

Negative Campaigning in a Multiparty System

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Research in political campaigning in Scandinavian countries is inadequate, and research in negative campaigning is entirely non-existent. A 'negative campaign message' is defined as an explicit critique of the political opponent. Applying this definition to the 2005 Danish election indicates that negative campaigning comprises a very limited aspect of the political campaigning in the course of this election. The opposition tends to employ negative tactics the most in their attempts to establish their political platform. The media provided extensive coverage to the few negative campaign messages, thus presenting a biased sense of the political campaign to the general public. This biased media coverage encourages parties to 'go negative' in their respective campaigns in the battle for media attention.

Introduction

When compared internationally, Danish election campaigns have been described as traditional and inexpensive because parties have been 'reluctant to make use of many of the paraphernalia of contemporary campaigns' (Bille et al. 1992, 79). In 1987 and 1995, however, the public financial support for parties was increased substantially. Campaign spending has correspondingly increased – for instance, one estimate of campaign spending suggests that while the parties spent DKK77 million (about €10.3 million) in the 2001 election, they spent more than DKK100 million (about €13.5 million) in the 2005 election (Jønsson 2004). Moreover, the use of modern campaign methods such as professional advertising and media agencies and the employment of focus groups, opinion polling and Internet communications have also become more prominent and widespread in the last couple of election campaigns (Jønsson 2004; Hansen & Pedersen 2007).

Despite these changes in election campaigning, few studies have analysed the effect of these changes in the Danish context or similar changes in the other Scandinavian countries.¹ This article will address this lack of research

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in election campaigning in the Danish context by focusing on the use of negative campaigning in the 2005 general election. Negative campaigning is especially interesting due to its controversial nature. Political commentators often describe negative campaigning in pessimistic terms, pointing to the unconstructive tone and devastating effects it presumably has on the general political debate. The contribution of this study is to examine the use of negative campaigning based on empirical data from a multiparty system, where political advertising from political parties and political movement is forbidden on television and public radio.

Negative Campaigning

Negative campaigning 'only means talking about the opponent – the (deficient) nature of his or her programs, accomplishments, qualifications, associates and so on' (Lau & Pomper 2001, 73) or 'attacks the other candidate personally, the issues for which the other candidate stands, or the party of the other candidate' (Skaperdas & Grofman 1995, 49). That is also to say that 'negative campaigning is not lying and stealing and cheating, it is criticizing the opponent' (Lau & Pomper 2001, 81), which sometimes tends to create some misunderstanding in the media. Negative campaigning is an analytical distinction and not a normative distinction; the negative campaigning distinction says nothing about whether negative campaigning is desirable or not in modern democracy.

These often-cited definitions are related to the American two-party system and highlight the fact that negative campaigning is often seen as being directed at a specific candidate. If that is the case, however, negative campaigns directed towards political parties would be excluded. Sanders and Norris (2005, 526) attempt to capture this exclusion by defining negative campaigning as 'criticising the record of the opposing party or parties; questioning the judgement, experience and probity of opposing leaders; and generating fear about what the future might hold if the opposing party or parties were in power'. Pooling the targets of negative campaigning from the three aforementioned definitions includes: programs, accomplishments, qualifications, associates, personalities, issue positions, party records, judgment, probity and experience and even an '*and so on*'. The many examples of the targets of negative campaigning demonstrate that negative campaigning is not limited to targeting, say, the personality of the opponent. Our general definition of a negative campaign message, which closely follows the definitions referred to above, simply states that the message must include an explicit critique of the political opponent.

In the following empirical analysis, however, we will narrow the focus to the negative campaigning that takes place when the sponsors and targets are

political parties or candidates running for parliament in the 2005 election. Nevertheless, we are aware that interest organisations and party-independent groups usually also contribute to campaigns – and often in negative terms (Pedersen 2006). Furthermore, this operationalisation demands that it is possible to identify the sponsor as well as the target of the negative campaign; otherwise it would be impossible to analyse why the sponsor uses negative campaigning and to discern its effect on the target.

