



How negative are elections, and does it matter?

Mapping the use of negative campaigning in elections across the world.

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The report by an international monitoring commission for the 2018 Presidential election in Georgia concluded that the November runoff “was marred by harsh rhetoric”, and that “the negative character of the campaign on both sides undermined the [election] process.”² The report seemingly echoes the widespread sentiment that elections in Georgia are becoming somewhat unique in the use of incivility and the duress of the political debates between competing factions. Is this the case? And, beyond the Georgian case, what is negativity and why does it matter?

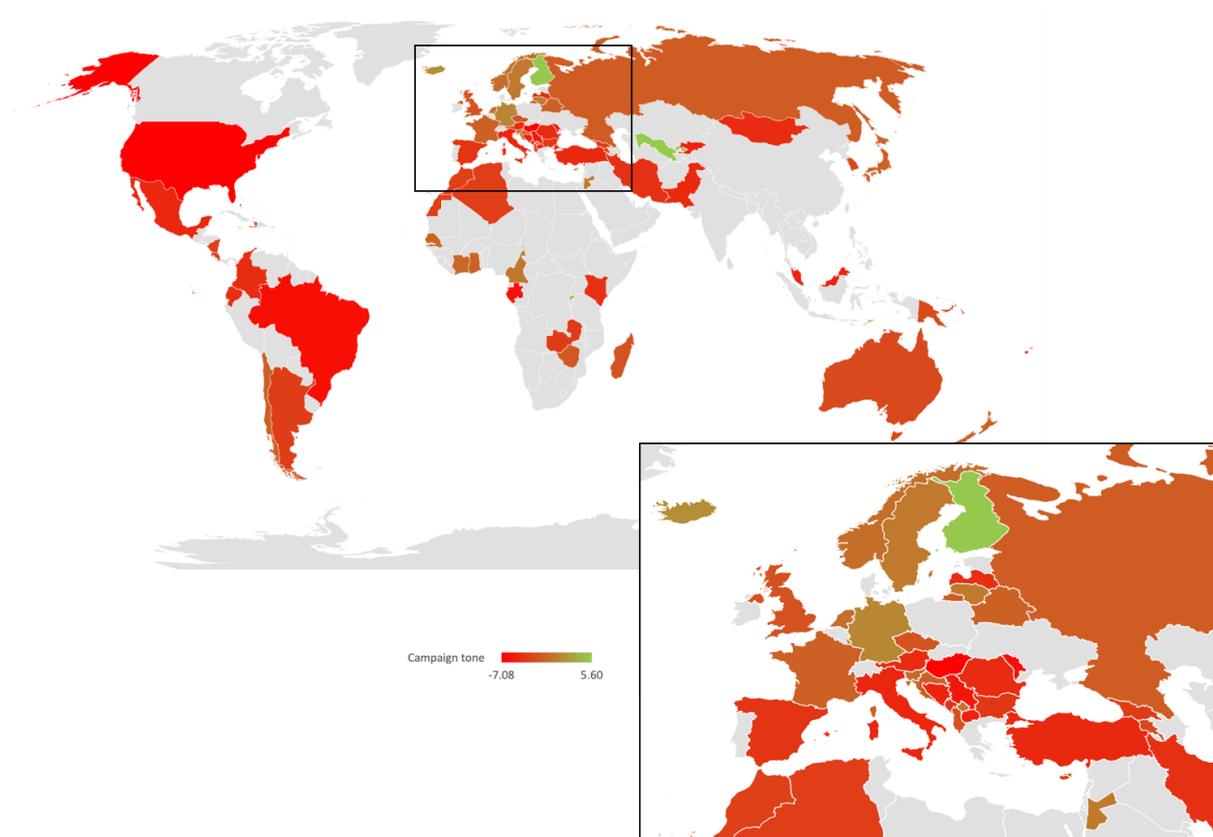
Negativity in recent Georgian elections and in the rest of the world

The use of negative (or “attack”) messages by competing parties and candidates – that is, messages intended to discredit the opponents and put them in a negative light, for instance by criticizing their program, ideas or character³ – frequently attracts media attention.⁴ How

