

Negative Campaigns, Negative Votes?

The Effects of Negative and Dirty Campaigns on Citizen Meanings of Voting

Ming Boyer, Cal Le Gall & Carolina Plescia

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Abstract

While there is considerable evidence on the effects of negative campaigns on mobilization and support for democracy, such research has often overlooked effects on how citizens perceive the electoral process itself. Closing this gap may account for mixed results in the existing literature. In this paper, we explore the relationship between different types of campaigning (i.e., positive, negative and “dirty”) and citizen meanings of voting, which we believe is paramount to account for those mixed findings. Cross-sectional evidence suggests predictable effects of ingroup and outgroup campaign perceptions on whether citizens vote *for* one candidate or *against* another, or find voting meaningless altogether. A survey experiment, however, finds no effects of campaigns on meanings of voting, but rather a partisan bias in campaign perceptions. Explanations for this disparity, as well as consequences for democracy are discussed.

Introduction

Negative campaigning – campaign aspects that emphasize an opponent’s flaws rather than one’s own qualities – has worried scholars and commentators alike. Recent research finds that perceived transgressions of social norms drive “backlash effects” of negative campaigns on the politicians that use them (Hopmann et al., 2018) and reduced trust in politicians (Reiter & Matthes, 2021). However, research into negative campaigning has produced mixed findings concerning mobilization and has found only minor effects on attitudes related to democracy (e.g., Donovan et al., 2016; Lau et al., 2007; Nai, 2013). Besides, no studies have explored citizen perceptions of the electoral process itself: citizen meanings of voting. Much is therefore still unclear about negative campaigning and its role in democratic politics.

Our argument in this paper stands on three main claims. Firstly, we argue that negative and “dirty” campaigning affect not only citizens’ (inclination to) vote, but also the *meaning they adhere to that vote*. Indeed, there is evidence showing that motivations to vote, e.g., a sense of duty, are contingent upon perceptions of contextual circumstances such as the type of campaigning (Martin, 2004). Secondly, we argue that the effects of negative campaigns on citizen meanings of voting are strongly dependent on whether the campaigning party is considered the ingroup or outgroup party. We do so because many studies show that perceptions of negative campaigns are strongly biased by partisanship and attacks by one’s own party can be perceived differently by partisans (Haselmayer et al., 2020). At the end of the chain, we contend that citizen meanings of voting are related to their inclination to participate in elections and their attitudes toward democracy, because many studies show that electoral mobilization is dependent on meanings citizens attach to voting, e.g., a sense of duty (Blais et al., 2019).

There is more than one way to categorize meanings of voting. In this paper, we follow the literature on negative partisanship, that contends that citizens largely align *against* a party

or candidate, rather than *in favor* of one (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). Accordingly, we distinguish between positive meanings of voting – voting *in favor* of a party or candidate – and negative meanings of voting – voting *against* a party or candidate. However, following up on worries that negative campaigns may alienate citizens from democracy altogether (e.g., Lau et al., 2007), we additionally define non-meanings of voting – i.e., meanings that are negative toward voting itself. We theorize that political campaigns can affect these meanings, depending on whether they can be considered positive, negative or ‘dirty’, as well as on the (ingroup or outgroup) party that uses them. We also theorize that these meanings of voting are related to important political attitudes and behavior, regarding voting and democracy.

We test our claims in one of Europe’s most controversial contemporary elections: the 2022 Hungarian election and further our knowledge on negative campaigning in three crucial manners. First, we extend the relatively new investigation of “dirty” campaigning. Second, we introduce the concept of citizen meanings of voting to the field, initiating an exploration of mechanisms to better understand the effects of negative campaigning. And third, by differentiating between ingroup and outgroup campaigns, we allow for more differential effects than previous work on negative and dirty campaigning. Taken together, this paints an innovative and complex picture of negative campaigns and their consequences for democracy, as discussed in the conclusion of this paper.

Transgressing Social Norms: Negative and “Dirty” Political Campaigns

Research into negative campaigns generally focuses on three main outcome categories: general mobilization, specific mobilization, and system-supporting attitudes (Lau et al., 2007). The first strand thus focuses on the presumed effect of negative campaigning on electoral turnout. Findings, however, are rather ambivalent (Lau et al., 2007), or at least depend on the content of the campaign (Nai, 2013) or the political system (Donovan et al., 2016). Specifically, some

studies argue that negative campaigning demobilizes voters by making voters disenchanted about politics (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), while other studies point to mobilizing effects because of heightened attention and awareness towards the campaign (Martin, 2004). These ambivalent findings may suggest that we do not yet fully understand how these effects work in citizens' minds.

The second strand of research focuses on the effects of negative campaigning on citizens' party choice. Such research has found that negative campaigning may harm a candidate's opponent, but it may also cause a backlash effect where certain citizens abandon their preferred candidate because of these negative campaign strategies (Lau et al., 2007; Lau & Rovner, 2009). In multi-party systems, this may even cause a boost to third parties, as citizens choose their second favorite (Galasso et al., 2021; Walter & van der Eijk, 2019b). In two-party systems, effects might be more detrimental and decrease turnout.

The final strand of research investigates the effects on "system-supporting attitudes" (SSAs), i.e., attitudes in support of democracy. SSAs include political efficacy, political trust and satisfaction with democracy. Meta-analysis shows that this strand of research has uncovered relatively consistent findings that indicate that negative campaigning reduces feelings of self-efficacy and trust in government or politics (Lau et al., 2007). However, the effects are very small and may therefore obscure variation.

Even though research investigating negative campaigning dates back decades, the mechanisms behind their effects are understudied. However, some studies offer some insights regarding intervening factors linking negative campaigns and mobilization. First, Martin (2004) identified three mechanisms of voter motivation, i.e. republican duty, candidate threat, and perceived closeness of the election, as variables that translate exposure to negative advertisement into increased participation. For instance, negative campaigning can stimulate participation by activating concern over the future of the country. Second, some evidence

points toward perceived transgression of social norms as the main driver of backlash effects, decreased turnout and fewer SSAs. Uncivil messages and attacks on opponents' person have stronger negative outcomes than civil attacks and attacks on opponents' issue stances because they are perceived as less fair (Hopmann et al., 2018). Indeed, perceptions of such "dirty" campaigning – campaigning "below-the-belt" – reduce trust in politicians (Reiter & Matthes, 2021). Therefore, it is important to differentiate between negative campaigning that is perceived as fair (to which we will refer as "negative" campaigning), and negative campaigning that is perceived to transgress social norms (which we will refer to as "dirty" campaigning) (Reiter & Matthes, 2021). These are contrasted to "positive" campaigning – campaigning that focuses on a candidate's own qualities.

As a second type of simplification, research surprisingly often considers negative campaigning as an attribute of a certain election cycle, rather than an act by a specific political party or candidate (Walter & van der Eijk, 2019a). However, there is evidence that perceptions of negative campaigns are biased by partisanship. For one, attacks by one's own party are not perceived as negative by strong partisans, because humans are more lenient when judging behavior by ingroup members than outgroup members (Haselmayer et al., 2020). Especially in two-party systems this may be crucial as they clearly define and emphasize ingroup and outgroup parties, as well as conflict between them. As such, any effects of negative campaigning should be considered in light of the relation between sender and receiver of these campaign messages.