The major and ongoing controversy over whether negative campaigning tends to demobilise (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1995) or mobilise the electorate (Kahn & Kenney 1999; Freedman & Goldstein 1999; Lau & Pomper 2001, 2004) has been revitalised, as Brooks (2006) disproves the general demobilising thesis using Ansolabehere and Iyengar's original dataset. She concludes that campaign tone has no significant relationship to turnout. As to whether negative and positive campaigning have different perception and persuasion effects on the electorate, the research appears quite inconclusive – for example, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995, 91) find mixed results; Min (2004) finds that negative campaigning tends to undermine support for the sponsor; Shapiro and Rieger (1992) show how negative advertisements can be more effective than positive ones in terms of candidate rating. Lau et al. (1999, 857) reviewed 52 empirical studies of negative campaigning, concluding that 'there is simply no evidence in the research literature that negative political advertisements are any more effective than positive political ads'. Nevertheless, there is no shortage of professional campaign architects and consultants believing otherwise (Fridkin & Kenny 2004, 571).

More recent research finds that negative campaigning is more effective for the challengers, while positive campaigning works more effectively for the incumbents (Lau & Pomper 2002; Fridkin & Kenny 2004, 580). Brooks and Geer's (2007) differentiation between negative or positive, civilised or uncivilised, and issue-focused or personal-focused campaign tones reveals that it is the uncivilised tone in general, and the personal uncivilised tone in specific, that the public values the least. These findings correspond to Fridkin and Kenny's (2004) study, which shows that negative advertisements attacking the opponent's personal characteristics have no effect on the overall rating of the opponent, while negative campaigning attacking an opponent's policy position lowers the evaluation of the opponent among the citizens. In other words, negative campaigning tends to work as intended if it focuses on policies rather than on the personal characteristics of the candidates.

To our knowledge, there are no published studies of negative campaigning in the Scandinavian multiparty context. The hypotheses concerning the use of negative campaigning are largely developed with reference to the American two-party system, which cannot be directly transferred to the Scandinavian proportional electoral (multiparty) system, where many parties compete through media that do not allow the use of political

advertisements on television and public service radio. Denmark and Sweden both have a ban on political advertisements in television and public service radio. Norway only has a ban on political advertisements in television² (Siune 1987, 1994; Leroy & Siune 1994; Petersson et al. 2006, 52; Moring 2006; NOU 2004). It is therefore necessary to develop hypotheses concerning the use of negative campaigning adapted to the Scandinavian context.

One of the most established theses in the American context of negative campaigning is that challengers tend to use negative campaigning more than incumbents (Lau & Pommer 2001; Benoit et al. 2000, 69). This is because the incumbents can emphasise their former performance in, say, Congress or the presidency – for instance, they can point to their work to pass popular bills or efforts made to stop unpopular legislation. Conversely, the challenger can only emphasise future deeds and promises. As such, the challengers' promises will tend to be rather abstract and insubstantial compared to the incumbents' tangible and proven record (Trent & Friedenberg 2000, 87; Mayer 1996, 451). This will put the challengers on defensive, but it will also set an election agenda largely framed around the record of the incumbent, leaving the challengers little choice but to criticise the incumbents' record. This is the first step toward negative campaigning. Combined with having the odds against them, the challengers would *ceteris paribus* 'go negative'. However, the Scandinavian proportional electoral system focuses on the party rather than the candidate, thus rendering the challenger/incumbent distinction less obvious.

One way of adapting the thesis would be to apply it to the government level – for the same reasons as above, we would expect the opposition parties to be more inclined to exploit negative campaigning than parties in government or parties supporting the government. This is our first hypothesis, which reads:

*H*_{opposition}: Parties in opposition use negative campaigning to a greater extent than do parties in government or parties supporting the sitting government.

Another thesis concerning the use of negative campaigning is that the party that is behind in the polls (runner-up) would be inclined to apply negative campaigning to a greater degree than the parties leading in the polls (frontrunners) (Theilmann & Wilhite 1998, 1052). Empirically, several studies have confirmed this thesis (e.g. Damore 2002; Haynes & Rhine 1998). The reasoning behind this thesis is that as negative campaigning can potentially hurt the sponsoring party more than it helps due to the risk of being portrayed as weak and desperate by the media and opponents (the boomerang or backfire effect), frontrunners will be disinclined to gamble with their leading position (Skaperdas & Grofman 1995). Furthermore, if a frontrunner goes negative, i.e. targets the runners-up, it would provide the runners-up with a platform from which to respond to the negative campaigning. On the other hand, the runners-up are less risk averse, as they have less to

lose and are attempting to establish a platform from which they can directly confront the frontrunner. This leads to our second hypothesis, which reads:

$H_{\text{opinion poll}}$: The inclination for a party to go negative is inversely related to its position in the opinion polls.