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² RadioFreeEurope Online. “Vashadze Rejects Zurabishvili's Win in Georgia's Presidential Runoff Criticized for its 'Negative Character'.” 28 November 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgian-presidential-runoff-pits-rivals-two-main-factions-/29625165.html>
³ Lau, R. R., & Pomper, G. M. (2004). *Negative campaigning: An analysis of U.S. Senate elections*. Rowman & Littlefield; Geer, J. G. (2006). *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Nai, A. & Walter, A. (eds.). (2015). *New Perspective on Negative Campaigning. Why Attack Politics Matters*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

“negative” are elections across the world? To answer this question, I have been conducting since 2016 a large-scale comparative expert survey where selected samples of scholars are asked to evaluate the nature and content of election campaigns in the direct aftermath of all national elections worldwide.⁵ Looking at the data, it emerges that indeed elections across the world are quite negative (Figure 1), that is, they are characterized by a higher share of attacks and criticisms between competing parties and candidates than “positive” elements such as policy propositions.

Figure 1. Negativity in recent elections worldwide⁶



Note: The map charts the “tone” of the last national election; the “tone” of the campaign varies theoretically between -10 “very negative” and +10 “very positive”.

⁴ Geer, J. G. (2012). The news media and the rise of negativity in presidential campaigns. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 45(03): 422-427.

⁵ Nai, A. (2018). Going negative, worldwide. Towards a general understanding of determinants and targets of negative campaigning. *Government & Opposition*. doi: 10.1017/gov.2018.32

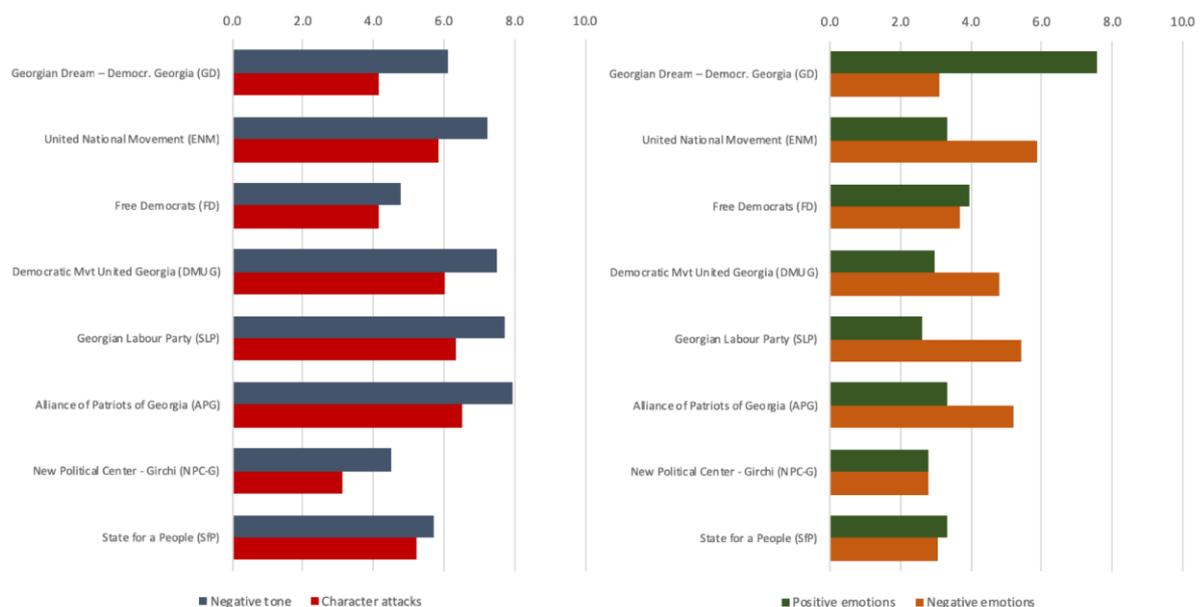
⁶ Source: NEGex - The Negative Campaigning Comparative Expert Survey, 2019. See Nai, A. (2018). Going negative, worldwide. Towards a general understanding of determinants and targets of negative campaigning. *Government & Opposition*. doi: 10.1017/gov.2018.32

Where does Georgia stand in this international comparison? Averaging scores for most recent Legislative election (October 2016) and Presidential election (October 2018), Georgia stands somewhat in the middle of the international distribution, with an average tone of -3.5; the most negative country by far, within those included so far in the study, is (perhaps unsurprisingly) the United States, whereas several Northern European and Nordic countries have the most positive campaigns.