Negative Campaigns and Citizen Meanings of Voting

While existing research into negative campaigning has offered important insights into what types of effects negative campaigning can have, there might be additional, related factors that negative campaigning might impact. Looking, for instance, at the backlash effect described

above, it seems that negative campaigning can cause citizens to base their vote choice on who *not* to choose, rather than a positive criterion. In other words, prior research implies – but does not test – that negative campaigning leads to a *negative meaning of voting* – i.e., voting against a candidate or party, rather than a *positive meaning of voting* – i.e., voting in favor of a candidate or party. This means that negative campaigns might not only change citizens' vote choice, but also the meanings that citizens adhere to their vote.

With meanings of voting, we mean both the significance of voting for citizens as well as what is meant by voting for citizens, which may encompass citizen definitions or understandings of voting and/or the motivations they have for voting or not. There are several ways to conceptualize citizens' meanings of voting. For instance, the rational choice literature has generally viewed voting as an instrumental choice based on a calculus concerning the outcome of the election (Blais et al., 2019; Downs, 1957; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). In this framework, the utility citizens derive from voting is a function of multiple aspects: the success of a preferred candidate or party, the probability to be pivotal or other factors which refer to subjective feelings derived from normative, ethical, and social considerations. Second, an expressive approach conceptualizes voting as a mechanism that citizens use to signal their agreement with certain ideas, values or groups (Brennan & Hamlin, 1998; Schuessler, 2000). Here, citizens can gain utility from communicating their support for a preferred candidate, party or position regardless of who wins the election. Third, another strand of the literature views voting as a symbolic act (Campbell, 2008). This perspective refers predominantly to the importance of exercising one's rights, the sense of civic duty, responsibility and privilege, as well as the more general views on being part of a community (Dalton et al., 2007).

In relation to negative campaigning, we differentiate between (1) positive meanings of voting – voting *in favor* of a certain party or candidate, (2) negative meanings of voting – voting *against* a certain party or candidate, and (3) non-meanings of voting – perceiving voting to

have a lack of meaning, e.g., to be meaningless. This discrimination between positive and negative meanings of voting is especially relevant in times of increasing negative partisanship – defining one’s partisanship by aversion of the opponent (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016, 2018). However, it is distinct from the negative partisanship literature in its ability to differ between elections, candidates, or situations. Rather than a stable part of one’s self-image, it is an attribute of one’s concept of voting related to the democratic process as a whole, a specific election cycle, or a specific vote.

In light of the above, we investigate the effects of (a) positive, (b) negative and (c) dirty campaigning, by the (1) ingroup party or the (2) outgroup party, on (i) positive, (ii) negative, or (iii) non-meanings of voting (see Figure 1).

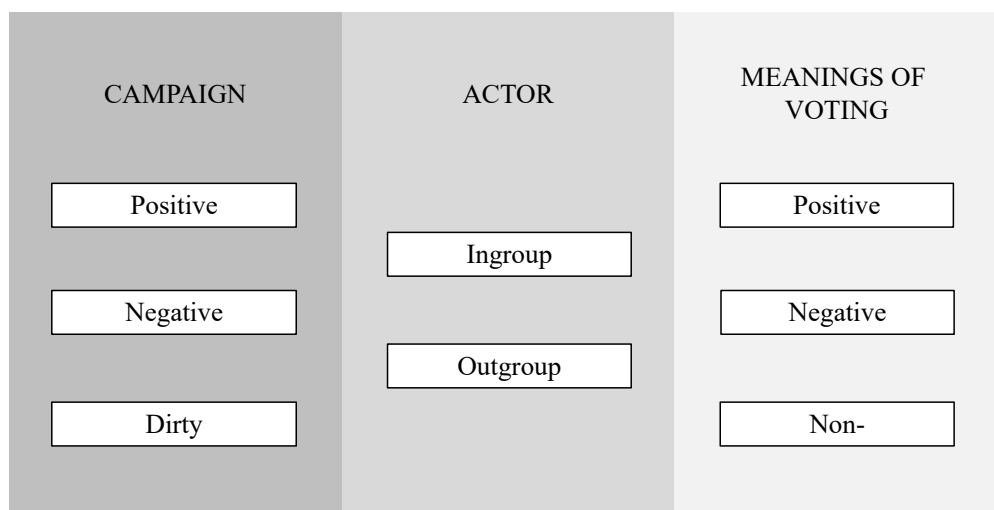


Figure 1. Elements in the analysis of the effects of negative campaigning on citizen meanings of voting.

Turning first to ingroup party campaigning, it is to be expected that – by emphasizing a candidate’s beneficial attributes – positive campaigning is associated with increased positive meanings of voting. That is, because voters are pointed toward their candidate’s positive attributes, these will be more easily accessible in their minds and they will base their votes on the fact that this candidate is the one they would like to see in office. In a similar vein, it is to

be expected that ingroup party negative campaigning might lead voters to build stronger associations between ‘voting’ and the flaws of their opponent, which would cause them to base their votes on the fact that they would not want to see their opponent in office. In other words, ingroup positive and negative campaigning serve to activate existing predispositions or reinforce initial preferences by increasing clarity of messaging for ingroup members.

In contrast, ingroup party dirty campaigning – as it *per definition* transgresses social norms – should not have such a straightforward impact on meanings of voting. As mentioned, a downside of dirty campaigning flagged in the literature is that it can trigger backlash against the sponsoring candidate, especially if the attack is perceived as not being fair by ingroup members (Lau & Rovner, 2009). As a consequence, dirty campaigning is likely to lead to attitudinal ambivalence, i.e. simultaneous occurrence of positive and negative evaluations towards voting. In this framework, ambivalence can impede citizens’ ability to ultimately form attitudes or express preferences in general (Groenendyk, 2019; Mutz, 2002; but see Lavine et al., 2012), and on meanings of voting in particular. We expect that – especially in two-party systems, where there are no viable third-party alternatives – this may lead to a feeling that no favorable option exists and that voting is therefore meaningless – i.e., we expect it to lead to non-meanings of voting.

H1a: Positive campaigning by the ingroup party leads to more positive meanings of voting.

H1b: Negative campaigning by the ingroup party leads to more negative meanings of voting.

H1c: Dirty campaigning by the ingroup party leads to more non-meanings of voting.

The effects by outgroup party campaigning are expected to be considerably different. Positive campaigning by the outgroup party is expected to evoke counterarguing which should lead to no changes in the meanings of voting, or even increase negative meanings of voting (Taber &

Lodge, 2006). Negative campaigning by the outgroup party is expected to be met with a similar reaction, but two effects could be expected here. First, following motivated reasoning theory, counterarguing negative information about the ingroup party may cause a backfire effect causing voters to remember and strengthen their ideas of why they want to vote for their ingroup party (Hart & Nisbet, 2012), leading to a positive meaning of voting. At the same time, negative emotional reactions caused by this campaign might form an additional reason to want to keep the outgroup party out of office, leading to a negative meaning of voting. For dirty campaigning, the latter effect should be the dominant effect, as the outgroup party is perceived to transgress social norms, i.e., outgroup dirty campaigning should lead to negative meanings of voting.

H2a: Positive campaigning by the outgroup party leads to more negative meanings of voting.