In our quest to understand the use of negative campaigning, we must proceed beyond the party level and analyse how the media focuses attention on negative campaigning. The liberalisation of the party media and the eradication of the close link between party and media render the media an independent filter for much of the communication in postmodern campaigning (Norris et al. 1999). Competition among the media has intensified in a time of falling newspaper circulation, which encourages the media to follow the specific criteria of what defines 'good' news (i.e. news that can be reduced to a conflict between a few positions that can be assigned to specific actors) (Cook 1998, 23; Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1995, 116, 154; Lund 2002; Christiansen & Togeby 2006; Jenssen & Jamtoy 2005). Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995, 134) emphasise this by saying:

Negative advertisements make particularly tasty morsels for the media. For journalists, it is a no-lose situation when candidates attack one another. Allegations of dishonesty and incompetence lay the seeds of controversy and scandal. Even if the charges prove to be false, reporters can always rail against the candidate who aired the attack for slandering his or her opponent and engaging in sleazy campaigning. The fight itself becomes the story.

Our third hypothesis reads:

H_{media} : Negative campaigning receives relatively more attention in the news than positive campaigning.

The first step in analysing the hypotheses would be to provide a benchmark for future comparisons of negative campaigning: a descriptive study of usage in the 2005 general election campaign. Second, we will analyse each of the three hypotheses using the Danish general election of 2005 as the case.

How Negative?

The first step towards understanding the use of negative campaigning must be to present an overview of its use. Several attempts have been made to classify campaign contributions in 'negative' and 'positive' terms. Many simply apply a coding as either 'negative' or 'positive' (Lau & Pomper 2001, 73; Sanders & Norris 2005; Damore 2002, 670), while others apply a three-category coding like 'no negative message', 'minor emphasis on negativity' and 'major emphasis on negativity' (Kahn & Kenney 1999, 879). Here, we will adapt a five-point coding scheme greatly inspired by Freedman and Goldstein's (1999, 1193) coding: 1 denotes 'exclusively positive', 2 'primarily positive', 3 'balanced positive and negative', 4 'primarily negative' and 5 'exclusively negative'.

Focusing exclusively on the 2005 general election in Denmark allows us to include a variety of different campaign contributions: the advertisements placed (paid for) by parties and candidates in the major newspapers; Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs); the two major debates involving all of the party leaders; and newspaper articles about the campaign. These four empirical campaign contributions were all coded for their degree of negativity using the five-point coding scheme with our definition of 'negative campaigning' as the focus point. In other words, an advertisement featuring only the picture and name of the candidate is regarded as positive (code 1), whereas an article balancing the positive and negative, such as the advertisement in Figure 1, is coded 3.

In order to be coded as exclusively negative, the advertisement must only criticise and not provide any political solutions to the problem at issue. Figure 2 is an example of an advertisement that has been coded as 5 – exclusively negative.

In the next section, the advertisements, PEBs and the two debates are analysed in order to provide a descriptive overview of the negativity of the campaign in the 2005 election. The empirical materials are thereafter analysed using the three hypotheses.

The Advertisements Placed by the Parties and Candidates

The six Danish newspapers with the greatest circulation on an average weekday during the election campaign are all included in the analysis.³ The period of investigation is from the day after the election was called (19 January 2005) until Election Day (8 February 2005). A total of 114 newspapers were analysed featuring 764 advertisements from the political parties and candidates running for election. Each of these advertisements was analysed using the five-category coding scheme.⁴ Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the advertisements divided in relation to party and coding.

Only 8 percent of all the advertisements are coded as 'exclusively negative', whereas 78 percent were coded as exclusively positive. In this sense, the negative campaigning only constituted a minor segment of the party advertising. By comparison, 44 percent of the party or candidate television advertisements in the 2000 American federal elections were exclusively negative, 32 percent contrasting advertisements – including negative as well as positive elements – and only 24 percent exclusively positive (Holman & McLoughlin 2001).

Examination of the various parties reveals considerable differences in their use of negative campaigning. The Social Democrats top the list with 39 percent negative advertisements, whereas the Conservatives, the Minority Party, the Centrum-Demokraterne and the Christian Democrats never used negative advertisements.

Figure 1. Balanced Advertisement from the Social Democrats.

Skære

Under VK-regeringen er udgiften pr. elev i folkeskolen blevet skåret ned med mere end 1.000 kr.

I samme periode er udgifterne i privatskolerne steget med et tilsvarende beløb.

Der er blevet skåret 1.000 kr. ned pr. folkeskoleelev.

I Venstres valgprogram er der ikke afsat en eneste krone til at forbedre forholdene i folkeskolen.

Lære

Det er svært at styrke fagligheden i skolen, når man samtidig skærer ned. Vi vil investere i folkeskolen, men vi vil samtidig stille krav om at få mere for pengene.