To be sure, election campaigns are not monolithic. Different parties and candidates face off, and it seems logical to expect that the use of campaign strategies diverges substantially among them. This was the case as well during the two most recent elections in Georgia.

Looking first at the 2016 Legislative election (Figure 2) a radically different pattern emerges for the two main competing parties. According to our data, the campaign of the incumbent Georgian Dream (GD) coalition, led by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, used comparatively a less negative campaign than their main opposition rivals from the United National Movement (ENM). Although the GD campaign was still relatively negative in absolute terms, the party overall made a lower use of negative messages and character attacks (left-hand panel of Figure 2), and used a discourse intended to elicit more positive emotions during their campaign (right-hand panel).

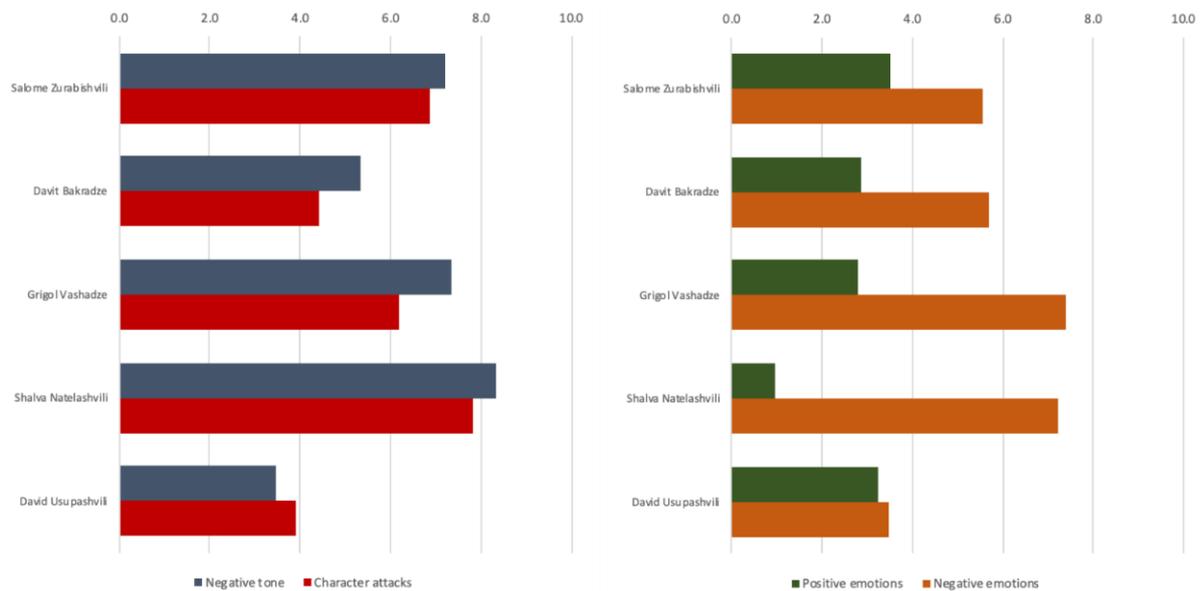
Figure 2. Campaign during the 2016 Legislative election in Georgia, by party⁷



⁷ Source: NEGex - The Negative Campaigning Comparative Expert Survey, 2019. See Nai, A. (2018). Going negative, worldwide. Towards a general understanding of determinants and targets of negative campaigning. *Government & Opposition*. doi: 10.1017/gov.2018.32

The ENM, by their side, used a rather harsh rhetoric punctuated by a higher incidence of character attacks and messages intended to elicit negative emotions (fear, anxiety). This trend is consistent with what we know from the literature, with incumbents more likely to promote a positive image of their accomplishments and challengers more likely to attack the incumbents (see below).