H2b: Negative campaigning by the outgroup party leads to both more positive and more negative meanings of voting.

H2c: Dirty campaigning by the outgroup party leads to more negative meanings of voting.

Meanings of Voting and Democracy

How do citizen meanings of voting relate to mobilization and SSAs? First, positive and negative meanings of voting should both mobilize voters. The reason is that they both symbolize specific goals that could be achieved by voting: either the goal is to get a certain party or candidate into office (positive meanings of voting) or the goal is to keep another candidate or party out (negative meanings of voting). Indeed, the literature on psychological determinants of voter turnout suggest that both expressive voting and the desire to hold governors accountable tend to be associated with higher inclination to cast a ballot, by increasing the intrinsic benefits of the act of voting (Smets & van Ham, 2013). Most notably,

Schuessler (2000) made the claim that the expressive value of associating oneself with a political party should be considered in the turnout formula proposed by Riker and Odershook (1968). This suggests that expressing preferences for a given party or towards a policy is at the center of individual mobilization. Besides the expressive motivation to vote, there is abundant empirical evidence that discontent toward governors enhances electoral participation to remove them from office, while the reverse is also true to reward them if they are deemed responsible for good policy performances. In other words, both positive and negative meanings of voting should be positively related to electoral mobilization.

In contrast, non-meanings of voting should be demobilizing, as the act of voting carries no meaning to the citizens that hold them. Here, the rationale is straightforward: when benefits of voting are deemed null, both instrumentally or expressively, then it makes no sense for voters to go out and vote. Many studies confirm this relationship between believing that elections can make a difference and the individual likelihood to cast a ballot (Gerber et al., 2020). We thus expect that non-meanings of voting are negatively related to mobilization.

H3a: Positive meanings of voting are related to more electoral mobilization.

H3b: Negative meanings of voting are related to more electoral mobilization.

H3c: Non-meanings of voting are related to less electoral mobilization.

The relations that one should expect between meanings of voting and system-supporting attitudes only partially align with those for mobilization. Firstly, as they are based on good work politicians do, have done, or will do in the future, positive meanings of voting should be positively related to system-supporting attitudes. In contrast, we expect that negative meanings of voting, as they are based on the negative consequences of an outgroup victory – are related to less system-supporting attitudes. Indeed, such a negative approach to the democratic process

seems related to system-supporting attitudes, as negative partisanship leads to less satisfaction with democracy (Ridge, 2020). Unsurprisingly, we expect that non-meanings of voting are related to less system-supporting attitudes.

H4a: Positive meanings of voting are related to more system-supporting attitudes.

H4b: Negative meanings of voting are related to less system-supporting attitudes.

H4c: Non-meanings of voting are related to less system-supporting attitudes.

Case and study design

The hypotheses raised in this paper are tested during the campaign period of the 2022 Hungarian legislative elections. This is an interesting case to study the effects of negative campaigning for multiple reasons. First, while Hungary has a multi-party system, the opposition to incumbent Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz entered the elections under a single banner and a single candidate (United Opposition, Márky-Záy Péter). This effectively created a two-party system in Hungary for this election, where we would expect that a lack of alternatives can cause strong disillusionment when one's own party transgresses social norms. Second, as the controversial Fidesz party has been seriously challenged for the first time in a decade, there was a lot at stake for the parties. As is to be expected from previous work (Hassell, 2021), this has caused both candidates to resort to a vast amount of negative campaigning, making this a relevant and useful case for the study of negative campaigning. Moreover, the high profile of this election means that there is a lot of attention to the campaigns and therefore also to the negative campaign aspects during this election.

In this setting, we approach the hypotheses from both a cross-sectional and an experimental point of view. Both studies are conducted within the same survey that is descriptively representative of the Hungarian population, in terms of age, gender and region

(N = 1971). First, participants answered questions regarding their campaign perceptions, meanings of voting, mobilization and system-supporting attitudes (Study 1). At a later stage in the same survey, participants took part in a 3 (positive / negative / dirty campaigning) x 2 (ingroup / outgroup party) between-subjects experiment (Study 2).

Study 1: Cross-sectional Analysis

Method

In Study 1 (preregistration: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/54RY8>), we rely on a three-wave panel study conducted two months before the election (i.e., before the campaigns were at full force; t_0), during the two weeks before the election (i.e., during the height of the campaign; t_1), and right after the election (t_2). All participants that took part at both t_0 and t_1 are included in the analysis. For the effects on turnout, participants are included that took part in all three waves. In analyses in which the group affiliation is used to distinguish between ingroup and outgroup party campaign effects, only those who indicated an affiliation with either party before the campaigns started (t_0) are included in the analysis ($n = 1078$).

As preregistered, the analyses in this paper are based on the correlations between the items at t_1 , during the height of the campaign, as well as turnout at t_2 , after the election. As a robustness check, we have conducted lagged-dependent variable models (see Table A1 and Figure A1 in the appendix). These are more vulnerable to false negatives, as hostility between the parties might have produced part of the effects under study before data collection. However, these robustness checks largely lead to the same conclusions as the analyses in the main text. Similarly, in the paper, we use the preregistered measure of uncorrected campaign perceptions. However, as can be seen in a second robustness check, partisan bias-corrected measures of campaign perceptions following the method by Walter and van der Eijk (2019) lead to the same conclusions (see Table A2 and Figure A2 in the appendix).

Measures

Positive, negative and dirty campaigning. To measure citizens' perceptions of positive, negative and dirty campaigning, we use a shortened measures of Reiter & Matthes' (2021) measure. However, following Walter and van der Eijk (2019), we measure the perceptions of both campaigns separately. For both the incumbent and the opposition, participants are asked to rate the campaign on six items, of which two items measure perceived positive, negative and dirty campaigning each (see Table A3 in the appendix for the exact items). These items are rated on an 11-point scale on the extent to which they participants agree with them. In a confirmatory factor analysis, the items load on the expected three factors and formed reliable scales for both Fidesz and the United Opposition (see Table A4 in the appendix). These scores are recoded, such that ingroup campaigning is campaigning of the party with which a participant indicated an affiliation, and outgroup campaigning is campaigning of the party with which the participant did not indicate an affiliation: positive campaigning ($M_{in} = 6.85$, $SD_{in} = 2.41$, $M_{out} = 5.07$, $SD_{out} = 3.35$), negative campaigning ($M_{in} = 6.83$, $SD_{in} = 2.31$, $M_{out} = 2.48$, $SD_{out} = 2.59$) and dirty campaigning ($M_{in} = 1.86$, $SD_{in} = 2.37$, $M_{out} = 7.40$, $SD_{out} = 2.92$).

Meanings of voting. Positive meanings, negative meanings and non-meanings of voting are measured using three items each, starting with the statement "To me, voting means...". Each of these items are rated on a scale from 0 (completely disagree) through 10 (completely agree) (see Table A5 in the appendix for the exact items). In a confirmatory factor analysis, the items load on the expected three factors and we take the averages to form scales for positive meanings ($M = 7.20$, $SD = 2.26$, Eigenvalue = 1.68, Cronbach's alpha = .72), negative meanings ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 3.11$, Eigenvalue = 2.06, Cronbach's alpha = .84), and non-meanings of voting ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 2.29$, Eigenvalue = 1.37, Cronbach's alpha = .67).