Børnene skal lære mere. Derfor skal vi både investere mere i skolen og stille større krav.

Vi vil investere 600 mill. kr. om året i bedre efteruddannelse af lærere, nye bøger og IT. Vi vil samtidig fremrykke renovering af skolerne.

Læs mere på
www.socialdemokraterne.dk

socialdemokraterne.dk
sammen om fremtiden

Notes: This advertisement was published 15 times in the six newspapers under investigation. The first column reads: **CUTS.** Under the Venstre/Conservative government, spending pr. student in public schools has been cut by more than 1,000 DKK. In the same period, spending in private schools increased by the same amount. **1,000 DKK pr. student has been cut.** In the Venstre campaign program, there is not one DKK for the improvement of public schools. The second column reads: **LEARN.** It is difficult to improve the professional competence in the school when you are cutting back. We will invest in public schools, but we will also demand more value for the money. **Children must learn more. Thus, we must invest in schools and make greater demands.** We will invest 600 million DKK annually for improved schooling for teachers, new books and IT. We will at the same time move ahead with the renovation of the schools.

Sources: Ekstra Bladet 26/1-05, p. 8; Politiken 26/1-05, p. 12.

Figure 2. Negative Advertisement from the Social Democrats.

Fogh

*"Det er ikke rigtigt,
at der er skåret
ned på voksen- og
efteruddannelser"*

Anders Fogh,
DR, 18/1-2005

Fakta

Efteruddannelserne er
skåret med 106.000
kursus-uger.

Kilde:
Undervisningsministeriet

socialdemokraterne.dk

A

Notes: The advertisement was published six times in the newspapers under investigation. First column reads: **Fogh** [Prime Minister] 'It is not correct that adult and continuing education has been cut'. The second column reads: **Facts** – 106,000 course weeks of adult and continuing education have been cut.

Sources: Ekstra Bladet 28/1-05, p. 11; Politiken 28/1-05, p. 10.

The Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs)

Since the 1950s, all political parties running in a general election in Denmark have been provided with free primetime airtime to present a self-produced video on the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR). As political commercials are otherwise banned from television and public radio, the PEBs are the only way the parties can communicate directly via television to a large segment of the public. In 2005, the PEBs, including the debate with which they were presented, had between 399,000 and 217,000 viewers – almost 10 percent of the 4,003,616 eligible voters (Gallup: TV-Meter). In this sense, the Danish PEBs are a rather important institution for the political parties. In Table 2, the verbal messages in the PEBs (text and audio) are coded according to the share (in seconds) of negative campaigning in the video. In other words, the visual presentation – the part of the video not including any text

Table 1. Party Advertisements Coded for Tone (Number of Advertisements)

	Positive	Primarily positive	Balanced	Primarily negative	Negative	Total	Percentage negative or primarily negative of total number of party advertisements
Danish Red-Green Alliance	17	0	2	2	2	23	17
Socialist People's Party	74	8	19	15	0	116	13
Minority Party	2	0	0	0	0	2	0
Social Democrats	86	12	45	0	28	171	39
Social Liberals	21	0	3	6	0	30	20
Centrum-Demokraterne	33	0	0	0	0	33	0
Christian Democrats	3	1	0	0	0	4	0
Danish People's Party	122	0	4	0	4	130	3
Venstre	178	0	0	6	0	184	3
Conservatives	64	0	7	0	0	71	0
Government & support party	367	1	11	6	4	389	4*
Opposition	233	20	69	23	30	375	14
Frontrunners	354	8	31	29	2	424	7
Runners-up	246	13	49	0	32	340	9
Total	600	21	80	29	34	764	8
Percentage of total	78	3	10	4	5	100	

Notes: Due to rounding off, the figures do not always add up to 100 percent. The government is a Venstre and Conservative coalition, and the supporting party is the Danish People's Party. The other parties are included in the opposition. The runners-up are the Social Democrats, Centrum-Demokraterne, Christian Democrats, Minority Party and the Danish People's Party. The other parties are included as frontrunners. The runners-up and frontrunners are generally consistent throughout the campaign. This classification is based on the average of seven opinion polls during the first week of campaigning compared to the election result from 2001. * The number of negative advertisements compared to the number of non-negative advertisements placed by 'Government and supporting party' and 'Opposition' are significantly different at $p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Parties Election Broadcasts (PEBs) Coded for Tone (in Seconds)