Figure 3. Campaign during the 2018 Presidential election in Georgia, by candidate⁸



The 2018 presidential election was particularly negative (Figure 3). The two main contestants - Salome Zurbishvili, and ENM’s Grigol Vashadze – did not hold back their attacks against each other and other candidates, reflecting the extremely polarized environment in the pre-election phase, marred by leaked confidential tapes, allegations of torture and kidnapping, and widespread claims of corruption and coercion across the political spectrum.⁹ Both Zurbishvili and Vashadze used a very negative rhetoric, characterized by harsh attacks against the character of the opponent (more than their policies), and overwhelmingly used a rhetoric intended to fuel the fear and anxieties of the public.

⁸ Source : NEGex - The Negative Campaigning Comparative Expert Survey, 2019. See Nai, A. (2018). Going negative, worldwide. Towards a general understanding of determinants and targets of negative campaigning. *Government & Opposition*. doi: 10.1017/gov.2018.32

⁹ OC Media. “Georgia’s tapes scandals suggest something is rotten at the top of Georgian politics.” 17 October 2018. <https://oc-media.org/analysis-georgia-s-tapes-scandals-suggest-something-is-rotten-at-the-top-of-georgian-politics/>

Where does negative campaigning come from?

Are the trends shown for the Georgian case unique, in terms of *who* used a more negative rhetoric? What are the reasons that make candidates more likely to “go negative” on their opponents? First, incumbent candidates have been shown to be comparatively less likely to use negative campaigning than challengers.¹⁰ Unless their previous office has been marred by extreme scandals or dramatically poor results, incumbents should be able to promote themselves, their record and accomplishments via positive campaigns. Challengers, on the other hand, usually do not have this and do not have an office to lose. Additionally, challengers have been shown to receive weaker media coverage than incumbents¹¹, which implies that they have to work harder increase their visibility in the media if they want to stay relevant in the eyes of the voters. A particularly effective way to capture media attention is via the use of a more negative rhetoric; “candidates want to get their message out, hoping to control the terms of the debate. They can air a positive ad and seek to influence voters with that spot. But the news media will likely ignore it ... A negative ad, however, can generate controversy and conflict, drawing attention from journalists.”¹²

Beyond incumbency status, a second factor likely to drive the use of negative campaigning is the prospect of electoral failure.¹³ Negative campaigning “is used to reduce the support of the opponent. [... Thus], the one lagging behind in the polls has not succeeded in attracting undecided voters and, therefore, has to scare off the opponent’s voters to stand a better chance.”¹⁴ Actors who are lagging behind have little to lose – and much to gain – from a negative strategy.

Turning to the profile of competing parties and candidates, evidence suggests that more extreme parties and candidates are more likely to use a negative and harsh rhetoric against

¹⁰ Lau, R. R., & Pomper, G. M. (2004). *Negative campaigning: An analysis of U.S. Senate elections*. Rowman & Littlefield; Nai, A. & Walter, A. (eds.). (2015). *New Perspective on Negative Campaigning. Why Attack Politics Matters*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

¹¹ Hopmann, D. N., de Vreese, C. H., & Albæk, E. (2011). Incumbency bonus in election news coverage explained: The logics of political power and the media market. *Journal of Communication*, 61(2): 264-282.

¹² Geer, J. G. (2012). The news media and the rise of negativity in presidential campaigns. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 45(03): 422-427. (p. 423).

¹³ Harrington J. & Hess, G. (1996) A spatial theory of positive and negative campaigning. *Games and Economic Behavior*, 17: 209-229; Walter, A. S., van der Brug, W. & van Praag, P. (2014). When the stakes are high: Party competition and negative campaigning. *Comparative Political Studies*, 47(4): 550-573; Nai, A. & Sciarini, P. (2015). Why 'going negative'? Strategic and situational determinants of personal attacks in Swiss direct democratic votes, *Journal of Political Marketing*, DOI: 10.1080/15377857.2015.1058310.