Mobilization. In the cross-sectional approach, mobilization is measured through the intention to vote, which is measured during the campaign on a scale from 0 (definitely not) through 10 (definitely) ($M = 8.85$, $SD = 2.56$). For a subset of the participants i.e., those who also took part at t_2 ($n = 1061$), actual turnout is measured again shortly after the elections (88%). Moreover, in order to take a broader perspective on political participation, mobilization is also measured by participants' intent to closely follow the campaign, measured on a 1-4 scale (52% very interested).

System-supporting attitudes (SSAs). We focus on two SSAs: political trust and satisfaction with democracy. Political trust is measured by asking participants to what extent they trust the Hungarian (a) parliament, (b) government and (c) political parties on a scale from 0 (no trust at all) through 10 (complete trust) ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 2.65$, Cronbach's Alpha = .82). We measure satisfaction with democracy with one item, ranging from 0 (not at all satisfied) through 10 (completely satisfied) ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 3.39$).

Results

Campaign perceptions and meanings of voting (H1 and H2).

To test Hypotheses 1a-c and 2a-c, we regress campaign perceptions on the meanings of voting (Table 1 and Figure 2). Confirming H1a, the results show a significant positive correlation between ingroup positive campaigning and positive meanings of voting, $b = .11$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$. Ingroup negative campaigning is also correlated with positive meanings of voting, $b = .14$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$, as well as with negative meanings of voting, $b = .10$, $SE = .05$, $p = .028$ – confirming H1b. Finally, confirming H1c, ingroup dirty campaigning is positively correlated with non-meanings of voting, $b = .22$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$.

Rejecting H2a, positive outgroup campaigning is not correlated with any meanings of voting. H2b is also rejected – while we expected outgroup negative campaigning to correlate

with positive and negative meanings of voting, we find that it correlates with non-meanings of voting, $b = .16$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$. H2c is supported, as outgroup dirty campaigning indeed correlates with negative meanings of voting, $b = .20$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$.

In sum, ingroup positive and negative campaigning are related to positive meanings of voting, while negative campaigning additionally correlates with negative meanings of voting. Ingroup dirty campaigning, though, is related to non-meanings of voting. While outgroup positive campaigning does not correlate with citizens' meanings of voting, outgroup negative campaigning relates to non-meanings of voting and outgroup dirty campaigning relates to negative meanings of voting.

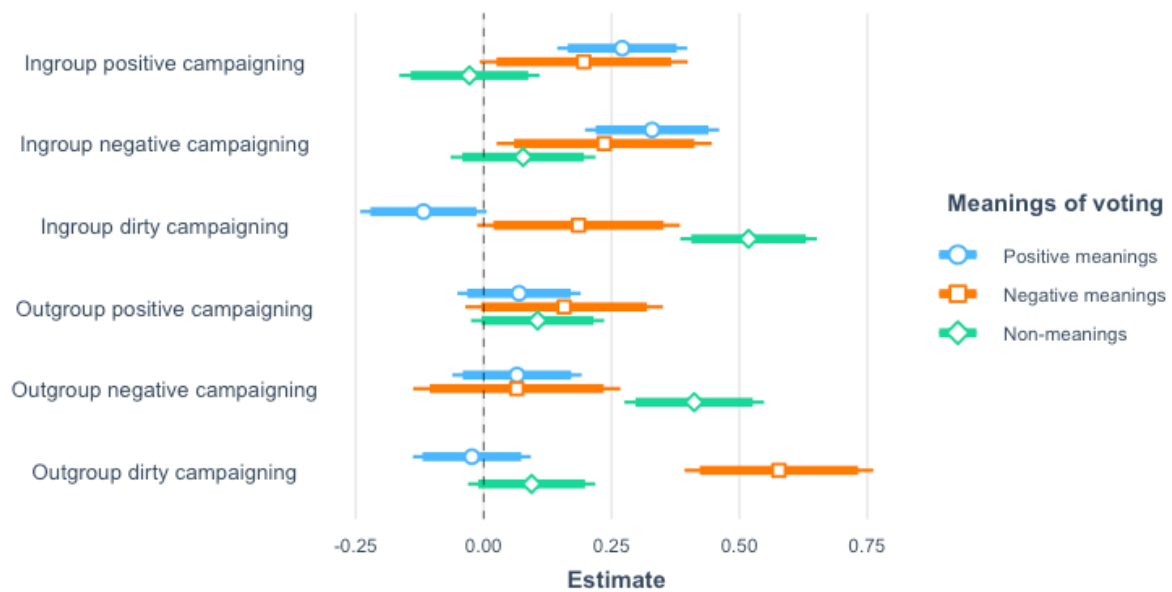


Figure 2. Estimated effects of campaign perceptions on positive, negative and non-meanings of voting, including 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

Table 1

Regression analysis, predicting meanings of voting, using campaign perceptions and control variables.

Meanings of voting	Positive	Negative	Non-meanings
Perceived positive campaigning (ingroup)	0.11*** (0.03)	0.08+ (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)
Perceived negative campaigning (ingroup)	0.14*** (0.03)	0.10* (0.05)	0.03 (0.03)
Perceived dirty campaigning (ingroup)	-0.05+ (0.03)	0.08+ (0.04)	0.22*** (0.03)
Perceived positive campaigning (outgroup)	0.02 (0.02)	0.05 (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)
Perceived negative campaigning (outgroup)	0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.04)	0.16*** (0.03)
Perceived dirty campaigning (outgroup)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.20*** (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)
Gender (female)	0.23* (0.12)	-0.52** (0.19)	-0.17 (0.12)
Age	0.02*** (0.004)	0.03*** (0.01)	-0.01* (0.004)
Education	-0.05 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.08* (0.04)
Political interest	-0.39*** (0.08)	-0.44*** (0.13)	0.24** (0.09)
Political knowledge	0.07 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.11)	-0.22** (0.08)
Constant	5.85*** (0.43)	2.37*** (0.69)	1.26** (0.46)
Observations	1,078	1,078	1,078
Adjusted R ²	.151	.116	.191

Note: unstandardized effects; SE in brackets; + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Meanings of voting, mobilization and SSAs (H3 and H4).

To test Hypotheses 3a-c and 4a-c, we regress the meanings of voting on the variables for mobilization and SSAs (Table 2 and Figure 3). Logistic regression and ordered logistic regression are used in the models with turnout and campaign interest as dependent variables, respectively. We find that voting intention is positively correlated with positive meanings of voting, $b = .25$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$, and negative meanings of voting, $b = .04$, $SE = .02$, $p = .022$. Turnout is also positively correlated with positive meanings of voting, $b = .13$, $SE = .05$, $p = .006$, but although the direction is the same, there is no significant relation with negative meanings of voting, $b = .04$, $SE = .04$, $p = .307$. However, campaign interest is again positively correlated with positive meanings of voting, $b = .22$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$, and negative meanings of voting, $b = .07$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$. Positive and negative meanings of voting are related to more electoral mobilization, supporting H3a and H3b. Conversely, and in support of H3c, non-meanings of voting are negatively correlated with voting intention, $b = -.24$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$, turnout, $b = -.22$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$, and campaign interest, $b = -.26$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$.