	Video length	Time with verbal messages	Time with negative campaigning	Percentage with negative campaigning
Danish Red-Green Alliance	294	41	0	0
Socialist People's Party	296	262	72	27
Minority Party	294	280	50	18
Social Democrats	290	273	0	0
Social Liberals	297	258	12	5
Centrum-Demokraterne	292	243	0	0
Christian Democrats	287	242	0	0
Danish People's Party	296	245	0	0
Venstre	296	255	24	9
Conservatives	262	235	0	0
Government & support party	854	735	24	3*
Opposition	2,050	1,599	134	8
Frontrunners	1,445	1,051	108	10*
Runners-up	1,459	1,283	50	4
Total	2,904	2,334	158	7

Notes: Due to rounding off, the figures do not always add up to 100 percent. The government is a Venstre and Conservative coalition and the supporting party is the Danish People's Party. The other parties are included in the opposition. The runners-up are the Social Democrats, Centrum-Demokraterne, Christian Democrats, Minority Party and the Danish People's Party. The other parties are included as frontrunners. The runners-up and frontrunners are generally consistent throughout the campaign. This classification is based on the average of seven opinion polls during the first week of campaigning compared to the election result from 2001. * The number of seconds with negative messages compared to seconds of non-negative messages are significantly different at $p < 0.001$ compared to the group below in the table.

or audio – is not coded. The ten different advertisements differed greatly in terms of style. The Minority Party and Centrum-Demokraterne used *Talking Head* spots with the candidates, whereas the Danish People's Party and Venstre employed more of a *Cinema Verite* narrative style, where the candidates meet the Danes in everyday situations. The Danish Red-Green Alliance did not use their candidates in the video, focusing instead on dramatic scenes, music and posted slogans.⁵

Table 2 also illustrates that negative campaigning only account for 7 percent of the time during the PEBs. The Socialist People's Party and the Minority Party top the list, with up to 27 percent of negative campaigning. By comparison, in the 2001 British election, all of the Conservative Party PEBs were negative, all of the Liberal Party PEBs were positive, whereas the Labour Party employed both negative and positive PEBs (Sanders & Norris 2005). In this sense, the British comparison demonstrates that Denmark deviates in terms of the overwhelming use of positive PEBs.

The Party Leader Debate

It is a tradition in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries for all the leaders of the parties running in an election to be invited to participate in a general debate the evening before the election (Aalberg & Jenssen 2007). This debate drew 1,110,000 viewers on the eve of the 2005 election, and 1,025,000 viewers in 2001, thus proving to present an important opportunity for the candidates to reach the public (Gallup: TV-Meter) – that is, respectively, 28 to 26 percent of the 4,003,616 to 3,998,957 eligible voters in the two elections. In our analysis, we included not only the final debate, but also a similar debate on the day the election was called in order to understand whether elements of negative campaigning may change as the campaign intensified. The two debates were coded in terms of the share of negative campaigning of the total amount of talking.

First of all, Table 3 shows that positive campaigning dominated both debates. In the early as well as the final debates, the Red-Green Alliance tops the list of negativity, with up to 70 percent in the final debate. Table 3 also shows that negative campaigning became more prevalent during the final debate, where around a third of the speaking time was negative and only around a quarter of the time in the first debate. This suggests that negative campaigning possibly increases over the course of a campaign as it intensifies. The increasing use of negative campaigning during the campaign corresponds to other studies (Damore 2002; Haynes & Rhine 1998; Krebs & Holian 2007, 131). The explanation of the intensified use is threefold. First, early in the campaign, each party attempts to establish its own platform and its own unique identity and engage in the battle to define the overall agenda of the election campaign (Karlsen 2004). Thus, it makes little sense to ‘go negative’ early if the electorate has no recognition of your own platform. Second, when Election Day is close, the respective party platforms will be known to the public and the overall agenda of the election campaign will be established, leaving room for negative campaigning. Finally, going negative can also be seen as the last desperate choice as the election moves closer – a last-ditch effort to impact the outcome of the election. In other words, as the agenda of the election campaign and clear lines of distinction between the parties are established, negative campaigning becomes more likely (Karlsen 2004).⁶

Having presented the empirical materials, we will now use the next three sections to analyse the three hypotheses posed initially in the article by looking at Tables 1–3.

It’s the Opposition . . .

