided by the total number of information accessed during the entire campaign (multiplied by 100 for easier numerical interpretation).

## **Results**

Preliminary analyses showed that there were no significant differences between the experimental groups as concerns a few control variables (age, gender, political interest, political knowledge, and media habits). To investigate the effects of the inparty vs. outparty's campaign strategy on selective exposure to negative messages, the proportions of opened negative messages coming from the inparty vs. outparty candidate were submitted to 2 (inparty strategy: positive vs. negative) X 2 (outparty strategy: positive vs. negative) X 2 (content of messages: issue vs. person based) mixed-model ANOVA, with the last factor varying within-participants and the other ones between-participants. Among all the main and interactive effects, the inparty strategy had a significant effect on the selective exposure to negative messages coming from the inparty ( $F(1,99) = 205.26, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .67$ ). Interestingly, this effect was further qualified by the content of negative messages ( $F(1,99) = 5.40, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .05$ ), indicating that participants selected more often person-based (mean = 2.09,  $SD = 1.59$ ) than issue-based negative messages (mean = 1.45,  $SD = 1.24$ ). In

relation to selective exposure to negative messages coming from the outparty, only the campaign strategy had a significant main effect ( $F(1,99) = 169.92, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .63$ , proportion of negative messages opened in the negative condition = 1.83,  $SD = 1.00$ ). Thus, the analysis revealed that selective exposure to negative messages was mostly determined by the availability of negative messages, and that participants had a preference for person-based (vs. issue-based) attacks delivered by the inparty candidate.

In order to test the hypotheses, I estimated two path analyses models (WLSMV estimator). Figure 1 shows the model aimed at testing the effect of exposure to negative messages coming from the outparty candidate (controlling for messages coming from the inparty candidate) on the evaluations of candidates, through the mediation of anxiety and exposure to political information. Its fit,  $CFI = .932, TLI = .905, RMSEA = .046$ , was good. Consistent with Hp1, exposure to issue-based (but not to person-based) negative messages coming from the outparty candidate provoked an increase in anxiety. More interestingly, anxiety exerted a positive and significant effect on the proportion of political information accessed during the second part of the campaign. A heightened search for political information led to a higher evaluation of the outparty candidate but it did not affect the evaluation of the inparty candidate.

Figure 2 shows the model aimed at testing Hp2. The fit of the model was good,  $CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.089, RMSEA = .000$ . As expected, person-based negative messages coming from the inparty candidate provoked an increase in aversion, while exposure to issue-based messages decreased it. Aversion, in turn, had a negative impact on the evaluation of the inparty candidate and a positive effect on the evaluation of the outparty candidate. Exposure to negative messages coming from the inparty was not related to enthusiasm; however, consistent with the expectations, enthusiasm positively predicted the inparty candidate evaluation. Moreover, exposure to issue-based messages coming from the outparty candidate

provoked aversion and reduced enthusiasm. Finally, in both models, evaluations of the candidates strongly and significantly influenced participants' vote choice.

### **Discussion**

This research offered new insights on the psychological processes underlying the effects of exposure to negative campaigning on evaluations of candidates and vote choice. I integrated two different fields: Research on the effects of different types of negative messages (e.g., Budesheim et al., 1996; Carraro & Castelli, 2010) and research on the role of emotions in the political domain (e.g., Marcus et al., 2000). Working on the effects of negative campaigning on candidates' evaluations and vote choices, I empirically tested emotional reactions as mediators of the link between exposure to different type of negative messages and candidates evaluations. I showed that exposure to person-based negative messages coming from an inparty source provoked aversion, which led to a lower evaluation of the inparty candidate and a higher evaluation of the outparty, providing support to the idea that the black-sheep effect may be observed in the context of electoral campaigns.

The results also supported previous evidence about the persuasive impact of issue-based negative messages coming from an outparty source (Budesheim et al., 1996). However, based on the Affective Intelligence theory, I offered a new explanation for this effect: The increase in anxiety provoked by these negative messages led people to search for political information and, subsequently, to upgrade the outparty candidate's evaluation. I also found that issue-based negative messages from the outparty candidate provoked aversion and reduced enthusiasm. This result indicates that these messages actually elicited a mix of negative emotions. This might be due to a difficulty in differentiating between the disposition and the surveillance system as suggested by the Affective Intelligence theory, especially when negative

emotions are concerned. Alternatively, it is possible that the measures I used to assess the emotional appraisal were suboptimal. Future research using different measures of emotional appraisal (e.g., physiological measures) could help to clarify this issue.

Moreover, this study also represented a step further from previous research on the topic: By simulating electoral campaigns with the DPTE, I could analyze participants' selective exposure to political information. The DPTE is a particularly suitable tool for testing predictions drawn from the Affective Intelligence theory, especially because the interplay between emotions and information selection and processing is a crucial aspect of this theory. On this topic, this study revealed that the synergic nature of the campaign strategy (i.e., whether one or both candidates go negative) does not have any effect on the selective exposure to negative messages. However, I also found that, among the negative messages delivered by the inparty candidate, person-based attacks were more appealing than issue-based attacks. This is surprising considering that these messages provoked aversion towards the campaign. Even though the analysis of why voters select messages that elicit negative emotions was beyond the aim of this study, in future research it will be of high interest to understand if defense or accuracy motives drive selective exposure to these messages (cf., Hart et al., 2009).