¹⁴ Elmelund-Præstekær, C. (2010). Beyond American negativity: toward a general understanding of the determinants of negative campaigning. *European Political Science Review* 2(1): 137-156. (p. 141).

their opponents.¹⁵ More extreme actors are less likely to participate in coalitions or policy agreements. Parties seeking to enter coalition negotiations, in either the pre-or post-electoral phase, have strategic incentives to go positive if they want to avoid backlash effects.¹⁶ Evidence also exists that female candidates have a strategic disadvantage when compared to male candidates in going negative. Female candidates that go negative on their opponents face a situation that contrasts with social stereotypes and shared expectations of their behaviour as kind and sympathetic.¹⁷ This disruption of gender stereotypes can potentially have substantial electoral consequences, in the form of the increased likelihood of backlash effects.¹⁸ Looking at the context of the election, strong evidence exists that more competitive or “close” races lead to higher negativity.¹⁹

What are the consequences of negative campaigning?

Perhaps the most important question, of course, is to what extent does negative campaigning matter? The answer to this fundamental question is in three parts.

First, it is undeniable that negativity captures our attention as voters. Much research has established the existence of a “negativity bias”, according to which “people are more reactive and attentive to negative news than they are to positive news.”²⁰ In other terms,

¹⁵ Walter, A. S., van der Brug, W. & van Praag, P. (2014). When the stakes are high: Party competition and negative campaigning. *Comparative Political Studies*, 47(4): 550-573; Elmelund-Præstekær, C. (2010). Beyond American negativity: toward a general understanding of the determinants of negative campaigning. *European Political Science Review* 2(1): 137-156.

¹⁶ Walter, A.S. & van der Brug, W. (2013). When the gloves come off: Inter-party variation in negative campaigning in Dutch elections, 1981-2010. *Acta Politica* 48(4): 367-388; Hansen, K. M., & Pedersen, R. T. (2008). Negative campaigning in a multiparty system. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 31(4): 408-427.

¹⁷ Huddy, L. & Terkildsen, N. (1993). Stereotypes and the Perception of Male and Female Candidates, *American Journal of Political Science*, 37: 119-147; Fridkin, K. L., Kenney, P. J. & Woodall, G. S. (2009). Bad for men, better for women: The impact of stereotypes during negative campaigns. *Political Behavior*, 31(1): 53-77; Krupnikov, Y., & Bauer, N. M. (2014). The relationship between campaign negativity, gender and campaign context. *Political Behavior*, 36(1): 167-188.

¹⁸ Kahn, K. F. (1996) *The Political Consequences of Being a Woman*, New York: Columbia University Press; Trent, J. S., & Friedenber, R. V. (2008). *Political Campaign Communication: Principles and Practices*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

¹⁹ Fowler, E. F., Franz, M. M., & Ridout, T. N. (2016). *Political Advertising in the United States*. Boulder: Westview Press; Kahn, K. F., & Kenney, P. J. (1999). Do negative campaigns mobilize or suppress turnout? Clarifying the relationship between negativity and participation. *American Political Science Review*, 93(04): 877-889; Elmelund-Præstekær, C. (2008). Negative campaigning in a multiparty system. *Representation*, 44(1), 27-39; Lau, R. R., & Pomper, G. M. (2004). *Negative campaigning: An analysis of U.S. Senate elections*. Rowman & Littlefield.

²⁰ Soroka, S., & McAdams, S. (2010). *An experimental study of the differential effects of positive versus negative news content*. Paper presented at the Elections, Public Opinion and Parties Annual Conference, University of Essex. (pp. 2-3).