Our first hypothesis argued that the opposition parties tend to be more inclined to go negative than the governing parties because it is easier for the

Table 3. Two Party Leaders' Debates Coded on Tone (in Seconds)

	Total speech time	Time with negative campaigning	Percentage with negative campaigning
<i>Debate of 18 January</i>			
• Danish Red-Green Alliance	458	308	67
• Socialist People's Party	634	364	57
• Minority Party	356	35	10
• Social Democrats	713	206	29
• The Social Liberals	561	176	31
• Centrum-Demokraterne	511	60	12
• Christian Democrats	296	0	0
• Danish People's Party	688	79	11
• Venstre	815	71	9
• Conservative	482	79	16
• Government & support party	2,281	229	10*
• Opposition	3,233	1,149	36
• Frontrunners	2,950	998	34*
• Runners-up	2,564	380	15
Total	5,514	1,378	25
<i>Debate of 6 February</i>			
• Danish Red-Green Alliance	371	261	70
• Socialist People's Party	561	146	26
• Minority Party	245	142	58
• Social Democrats	778	235	30
• The Social Liberals	660	231	35
• Centrum-Demokraterne	364	185	51
• Christian Democrats	193	56	29
• Danish People's Party	747	104	14
• Venstre	910	313	34
• Conservative	553	140	25
• Government & support party	2,403	613	26*
• Opposition	2,979	1,200	40
• Frontrunners	3,055	1,091	36*
• Runners-up	2,327	722	31
Total	5,382	1,813	34
• Government & support party	4,684	842	18*
• Opposition	6,212	2,349	38
• Frontrunners	6,005	2,089	3*
• Runners-up	4,891	1,102	23
Total of both debates	10,896	3,191	29

Notes: Due to rounding off, the figures do not always add up to 100 percent. The government is a Venstre and Conservative coalition and the supporting party is the Danish People's Party. The other parties are included in the opposition. The runners-up are the Social Democrats, Centrum-Demokraterne, Christian Democrats, Minority Party and the Danish People's Party. The other parties are included as frontrunners. The runners-up and frontrunners are generally consistent throughout the weeks of the campaign across polls. This classification is based on the average of seven opinion polls during the first week of campaigning compared to the previous election result from 2001 (Altinget.dk 2007). * The number of seconds with negative messages compared to seconds of non-negative messages is significantly different at $p < 0.001$ compared to the group below in the table.

latter to emphasise previous results, whereas the former can usually only emphasise their intentions for future action. Distinguishing between the negative campaigning of governing parties and opposition parties in Tables 1–3 clearly demonstrates that the opposition tends to be more negative in their campaigning style. Considering party advertisements, 14 percent of those of the opposition were negative, while this was the case with only 4 percent of the governing party advertisements (Table 1). When it comes to the party election broadcasts, 3 percent of the governing parties were negative, whereas 8 percent of the opposition parties were negative (Table 2). Analysing the party leader debates, Table 3 reveals that the opposition tends to exploit negative campaigning more than three times as much in the first debate and twice as much in the final debate as compared to the governing parties. We have thus found evidence that in the 2005 election, the opposition parties tended to be more negative than the governing parties in their campaigning.

It's the Runners-up . . .

Our second hypothesis stated that if a party experiences inadequate electoral support in the opinion polls, they would be more likely to go negative in order to establish a platform for addressing the frontrunners. Tables 1–3 also divide the negativity of the campaign in terms of the frontrunner and runner-up. However, the three tables provide inconsistent results. When it comes to party advertisements, the frontrunners go negative with 7 percent, whereas the runners-up go negative with 9 percent (Table 1). In the party election broadcasts and the party leader debates, the relationship is the reverse: 10 percent of the frontrunners' campaigning was negatively toned when it came to PEBs, whereas only 4 percent of the runner-up campaigning was negatively toned (Table 2). In the party leader debates, both of the debates indicate that the frontrunners tend to be more negative than the runners-up (Table 3).

We must thus reject the hypothesis that runners-up tend to be more inclined to go negative. In two out of three sources of empirical materials, the effect is actually the opposite: the frontrunners tend to be more negative than the runners-up. This result can be interpreted from various angles. First, it is worth considering that the party advertisements and PEBs are often produced weeks in advance of the campaign. This makes it difficult to modify the campaign message as the campaign progresses. However, it is possible to purchase more advertising space in the newspapers as the campaign intensifies and ready-produced positive advertisements can be replaced with negative ones at the last minute. The party leader debates are also open to changes in tone. Another interpretation of these results is simply that minor fluctuations in the opinion polls do not affect the campaign tone – that is, the

opinion polls are usually quite stable. Change proceeds gradually and seldom produces large overnight shifts.