In support of H4a, we find that positive meanings of voting are positively correlated with political trust, $b = .34$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$, and satisfaction with democracy, $b = .43$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$. Conversely, yet in support of H4b, negative meanings of voting are *negatively* correlated with political trust, $b = -.19$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$, and satisfaction with democracy, $b = -.27$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$. However, non-meanings of voting do not seem to correlate with political trust, $b = -.04$, $SE = .03$, $p = .176$., or satisfaction with democracy, $b = .04$, $SE = .04$, $p = .222$, rejecting H4c.

In summary, positive meanings of voting are correlated with both mobilization and SSAs. In contrast, negative meanings of voting are positively correlated with mobilization, but negatively correlated with SSAs. Finally, non-meanings of voting are negatively correlated with mobilization, but not with SSAs.

Table 2

Effects of campaign perceptions on mobilization and SSAs.

Dependent variable	Mobilization			System-supporting attitudes (SSA)	
	Voting intention	Turnout ^a	Interest in campaign ^b	Political trust	Satisfaction with democracy
Positive meanings of voting	.25*** (.03)	.13** (.05)	.22*** (.02)	.34*** (.03)	.43*** (.04)
Negative meanings of voting	.04* (.02)	.04 (.04)	.07*** (.02)	-.19*** (.02)	-.27*** (.03)
Non-meanings of voting	-.24*** (.02)	-.22*** (.04)	-.26*** (.02)	-.04 (.03)	.04 (.04)
Gender (female)	.19 ⁺ (.11)	-.12 (.21)	.11 (.10)	.05 (.12)	-.20 (.15)
Age	.02*** (.004)	.02** (.01)	.01** (.003)	-.01** (.004)	-.02*** (.01)
Education	.09** (.03)	.19** (.06)	.04 (.03)	-.08* (.04)	-.08 ⁺ (.05)
Political interest (reverse score)	-.40*** (.06)	-.25* (.12)	-1.45*** (.07)	-.11 (.08)	.04 (.09)
Political knowledge	.15* (.06)	.21 ⁺ (.12)	.14* (.06)	-.09 (.07)	-.05 (.09)
Constant	6.65*** (.36)	.04 (.68)		3.75*** (.42)	3.40*** (.52)
Observations	1,901	1,042	1,968	1,806	1,922
Adjusted R ² (AIC)	.23	651.80	3287.32	.09	.09

Note: unstandardized effects; SE in brackets; ⁺ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$;

^alogistic regression model, ^bordered logistic regression model; Aikike Information Criterium (AIC) used in logistic models.

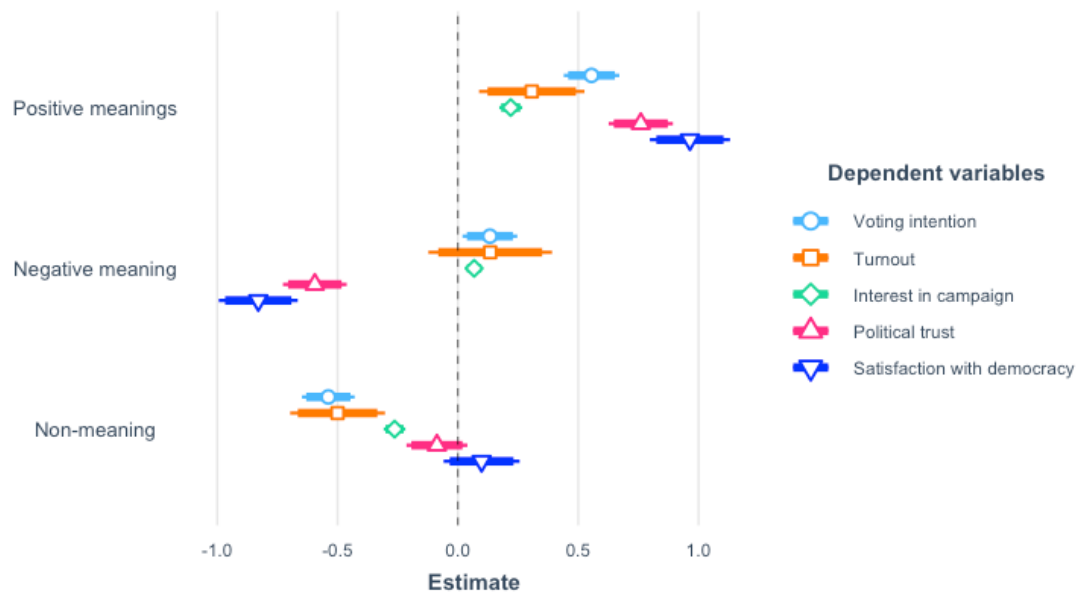


Figure 3. Estimated correlations of positive, negative and non-meanings of voting with mobilization and SSAs, including 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

Discussion

The findings in Study 1 offer some crucial innovations in the negative campaigning literature. Firstly, it shows that there are often antithetical findings between ingroup campaigns and outgroup campaigns, as well as between negative campaigning and dirty campaigning. These findings may explain the inconclusive and contradictory findings that negative campaigning research has produced over time (Lau et al., 2007). A more specific analysis of campaigning is therefore required to surpass this threshold.

Secondly, the findings show how negative campaigning is not only related to behavioral outcomes, but to the very meanings that citizens adhere to their votes. Positive and negative campaigning by the ingroup is related to positive and negative meanings of voting. In contrast, ingroup dirty campaigning seems to alienate citizens from voting, as indicated by its correlation with non-meanings of voting. Outgroup positive campaigning is not related to citizen meanings of voting at all. However, outgroup negative campaigns cause non-meanings of voting –

alienating citizens from voting, and outgroup dirty campaigns cause negative meanings of voting – pitting opposing citizens against the campaigning party.

This may have important consequences, as the results show correlations between the meanings of voting on the one hand, and mobilization and SSAs on the other. Positive meanings of voting are correlated with more mobilization and more SSAs. In contrast, negative meanings of voting are related to more mobilization as well, but to less SSAs. Finally, non-meanings of voting are not related to SSAs, but negatively correlated with mobilization.

Study 2: Experiment

Method

In order to add a stronger causal claim to the findings in Study 1, we conducted an experiment at t_1 (preregistration: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/J94M5>). The experiment makes use of a 3 (campaign type) x 2 (ingroup/outgroup) factorial design and includes all participants that indicated a preference for one of the two major coalitions in the election at t_1 ($N = 1243$).

Stimulus Material and Procedure

Before receiving the stimulus material, participants were asked to imagine coming across the following campaign message by [FIDESZ / The United Opposition] online. This is then recoded such that for FIDESZ supporters the FIDESZ advertisement is the ingroup campaign and the United Opposition advertisement is the outgroup campaign, and for United Opposition supporters *vice versa*. In the campaign advertisement, the party (1; positive campaign) does campaign promises, (2; negative campaign) criticizes its opponents' campaign promises, or (3; dirty campaign) criticizes its opponent's character and integrity. The positive campaign is accompanied by a flattering photo of the party's own candidate, while the outgroup and dirty campaign are accompanied by a darker, threatening-looking photo of the opponent (see an

English translation of the stimulus material in Figure A3 in the appendix). After answering the items for the dependent variables, participants are thoroughly debriefed.