“negative information may be more likely than comparable positive information to be noticed and processed, thereby having the opportunity to get its message across.”²¹ But does this mean that negative campaigning “works”? It depends. Indeed, second, much evidence exists that negative campaigns are able to sway the public opinion and reduce support for the target, but an equally large amount of research has shown that, to the contrary, negativity can quite as easily “backlash” against the sponsor of the message and harm them. With uncertain electoral results, campaigns can be a risky business. Well-crafted campaigns can mobilize the followers and inspire the crowds, lifting the candidates towards the final success. On the other hand, certain campaign strategies can be a liability; negative campaigning strategies are often successful to reduce support for the opponents but can also backfire drastically.²² The jury is still out concerning the net efficacy of attacks – that is, to what extent they are more likely to reduce support for the target (as intended) or instead harm the sponsor of the message (clearly not as intended), to the point that some scholars have started to question their overall electoral effectiveness in the first place.²³ Can we then conclude that negativity does not matter, at the end? Quite the opposite, actually. Beyond its direct electoral effects, much research has investigated to what extent negativity has, third, more “structural” effects on the political system itself. On the one hand, many argue that negative campaigning is a detrimental force in modern democracies. According to the “demobilization hypothesis,”²⁴ negativity depresses turnout and political mobilization by lowering political efficacy and trust, and fosters apathy and a gloomier public mood.²⁵ Especially when combined with elements intended to trigger an emotional response, negative messages can depress political efficacy and trust in elected officials.²⁶ On the other hand, however, some highlight that negativity might have a positive role to play: negative messages can convey important information to the voters,²⁷ promote a better general

²¹ Lau, R. R., & Pomper, G. M. (2002). Effectiveness of negative campaigning in U.S. Senate elections. *American Journal of Political Science*, 46(1), 47–66. (p. 47).

²² Roese, N. J. & Sande, G. N. (1993). Backlash Effects in Attack Politics. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 23(8): 632–653; Shapiro, M. A., & Rieger, R. H. (1992). Comparing positive and negative political advertising on radio. *Journalism Quarterly*, 69(1): 135-145.

²³ For a discussion about these competing effects, see the meta-analysis in Lau, R. R., Sigelman, L. & Rovner, I. B. (2007). The Effects of Negative Political Campaigns: A Meta-Analytic Reassessment. *Journal of Politics* 69(4): 1176–1209.

²⁴ Ansolabehere, S. & Iyengar, S. (1995) *Going Negative: How Attack Ads Shrink and Polarize The Electorate*, New York: Free Press; Ansolabehere, S., Iyengar, S., Simon, A., & Valentino, N. (1994). Does attack advertising demobilize the electorate?. *American political science review*, 88(4), 829-838.

²⁵ Thorson, E., Ognianova, E., Coyle, J., & Denton, F. (2000). Negative political ads and negative citizen orientations toward politics. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 22(1): 13-40; Yoon, K., Pinkleton, B. E. and Ko, W. (2005). Effects of negative political advertising on voting intention: An exploration of the roles of involvement and source credibility in the development of voter cynicism. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 11(2): 95-112.

²⁶ Brader, T. (2005). Striking a responsive chord: How political ads motivate and persuade voters by appealing to emotions. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(2), 388-405.

²⁷ Finkel, S. E., & Geer, J. G. (1998). A spot check: Casting doubt on the demobilizing effect of attack advertising. *American journal of political science*, 42(2), 573-595.

knowledge in the public about the most important issues at stake,²⁸ signal to the voters that the election is salient and thus worth paying attention to,²⁹ and ultimately stimulate interest and participation.³⁰ Whether, ultimately, negativity is a detrimental force for democracy or can instead act for the greater good is a normative question that goes, for now, beyond the sum of all evidence that scholars have been able to gather. We should however (1) be careful in assuming that negativity is necessarily bad for democracy, (2) concluding that negativity is a new or shocking phenomenon, and (3) fall into the temptation to assume that negativity is a particular trait of this or that political context. Negativity is ubiquitous, and its influences – for good and for bad – vast and, to a certain extent, still mysterious.

²⁸ Brians, C. L., & Wattenberg, M. P. (1996). Campaign issue knowledge and salience: Comparing reception from TV commercials, TV news and newspapers. *American Journal of Political Science*, 40(1), 172-193.

²⁹ Martin, P. S. (2004). Inside the black box of negative campaign effects: Three reasons why negative campaigns mobilize. *Political psychology*, 25(4): 545-562.

³⁰ Geer, J. G. (2006). *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



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