It is also a strong assumption that merely being one or two percentage points down compared to the previous election should make the party more inclined to go negative. In other words, the frontrunner/runners-up divide appears more appropriate in a first-past-the-post type of election system and less relevant in the Scandinavian proportional election system. Furthermore, the amount of negativity in a party leader debate might be more a matter of the personal style of the individual candidate than the general tone of political campaigning attempting to capture the entire political party and the party candidates. The findings thus indicate an inconsistent relationship between the frontrunner and the runners-up.

It's the Media . . .

The final hypothesis takes the analysis to another level by arguing that the media report from the campaign in a manner akin to sportswriters covering a sporting event – that is, focus is on the negatives of the campaign and not the positives through coverage of the attacks and dramatics of the opposing sides. During the campaign, the sports-writing and dramatics of the campaign prevailed, with numerous headlines including words such as ‘attack’, ‘brutality’, ‘lies’, ‘battle’, ‘in-fight’, ‘accusations’, ‘knockouts’ and ‘punches below the belt’. Table 4 analyses the major newspapers in terms of their attention to the negative campaign tone.⁷ Some 213 articles were analysed, but only 97 of these had indirect or direct quotations from the candidates that specifically targeted another candidate or party, which the operationalisation of our empirical analyses of negative campaigning requires. The unit of analysis is the entire article and the analysis is carried out by applying the

Table 4. Newspaper Articles Coded on Tone

	Positive	Primarily positive	Balanced	Primarily negative	Negative	Total	Percentage negative or primarily negative of total number of party advertisements
Number of articles	28	20	28	18	3	97	22
Percentage of total	29	21	29	19	3	101	22

Notes: Only articles quoting candidates are included. Due to rounding off, the table does not add up to 100 percent.

five-point coding scheme also applied to the party advertisements. In other words, if one candidate gives a negative statement and another gives a positive statement in the same article, the article is coded as balanced.

Table 4 indicates a strong media bias in the reported campaign in favour of negative campaigning tones. Some 22 percent of the articles were negative. By comparison, only 8 percent of the advertisements and 7 percent of the PEBs were negative. This shows that the media present a very biased image of the political campaign. In all, 29 percent of the time in the two party leader debates was negatively toned. Converting this share on the level of the specific candidate to our five-point coding scheme would only leave the Red-Green Alliance classified as negative because the other candidate messages during the debate are dominated by positive campaigning. So even though the negative campaigning was more present during the debates among the party's leaders, it is in no way close to the bias in the communication of the campaign in the media. In this sense, the media usually focused on statements indicating conflict in their coverage of the campaign, even though it only comprised a minor part of the entire campaign. This strong bias in the media coverage of the campaign can also be found elsewhere. For example, Min (2002) concluded that 60 percent of all news reports that comment on political advertisements during the 1992, 1996 and 2000 American general election campaign were negative and only 33 percent positive. This biased news coverage of the campaign during the election is also highlighted by Hetherington (1996, 374), who reports that more than 90 percent of the comments relating to the economy were negative during the 1992 presidential campaign compared to only 75 percent in the preceding period, even though the economy improved. The media focus on negativity also appears to be increasing over time (Patterson 1996).

Discussion and Conclusion

The 2005 Danish election was not unique compared to previous elections in Denmark. In this sense, the 2005 election presents a typical case when it comes to the political campaign (Goul Andersen et al. 2007; Pedersen 2005; Andersen 2006). Negative campaigning constitutes a very minor aspect of political campaigning in the Danish 2005 election. Compared to the United States and many other developed countries outside Scandinavia, the differences are quite striking. Several explanations as to why negative campaigning is not used very frequently can be in play at the same time.

First of all, the multiparty context blurs the benefit of attack advertisements because even if it works and pushes a voter away from the party under attack, this voter could ultimately decide to vote for a number of different parties. In a two-party system, the floating voter could only move their vote

to the attacker (or abstain from voting). On the other hand, the risk of backfire or a boomerang effect (i.e. being presented as weak and desperate by the media because the party sponsored a negative advertisement) is not uncertain, but limited to the party sponsoring the attack. In other words, negative campaigning in a multiparty system tends to represent a scenario in which the benefits can go to many different parties, while the risk of backfire is limited to the sponsoring party.

Second, the general elections in the Scandinavian countries pit party against party more than candidate against candidate. Even through the focus of the media is increasingly on the few primary candidates, the main choice is between parties – not candidates (Siune 1987, 365; Holmberg & Oscarsson 2004). Election campaigns in the rest of the world often tend to focus more on specific candidates rather than the overall party; and as negative campaigns, due to their often personal nature, often tend to target the candidate rather than the party, this difference might help explain why negative campaigns are used less in Scandinavia.