Measures

Campaign perceptions. Participants' perceptions of the campaign messages are measured right after exposure. For each type of campaigning, we use the item that has the highest factor loading in the original scale (Reiter & Matthes, 2021; see Table A3 in the appendix; $M_{\text{pos}} = 4.64$, $SD_{\text{pos}} = 3.84$, $M_{\text{neg}} = 3.72$, $SD_{\text{neg}} = 3.59$, $M_{\text{dir}} = 4.95$, $SD_{\text{dir}} = 3.85$).

Meanings of voting. Citizen meanings of voting are measured identical to Study 1. However, rather than opening with "To me, voting means...", the question opens with "In this election, voting is..." ($M_{\text{pos}} = 6.97$, $SD_{\text{pos}} = 2.49$, Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{pos}} = .79$, $M_{\text{neg}} = 5.23$, $SD_{\text{neg}} = 3.18$, Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{neg}} = .88$, $M_{\text{dir}} = 2.25$, $SD_{\text{dir}} = 2.45$, Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{dir}} = .76$)

Mobilization. Voting intention is measured identical to Study 1 ($M = 6.62$, $SD = 2.73$). Participation is measured asking participants to what extent they intend to (1) attempt to persuade someone to vote a certain way (2) share campaign materials on social media, or (3) participate in a campaign of one of the parties, on a scale from 0 (definitely not) through 10 (definitely). The mean score is the final measure ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 2.51$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$).

System-supporting attitudes. Political trust is measured by asking to what extent participants would trust that the government after the elections will have the country's best interests at heart, for the hypothetical victory of each coalition, on a scale from 0 (no trust at all) through 10 (complete trust) ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.56$, $r = -.15$, $p < .001$). Satisfaction with democracy is measured by asking participants the extent to which they are satisfied with the way democracy works in Hungary, on a scale from 0 (does not function at all) through 10 (functions perfectly) ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 3.43$).

Results

Campaign perceptions

As a manipulation check, we run three ANOVAs, using the experimental factors (i.e., ingroup/outgroup and type of campaign) as the independent variables and perceived positive, negative and dirty campaigning as the dependent variables. We find significant interaction effects on perceived positive campaigning, $F(2,1224) = 3.84, p = .022$, perceived negative campaigning, $F(2,1221) = 6.48, p = .002$, and perceived dirty campaigning, $F(2,1224) = 21.66, p < .001$ (Figure 4). The results show a strong partisan bias, in which negative and dirty campaigning are considered more as respectful, negative campaigning for the ingroup party campaign, and as below-the-belt, dirty campaigning for the outgroup party campaign.

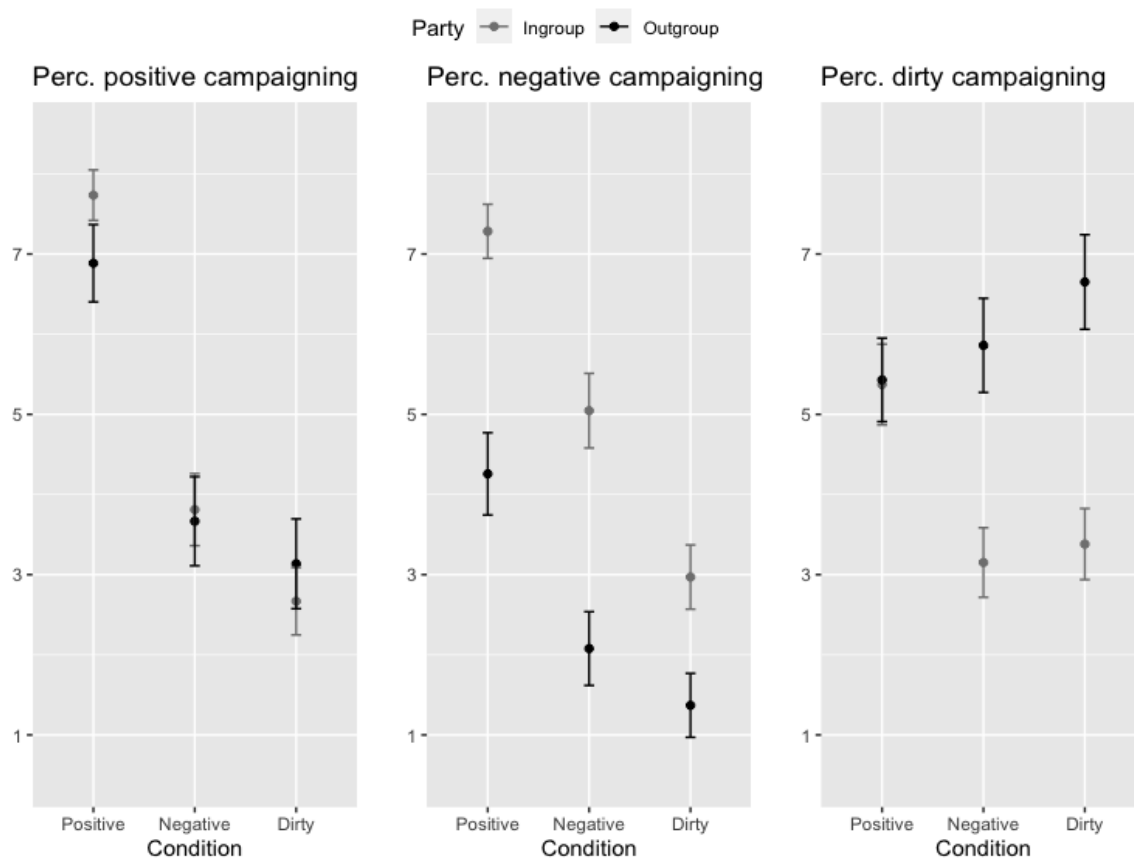


Figure 4. Perceived campaigning, per experimental condition (with 95%-CI).

Meanings of voting, mobilization and SSAs

None of the hypothesized interaction effects are significant in the models for positive, negative, and non-meanings of voting, for mobilization (voting intention and participation), or for SSAs (political trust and satisfaction with democracy). The ANOVA results are shown in Table 3. The only significant effect was a direct effect of the campaigning party (ingroup or outgroup) on satisfaction with democracy, where outgroup campaigns caused less satisfaction with democracy than ingroup campaigns, especially when they were “dirty”.

Table 3
ANOVA results of the preregistered hypothesis tests.