This research had some main limitations. The first one concerns the path analysis models: Due to the relatively limited sample size, I had to test the hypotheses by the mean of two different models. The test of an integrated model including aversion, anxiety, and enthusiasm could be interesting. The second limitation concerns the fictitious candidates I used as sources of negative messages. While this simplification allowed me to study voters reactions to negative messages by *a priori* excluding potential confounding factors such as pre-existing specific attitudes toward real politicians, I acknowledge that in real political contexts personal attacks can still be consequential and anxiety-provoking. However, since

this research involved generic candidates, I believe that considering person-based attacks as unfair behaviors was reasonable. Finally, it is also worth noting that participants decided to read very few negative information. It is plausible that in a real electoral campaign voters would unintentionally be exposed to a greater amount of negative information. Thus, it is possible that the effects observed in this study would be more substantial in a real electoral campaign.

In spite of these limitations, the current study also had some strong points. First, it provided new insights for the development of research on negative campaigning by underlying the importance of studying emotions as mediators of the link between exposure to negative messages and evaluations of candidates. Second, I gained results easily generalizable to broader persuasion processes. Indeed, most of the studies in this field are limited to the effects of forced exposure to persuasive messages in poor informational environments where the availability of pieces of information is unrealistically scarce. However, persuasive processes do not occur in a vacuum, especially today when the spread of the internet use makes every kind of information readily available. As showed with this research, the mechanisms underlying the effects of exposure to persuasive messages might be explained by emotional responses and the subsequent search for information. Finally, as concerns their applicative side, the results indicated that the only effective negative messages are the politically relevant ones. On the contrary, politically irrelevant negative messages have a backlash against the source. The message is clear: To move voters to their side, politicians should avoid person-based attacks in favor of issue-based criticisms.

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## Figure captions

*Figure 1.* Path analysis model, test of Hp1. Standardized coefficients are provided.

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

*Figure 2.* Path analysis model, test of Hp2: Standardized coefficients are provided.

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

Figure 1

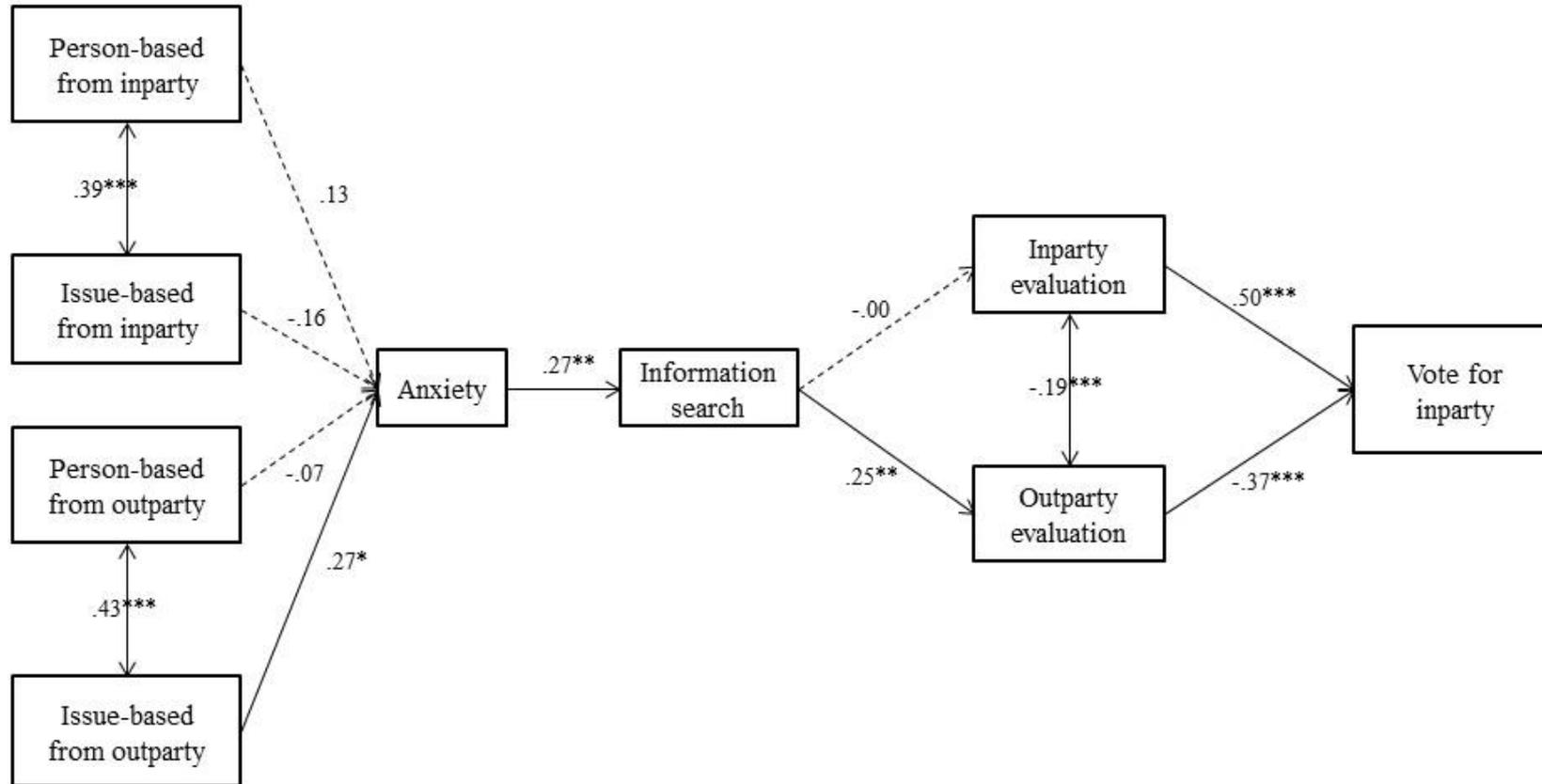


Figure 2