Third, if political cleavages between the parties are multidimensional as opposed to unidimensional, the benefits of a party engaging in attacks on another party become less clear as the voters align not only on one dimension, but several at the same time. A floating voter could accordingly float along several dimensions due to an attack advertisement – not just one.

Fourth, political advertisements on television are forbidden in Scandinavian countries. Thus, negative campaigning in terms of advertisements is limited to newspapers, billboards and local radio. These venues do not appear to foster the same degree of negativism as television in particular. In television advertising, the time slots are very small and the competition for the attention of the voters during the commercial breaks is very high, which tends to foster provocative advertisements in order to be noticed, and negative and provocative advertisements seem to go hand-in-hand here.

A fifth explanation for why negative campaigning appears so little in Scandinavia is the political culture. For example, parliamentary debates in Scandinavia tend to be very civilised and impersonal, and the tone is often consensual rather than confrontational. In countries such as Italy, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, the parliamentary debates are much livelier, and personal attacks are part of almost every debate. This ‘civilised’ political culture also helps us understand why Scandinavian parties tend to be less inclined to ‘go negative’ in the course of the election campaigns as it is against the political culture.

A sixth and final explanation is that as majority governments are the exception in Denmark, parties running against each other must also be able to work together after an election despite their political differences. Attack advertisements targeting future coalition partners make such cooperation difficult; parties are less inclined to go negative in political systems with

minority governments and in which broad coalitions (rather than minimum-willing coalitions) are the usual way of carrying out politics.

The analyses confirmed that opposition campaigning tends to be more negative than that of the governing parties. In this sense, adapting the original American-developed hypothesis on the divide between the challengers and the incumbents proves fruitful. The analyses provide inconclusive evidence as to whether frontrunners or runners-up apply negative campaigns the most. According to the frontrunner/runner-up divide, it appears more appropriate in a first-past-the-post electoral system, where the ‘winner takes it all’, and less relevant in the Scandinavian context of a proportional election system. Finally, the analyses show that the media devote much greater attention to negative campaigns than is the case with positive campaigns. In other words, the media grant extensive coverage to the limited number of negative campaign messages, thereby presenting a biased image of the political campaign to the general public. If this bias is persistent, we might see more negative campaigning in the future as the political parties become aware of this and if the battle for attention intensifies. In other words, if the parties receive more press coverage from negative campaigns than positive ones, the parties will be more inclined to go negative because they will reach more voters by doing so. Moreover, the media’s biased coverage of the campaign potentially could lead to increased general mistrust in parties and candidates and provide a misleading sense of how politics are usually conducted. Further analysis of election campaigning is clearly required to establish these results more firmly, as is analysis of the effects of negative campaigning in the Scandinavian proportional, multiparty context. Hopefully, the findings presented here can be applied as benchmarks for future comparisons.

NOTES

1. Studies on electoral campaigning in Scandinavian are quite rare. Nevertheless, there are a few recent notable exceptions available in English (e.g. Stromback & Nord 2006; Stromback & Dimitrova 2006; Jenssen & Aalberg 2006; De Vreese & Semetko 2004; De Vreese 2004; Buch & Hansen 2002).
2. The laws regulating political advertisements in Scandinavian with their amendments are: Denmark: Executive order on radio and television no. 410 of 02/05/2006, §76, section 3; Norway: Executive order on broadcasting no. 127 of 04/12/1992, chapter 3, §1 & 4; Sweden: Executive order on Radio- and TV no. 844 of 07/19/1996, chapter 6, §5.
3. Urban, Jyllands-Posten, Politiken, MetroXpress, BT and Ekstra Bladet.
4. 49 of the 764 advertisements were coded independently by two different persons. 94 percent (or 46 of the total) were coded identically.
5. See McNair (1999, 105) for an overview of the various styles in political commercials.
6. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the analysis (not shown) of the party advertisements in Table 1 over time only provide inconclusive evidence about whether the negative campaign tone has changed during the course of the campaign. This might be due to the advertisements being produced weeks in advance and thus less flexible than the debates (see the discussion in the section: ‘It’s the Runners-up . . .’ below).

7. Articles from 18 January to 8 February are included from Jyllands-Posten, Politiken, Berlingske Tidende, BT and Ekstra Bladet. The analysis is limited to articles between 300 and 600 words on the first three pages of the newspapers, though the first 15 pages in the case of BT and Ekstra Bladet.

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