	<i>n</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Positive meanings of voting model</i>			
Campaign	1251	2.51	.082 ⁺
Ingroup/outgroup		.84	.360
Interaction effect		2.28	.103
<i>Negative meanings of voting model</i>			
Campaign	1251	.150	.861
Ingroup/outgroup		.183	.669
Interaction effect		1.23	.294
<i>Non-meanings of voting model</i>			
Campaign	1251	2.58	.076 ⁺
Ingroup/outgroup		1.97	.161
Interaction effect		.33	.719
<i>Voting intention model</i>			
Campaign	1243	2.16	.116
Ingroup/outgroup		.81	.368
Interaction effect		.10	.902
<i>Political participation model</i>			
Campaign	1222	2.05	.129
Ingroup/outgroup		2.21	.138
Interaction effect		.30	.745
<i>Political trust model</i>			
Campaign	1054	1.52	.219
Ingroup/outgroup		.02	.898
Interaction effect		1.25	.288
<i>Satisfaction with democracy model model</i>			
Campaign	1238	2.96	.052 ⁺
Ingroup/outgroup		4.51	.034 [*]
Interaction effect		1.07	.344

Note: ⁺ $p < .10$, ^{*} $p < .05$, ^{**} $p < .01$, ^{***} $p < .001$

Discussion

The goal of Study 2 was to determine the causal direction of the results in Study 1. However, the experiment did not confirm the effects of the cross-sectional analyses. This experiment shows that there is a strong partisan bias in whether campaigns focused on the opponent are considered “negative” or “dirty”. Specifically, ingroup campaigns are more likely to be considered negative, while outgroup campaigns are more likely to be considered dirty. This makes sense from a Social Identity Theory perspective: humans interpret the world in such a way that allows them to experience positive social identity through their group affiliations (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It also aligns with previous work showing that perceptions of positive vs. negative campaigns are dependent on party affiliation (Haselmayer et al., 2020). Partisans are thus likely to deny ingroup transgressions of social norms, but emphasize those of the outgroup.

General Discussion

This study investigated how campaign negativity and “dirtiness”, as well as its origin in an ingroup or outgroup party campaign, affect citizen meanings of voting. A cross-sectional analysis showed predictable effects of positive, negative and dirty campaigning by ingroup and outgroup parties on positive, negative and non-meanings of voting. These findings are robust to correcting for partisan bias in campaign perceptions, and largely robust to controlling for previous meanings of voting. As long as it is perceived as fair, ingroup campaigning produces positive meanings of voting. Negative campaigning also produces negative meanings of voting. When perceived as transgressing social norms, though, ingroup campaigning causes non-meanings of voting – a disillusionment with voting. Outgroup campaigns only affect citizens when focused on their ingroup party. When considered fair, citizens get disillusioned as well,

but when considered below-the-belt, outgroup campaigning causes citizens to vote against their outgroup party – a negative meaning of voting.

While these are important results, our experimental investigation of the same question showed a partisan bias in campaign perceptions, but no effects of campaign messages on citizen meanings of voting. We see two possible explanations for this disparity. Firstly, citizens might be affected more by their perceptions of campaign messages than the actual messages in the campaign. Individual differences in citizens' campaign perceptions can, for instance, also be affected by exposure to each campaign (Pattie et al., 2011), or by citizens' personalities (Nai & Maier, 2021). Such variables may explain the extent to which citizens perceive the campaigns of their ingroup and outgroup party as positive, negative or dirty – something we fail to capture in the experiment. However, using partisan bias-corrected measures of campaign perceptions did not change the results in Study 1.

Secondly, we might have overestimated the power of a single campaign message to cause changes in citizens' attitudes and behavior – especially in the midst of an intense election campaign. Specifically, as this campaign had been ongoing for some time, there might have been a lot of pretreatment. In other words, respondents might have been exposed to such a large amount of negative and dirty campaigning before the experiment took place that all effects had already taken place. This could explain why we find the expected correlations in the cross-sectional analysis, but no effects in the experiment. However, lagged dependent variable models did not substantively change the conclusions to be drawn from Study 1.

What we should conclude from these results, then, is that negative and dirty campaigning might have the expected effects on citizen meanings of voting, but that this effect takes place *on average*, rather than each time citizens get exposed to these types of campaigning. This has severe consequences for democracy, as our data shows that, while positive meanings of voting are related to more mobilization and SSAs, non-meanings of

voting are related to decreased mobilization and negative meanings of voting with fewer SSAs. A shift from positive to negative and dirty campaigning might therefore seriously damage the legitimacy of democracies by contributing to further democratic detachment and by weakening electoral participation. The increasing use of such campaigning tools in democratic debates might thus be a piece of the puzzle explaining the decrease of turnout and political trust across democracies (Dalton, 2007), and their effects on citizen meanings of voting may be a first step in this mechanism.

For scholars interested in the effects of negative campaigning, these findings emphasize the need for research that differentiates negative campaigns between ingroup and outgroup campaigns, rather than elections cycles (Walter & van der Eijk, 2019a), as well as for research that differentiates between negative campaigns that transgress (or not) social norms, i.e., negative and dirty campaigns (Reiter & Matthes, 2021). Perhaps such differentiations may reduce the ambivalent findings of the past (Lau et al., 2007).

Finally, this paper shows the importance of taking into account a citizen perspective on democracy, elections and voting. Meanings of voting have long been considered from an elite point of view, considering them from the perspective of political theory or party identifications. However, taking a more citizen point of view reveals that the meanings citizens adhere to voting change, influenced by different experiences with democracy – such as political campaigns. Putting citizens in the main focus of democracy illuminates not only new effects of negative campaigns, but also the extent to which democracy may be at risk by such tactics – at a level that is easily overlooked.

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Appendix

Lagged dependent variable models

Table A1

Lagged dependent variable models for the main analysis of Study 1.

Meanings of voting	Positive	Negative	Non-meanings
Perceived positive campaigning (ingroup)	.08** (.02)	.06 (.04)	-.001 (.03)
Perceived negative campaigning (ingroup)	.09*** (.03)	.05 (.04)	.03 (.03)
Perceived dirty campaigning (ingroup)	-.02 (.02)	.06 (.04)	.16*** (.03)
Perceived positive campaigning (outgroup)	.0003 (.02)	.01 (.03)	.01 (.02)
Perceived negative campaigning (outgroup)	.02 (.02)	.01 (.04)	.12*** (.03)
Perceived dirty campaigning (outgroup)	-.002 (.02)	.13*** (.03)	.04* (.02)
Lagged dependent variable	.41*** (.03)	.49*** (.03)	.37*** (.03)
Gender (female)	.08 (.11)	-.26 (.17)	-.16 (.12)
Age	.01** (.004)	.02*** (.01)	-.004 (.004)
Education	-.03 (.03)	.002 (.05)	-.05 (.03)
Political interest	-.19* (.07)	-.18 (.11)	.19** (.08)
Political knowledge	.06 (.06)	-.05 (.10)	-.10 (.07)
Constant	3.23*** (.43)	.50 (.62)	.09 (.44)
Observations	1,078	1,078	1,078
R ²	.30	.31	.31
Adjusted R ²	.29	.30	.30

Note: unstandardized effects; SE in brackets; ⁺ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

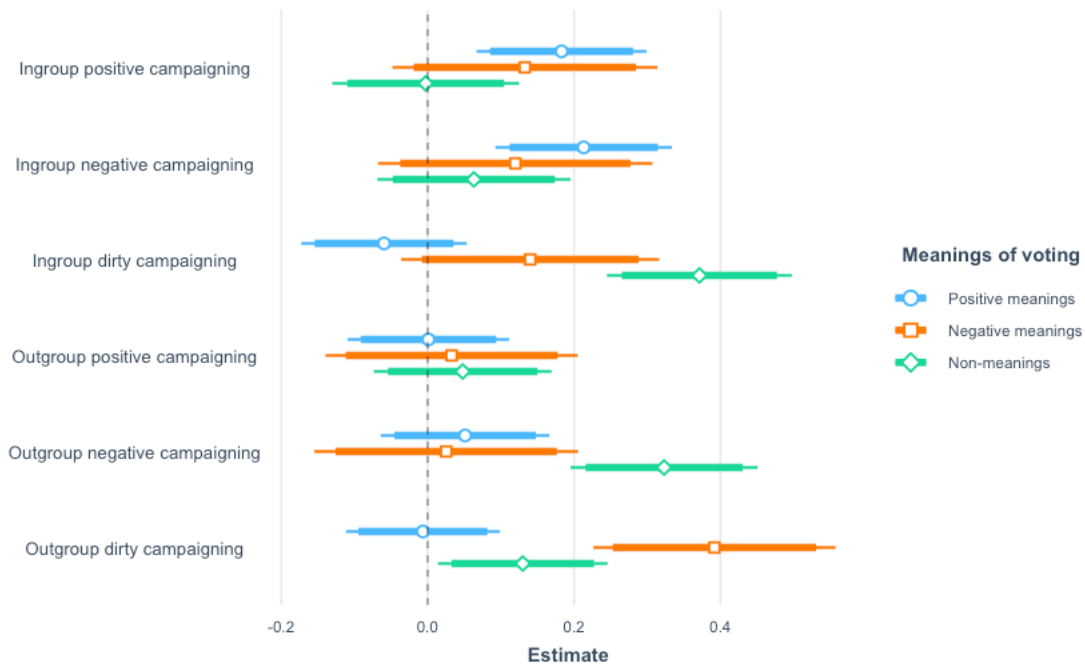


Figure A1. Estimated effects of campaign perceptions on positive, negative and non-meanings of voting, including 90% and 95% confidence intervals, controlled for the lagged dependent variables.

Partisan bias-controlled models*Table A2*

OLS models analogous to the main analysis of Study 1, using partisan-bias controlled measures of campaign perceptions.

Meanings of voting	Positive	Negative	Non-meanings
Perceived positive campaigning (ingroup)	.12*** (.03)	.09* (.04)	-.03 (.03)
Perceived negative campaigning (ingroup)	.05 ⁺ (.03)	.10* (.05)	.06 ⁺ (.03)
Perceived dirty campaigning (ingroup)	.07** (.02)	.06 ⁺ (.04)	.18*** (.03)
Perceived positive campaigning (outgroup)	.02 (.02)	.05 (.03)	.03 (.02)
Perceived negative campaigning (outgroup)	.03 (.03)	.04 (.04)	.13*** (.03)
Perceived dirty campaigning (outgroup)	-.02 (.02)	.17*** (.03)	.07*** (.02)
Gender (female)	.26* (.12)	-.52** (.19)	-.17 (.13)
Age	.02*** (.004)	.03*** (.01)	-.01** (.004)
Education	-.06 ⁺ (.03)	-.01 (.06)	-.07** (.04)
Political interest	-.50*** (.08)	-.49*** (.13)	.35*** (.09)
Political knowledge	.10 (.07)	.01 (.11)	-.27*** (.08)
Constant	7.55*** (.34)	5.37*** (.54)	2.75*** (.37)
Observations	1,073	1,073	1,073
Adjusted R ²	.11	.11	.16

Note: unstandardized effects; SE in brackets; ⁺ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

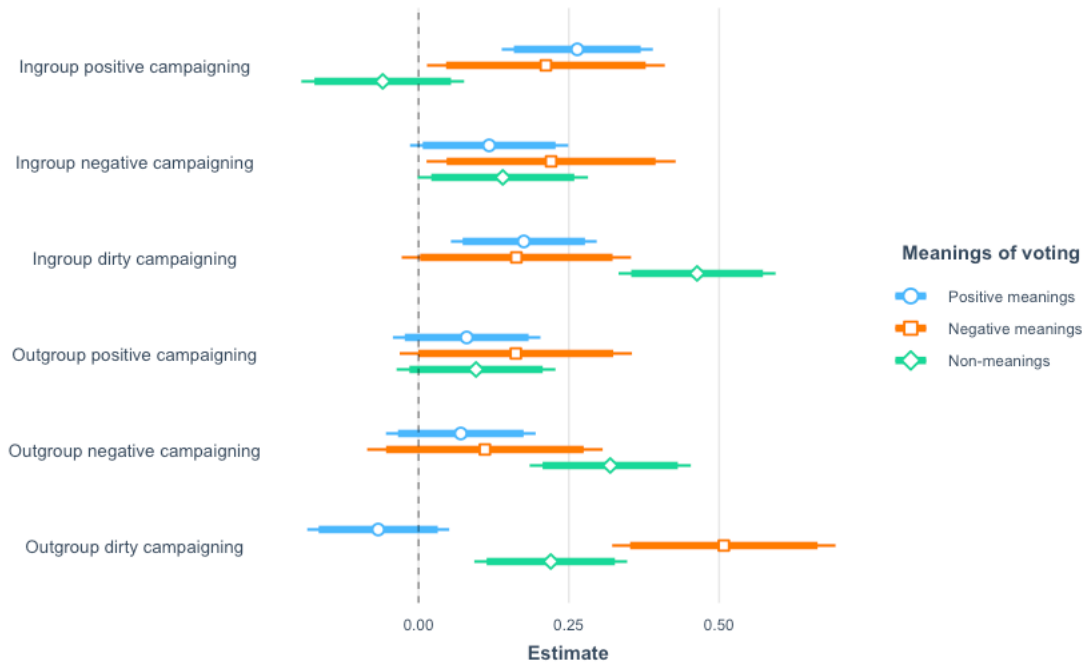


Figure A2. Estimated effects of campaign perceptions on positive, negative and non-meanings of voting, including 90% and 95% confidence intervals, using partisan bias-controlled measures of campaign perceptions.

Measurement Campaign Perceptions

Table A3

Items perceived campaigning measures.

Positive campaigning

- [Party] mostly focuses on presenting themselves in a positive way*
- The main focus in the campaigns of [party] constitutes the emphasis on their own strengths

Negative campaigning

- [Party] engages with their opponent in a very critical but respectful way*
- [Party] emphasizes the negative aspects of their political opponents but do so in an objective way

Dirty campaigning

- The electoral campaign of [party] is taking place ‘below-the-belt’*
 - [Party] is using dishonest methods in the campaign
-

*Highest factor loading – used in manipulation check of Study 2

Table A4

Factor analysis and reliability analysis results campaign perceptions

	Eigenvalue	Cronbach's Alpha
<i>Fidesz</i>		
Positive campaigning	1.69	.69
Negative campaigning	1.16	.70
Dirty campaigning	1.13	.87
<i>United Opposition</i>		
Positive campaigning	1.59	.80
Negative campaigning	1.58	.74
Dirty campaigning	.96	.82

Measurement Meanings of Voting

Table A5

Items meanings of voting.

Positive meanings of voting

- ... a way to express my preference for a politician or party
- ... a way to reward a politician or party
- ... a way to express my trust in a politician or party

Negative meanings of voting

- ... a way to express my aversion for a politician or party
- ... a way to punish a politician or party
- ... a way to express my distrust in a politician or party

Non-meanings of voting

- ... a meaningless act
 - ... an unpleasant or difficult activity
 - ... an act without consequence
-

Stimulus material in Study 2



Figure A3. Stimulus material in Study 2

Note. From top to bottom: positive, negative, dirty campaign. Left: Fidesz campaign, right: United Opposition campaign.